

Sports Brand Cooperation Strategy in the Context of Globalization: A Case Study of the NBA's Cooperation Model with Multinational Brands and Its Implications for Chinese Professional Basketball

Yuchen Wang^{1,*},
Ziang Zhang² and
Zican Zhang³

¹School of Tsinglan, Dongguan, China

²School of Yali, Hunan, China

³School of Britain-China, Wuhan, China

*Corresponding author: Ethan.
Wang_27@tsinglan.org

Abstract:

The study delves into the strategic partnership between the NBA and selected commercial brands, assessing the strategic relationship between brand sponsorships and sports events, and its implications for the Chinese professional basketball sector. The sports industry's globalization and commercialization have made brand-sports event partnerships a vital mechanism for mutual value maximization. Utilizing a literature-based research approach, the case analysis technique serves as the focal point, complemented by comparative and content analyses, reveals that sports events derive profits from brand partnerships while concurrently disseminating event culture, bolstering political sway, and offering novel avenues and platforms for national and regional development. In tandem, the situation spawns a host of challenges and obstacles. The sustainable advancement of sports event-brand partnerships hinges on the proper dissemination of sports culture and the implementation of effective risk management systems, assuming reasonable cooperation prevails. The sustainable advancement of sports event-brand partnerships hinges on the proper dissemination of sports culture and the implementation of effective risk management systems, assuming reasonable cooperation prevails.

Keywords: Brand sponsorship, sports events, NBA, co-operation, risk management.

1. Introduction

Globalization has catalyzed the transformation of the professional sports league from a basic competition-based entity into a sophisticated system that amalgamates commercial endeavors, cultural communication, and the manifestation of national soft power. As a top commercial sports league globally, the NBA stands as a representative instance for analyzing the relationship between multinational sports entities and branding tactics. As a top commercial sports league globally, the NBA stands as a representative instance for analyzing the relationship between multinational sports entities and branding tactics.

The NBA's strategic blend of elite competition content, the star effect, international news media reach, and a comprehensive business alliance has enabled the continuous expansion of its market and the construction of a robust global brand presence. The NBA has entered into extensive collaborations with international brands like Nike, Adidas, and Coca-Cola, collectively enhancing the commercialization of sports. This league's "sports + culture + capital" integrated operational framework not only yields substantial economic returns but also acts as a critical conduit for disseminating American cultural values such as consumerism and individual heroism. By adopting localization strategies such as securing broadcasting rights, hosting celebrity visits, and engaging in brand collaborations, the NBA has effectively won a large fan base and reaped commercial benefits in the Chinese market. Deals with challenges like cultural identity conflicts, political risks, and market instability. Simultaneously, leveraging the NBA's developmental insights, the challenge of establishing a distinct brand identity while preserving cultural autonomy amidst the influence of dominant foreign cultures and branding has emerged as a pertinent issue. Simultaneously, leveraging the NBA's developmental insights, the challenge of establishing a distinct brand identity while preserving cultural autonomy amidst the influence of dominant foreign cultures and branding has emerged as a pertinent issue.

The study commences with an exploration of the NBA's collaborative ventures with multinational entities, grounded in a comprehensive literature review and tailored to the Chinese market landscape. It seeks to delineate the NBA's integrated business and cultural export model and to investigate the branding and cultural perspectives of regional sports coalitions amidst the backdrop of globalization, with the objective of achieving a harmonious balance of commercial gains. The exploration of benefits and cultural diversity yields theoretical perspectives and practical advice. The exploration of benefits and cultural diversity yields theoretical perspectives and practical advice.

2. Literature Review

Academic literature generally attributes the NBA's globalization to its competitive attributes and commercial operations, further enhanced by the "sports + capital + culture" integrated model with multinational brands. The model has constructed a global brand network via commercial sponsorships, broadcasting rights sales, and merchandise licensing, concurrently providing an effective pathway for multinational brands to enter the global sports market. The NBA partnership has enabled Nike to fortify its market position in North America and extend its global impact, particularly in the Asian sector, through the utilization of NBA stars' images. The NBA's partnership with multinational brands transcends mere brand visibility; it also fosters a platform for brand culture communication amidst the globalizing landscape, thereby propelling the internationalization of brand value. The NBA's partnership with multinational brands transcends mere brand visibility; it also fosters a platform for brand culture communication amidst the globalizing landscape, thereby propelling the internationalization of brand value.

Academic circles have pointed to the model's dependency on top-tier producers. The NBA's economic stability could be compromised by the disruption in major sponsor partnerships. Strategic over-reliance on select brands may erode the NBA's bargaining power, rendering it vulnerable in global commercial negotiations. To mitigate this issue, the NBA must prospectively broaden its roster of brand partners, diminish reliance on a solitary brand, and construct a more varied commercial partnership framework, thereby augmenting its negotiating leverage and adaptability within the international market. To mitigate this issue, the NBA must prospectively broaden its roster of brand partners, diminish reliance on a solitary brand, and construct a more varied commercial partnership framework, thereby augmenting its negotiating leverage and adaptability within the international market.

Through the use of superstars like Michael Jordan and LeBron James, the NBA constructs narratives of personal heroism and concurrently spreads American values such as consumerism and liberalism via its events and media. This cultural output has not only augmented brand recognition but also facilitated cultural dialogue and integration. In the Chinese market, the NBA has minimized cultural discrepancies through targeted marketing initiatives during events like the Spring Festival, thereby fostering brand acclimatization to local customs while advancing global outreach. The NBA's fusion of culture and commerce has not only propelled its success in competitive sports but has also contributed to the amplification of its global brand value and cultural standing. The NBA's fusion of culture and commerce has not only propelled its success in competitive sports but has also contributed to

the amplification of its global brand value and cultural recognition.

Scholarship predominantly focuses on the NBA's commercial strategy, with discussions on cultural conflicts and localization challenges in cross-cultural communication being relatively underdeveloped. Scholars have engaged in discourse regarding the superficial application of cultural symbols in "Spring Festival marketing" and its lack of genuine integration with local culture. Future strategies for the NBA and sports brands necessitate a harmonious balance between global branding and local adaptation to sustain their international image while fostering cultural immersion. Future strategies for the NBA and sports brands necessitate a harmonious balance between global branding and local adaptation to sustain their international image while fostering cultural immersion.

3. Case Reconstructions

In the 1980s, under David Stern's stewardship, the NBA initiated its globalization endeavor, culminating in the gradual evolution of a sports business alliance model. The transformation was manifested in the league's scale expansion and a marked alteration in its philosophy. Basketball, under the NBA's influence, has been repositioned from a competitive sport into a cross-border value product that includes sports, culture, trends, and commerce [1]. The NBA's success is attributed to its strategic implementation of integrated marketing communications, which masterfully crafted its brand into a multifaceted symbol transcending the realm of sport, a fundamental element in realizing its global value [2]. The NBA acknowledged that partnerships with globally recognized brands were pivotal in propelling its international growth during this transformation phase. The strategy demonstrated its pivotal significance upon its focus on the Chinese market. China, with a large populace and considerable consumption capacity, offers substantial market potential. The 1990s witnessed the NBA's initial foray into the Chinese market via China Central Television (CCTV)'s broadcasts, with Yao Ming's NBA career serving as a catalyst for the NBA's identification with Chinese fans, thereby expanding its market presence. The 1990s witnessed the initiation of NBA broadcasts on China Central Television (CCTV), a development that was further amplified by Yao Ming's NBA debut, thereby reinforcing the NBA's connection with Chinese fans and propelling its market penetration in China.

The collaborative backdrop is a non-accidental outcome, deriving from the sports industry's capitalization amidst globalization. The NBA's decision to enter the Chinese market was driven by the attractiveness of a massive audience and substantial market potential, along with the objective to present its brand culture to a global audience, encompassing Chinese viewers. Likewise, multinational

entities aimed to forge alliances with the NBA, utilizing its robust global communication network to boost the commercial value of their brands and the NBA's basketball culture globally, thereby fostering a dual "culture + commerce" value enhancement. Mengniu exemplifies an exemplar instance, initiating its partnership with the NBA in 2006. The brand's action was not a simple commercial sponsorship but a strategic effort to utilize a top-tier sports league for global dissemination and to amplify its international influence [3]. The NBA's alliance with multinational entities is not merely a commercial arrangement; it signifies a strategic globalization that intertwines cultural and commercial aspects. The NBA's cooperation with multinational brands is not just a commercial sponsorship; it denotes a globalization strategy that synergizes culture with commerce.

The NBA's partnerships with multinational corporations were multifaceted, with collaborative forms spanning multiple fields. Multinational corporations have identified various collaborative pathways with the NBA, transcending the sale of official merchandise to encompass direct sponsorship agreements. A notable instance is represented by Coca-Cola's primary sponsorship of the NBA China Games. The league has augmented its sponsorship portfolio by forming strategic alliances with digital media companies like Tencent Sports, thereby enhancing the online broadcasting and accessibility of its matches. Numerous international brands have notably moved beyond conventional endorsement models to actively engage in NBA event planning and execution, thereby increasing their visibility. Nike's "City Edition" jerseys exemplify a compelling depiction, characterized by the incorporation of unique cultural motifs from particular urban areas. The jerseys have evolved from being mere fan identifiers to powerful conveyors of the synthesis of commercial branding and local culture [2]. The jerseys have evolved from being mere fan identifiers to powerful conveyors of the synthesis of commercial branding and local culture [4].

By synchronizing its events with Chinese traditional celebrations like the Spring Festival, the NBA has adeptly reduced cultural distance in China. The approach has fostered a greater degree of cultural assimilation within the league. A prominent instance is the "City Edition" jerseys, co-developed by Nike and the NBA, which feature Spring Festival-inspired elements. The integration of these designs into the market not only increased brand recognition but also fostered local acceptance through culturally resonant interactions. This initiative, distinct from conventional advertising, exemplifies a sophisticated co-branding strategy, where global corporations and the NBA collectively foster international business ecosystems. Partner brands within this framework exceed the scope of event promotion, effectively channeling audience interest from sports competitions to brand identity via strategic fan en-

agement, thereby materializing emotional connections into brand equity. Partner brands within this framework exceed the scope of event promotion, effectively channeling audience interest from sports competitions to brand identity via strategic fan engagement, thereby materializing emotional connections into brand equity.

From an economic viewpoint, the collaboration yielded mutual advantages. Substantially enhanced jersey sales for Nike coincided with the NBA's audience expansion into new Asian regions, a result of their collaborative venture. This collaboration facilitated a youthful rebranding of Coca-Cola in the Chinese market [5]. In the Spring Festival, the NBA introduced marketing initiatives for the Chinese Super League, collaborated with renowned celebrities for basketball marketing, and employed digital marketing strategies, which fostered a gradual growth in its fan base size. The trend of fans following NBA games more than the CBA finals is exemplified by some fans' preferences. The 2019-2020 NBA season saw a dramatic rise in social media views, exceeding hundreds of millions, attributed to digital media utilization. Success was gauged not solely by sales or viewership increases, but by the formation of a sustainable brand ecosystem. Beyond basketball contests, the NBA restructured its events into an ongoing series of brand initiatives, while multinational corporations concurrently redefined their brand identities via this narrative. Both entities reaped benefits exceeding the contractual value due to the long-tail effect. Both entities reaped benefits exceeding the contractual value due to the long-tail effect.

The model's maturity is compromised by its overreliance on top-tier brands, which poses risks. Should strategic alliances be dissolved or degrade, the league may incur substantial financial and brand-related damage. Intermittently, political and cultural aspects pose obstacles to collaborative progress. The "Morey Incident" resulted in the withdrawal of almost all cooperative brands from the Chinese market, thereby incurring substantial financial harm on the NBA. Risk consciousness in cross-border ventures and the anticipation of crisis readiness must be given precedence. Superficial localization is problematic when localization endeavors merely adopt cultural symbols without integrating into local culture. Although immediate benefits might be realized, these endeavors are incapable of nurturing profound cultural connection in the long term. In its NBA-inspired transformation, China's professional basketball must avoid the "symbolic localization" trap. To differentiate itself from competitors, the entity should persistently innovate sports content and operational models that are inextricably linked to Chinese culture, thereby cultivating a unique and unimpeachable competitive advantage. To differentiate itself from competitors, the entity should continually evolve sports content and operational models that are inextricably linked to Chinese

culture, thereby fostering a unique and unchallengeable competitive edge.

4. Case Study

Nike's long-term partnership with the NBA stands as one of the most representative cases of "top-tier brand synergy". As the exclusive on-court jersey, apparel, and footwear supplier for the NBA, Nike has reaped substantial profits through the sale of licensed products. For instance, the global annual sales volume of NBA jerseys exceeds 10 million pieces, particularly for popular teams; moreover, signature basketball shoes of NBA stars, leveraging the exposure and promotion from NBA games, have long dominated the top spot in the global basketball shoe market in terms of sales. Meanwhile, Nike boasts over 100,000 offline stores worldwide, which form a resource complementarity with the NBA's event platform. For example, Nike attracts customer traffic by hosting star meet-and-greets and broadcasting games in its stores, while the NBA enhances the exposure of Nike during games, significantly improving marketing efficiency. This reflects the advantages of concentrated resource utilization and brand synergy.

However, this cooperative relationship also harbors certain risks. Nike has secured over 90% of the NBA's top-tier stars through exclusive contracts and dominates the market for core equipment such as jerseys and sneakers. This has restricted the NBA's ability to control prices in player commercialization negotiations. Especially when stars are dissatisfied with their cooperation with Nike (Kobe Bryant once founded his own brand due to disputes over renewal terms), it may undermine the NBA's star influence, the appeal of its games, and the sales of peripheral products.

In addition, the NBA's business model is highly reliant on media copyright revenue, which it generates by selling broadcast rights and engaging in cooperative ventures. For example, the broadcast rights for an 11-year period from 2025 to 2035 were sold to three companies—Disney (the parent company of ESPN), NBC Universal, and Amazon—for a high price of 77 billion US dollars, averaging 7 billion US dollars per year [6]. In the international market, the NBA also generates revenue through national television networks and media platforms. Taking China as an example, Tencent acquired the exclusive digital broadcast rights for five years in 2009 with 1.5 billion US dollars, contributing an average of 300 million US dollars annually. The NBA was almost entirely dependent on this single platform. Furthermore, Tencent has held a monopoly on the NBA's digital broadcast rights in China since 2015 and renewed the five-year contract in 2020, accounting for over 80% of the NBA's digital broadcast rights in the Chinese market [7]. Nevertheless, the cooperative model between the two parties is not limited to live broadcasts;

they have also developed customized co-produced programs such as *NBA Zero Distance* to form an innovative and developmental cooperative model. It is important to note that if Tencent decides not to renew the contract, the NBA will struggle to find an alternative of equivalent scale in the short term. Additionally, user habits in the Chinese market (reliance on the WeChat ecosystem) and Tencent's traffic advantages (dual entry points of WeChat and QQ) have exacerbated this dependence.

Certainly, the NBA also makes full use of brand partnerships to export its culture and jointly shape and promote the images of superstar players. For example, Nike's posters for LeBron James highlight his crown logo, which aligns with his "King" persona; Kobe Bryant's posters incorporate snake-patterned elements or the "Mamba Day" black-and-gold theme to attract fans and drive purchases. Furthermore, the NBA enhances its popularity through activities such as players' visits to China and offline autograph sessions.

In the Chinese market, the NBA conducts joint brand and cultural promotion initiatives. It aligns with the "fan culture characteristics" of the Chinese market and creates co-branded products that integrate Chinese culture. For instance, the Nike LeBron 18 Reflection series fully embodies Chinese cultural features. The NBA also leverages cultural integration in holiday marketing—by showcasing NBA Spring Festival advertisements, it intuitively presents the creativity and style of the ads to capture the audience's attention. Additionally, the sale of limited-edition peripheral products and the application of cultural symbols demonstrate localized characteristics, commercial value, and explore ways of cultural integration.

However, there is significant controversy over whether the primary purpose of these activities is commercial gain rather than genuine cultural exchange and respect. A notable example is the 2004 Nike commercial *Chamber of Fear* produced for LeBron James, which frequently featured scenes where elements of Chinese culture, such as the Chinese dragon and Dunhuang flying apsaras, were "defeated". This sparked strong dissatisfaction and condemnation from Chinese society, as it was deemed to be disparaging traditional Chinese culture. After the incident, Nike promptly removed the commercial and issued a public apology, claiming that it had no intention of showing any disrespect towards Chinese culture [8].

From this incident, it is evident that Nike should gain a deeper understanding of traditional culture and utilize it appropriately, strengthen its investment guided by commercial logic, and pay greater attention to cultural adaptability in future advertisements to avoid cultural conflicts. For the NBA, this incident also serves as a reminder to build a correct and long-term brand image in China and globally, enhance cultural recognition, and improve its ability to reasonably address risks and resist potential

threats.

For the CBA (Chinese Basketball Association), it should appropriately introduce international players, seize cooperation opportunities to export its local culture and values, and thereby gain the recognition and trust of fans.

In summary, while the NBA currently enjoys increased economic benefits, it has a moderate level of cultural subjectivity and low risk controllability. Therefore, the CBA should establish a diversified sponsorship system, strengthen its awareness of cultural subjectivity, and achieve agile risk response capabilities.

5. The Path, Inspiration and Suggestions of Strategic Cooperation between Sports Events and Sports Brands

From a cooperative viewpoint, the NBA's global expansion strategy is deemed highly significant. Market development is executed through a strategic, long-term strategy, characterized by the initial distribution of broadcast videotapes to China Central Television at no cost, with the intention of waiting for fan acceptance before implementing a charging model [9]. In the subsequent phase, the integration of overseas preseasons, regular seasons, and direct interactions with overseas stars enables global fans to connect with celebrities, immerse themselves in the event atmosphere, and reduce spatial separation [10]. Furthermore, the establishment of a consumption ecosystem through peripheral products propels the growth of collaborative brands. In the initial quarter of fiscal year 2020, Nike, an American company known for producing sneakers and sports gear, recorded a 22% revenue escalation in the Greater China market [9]. Strategic guidance over an extended duration is essential for the sports event-brand collaboration, aiming to convert the event's influence into brand market value. Concurrently, the trajectory of digital transformation within the sports competition performance sector is pronounced. Technological advancements such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and mixed reality (MR) are revolutionizing viewing experiences, with digital copyright operations emerging as a pivotal area of collaboration, exemplified by Tencent's 2021-2025 NBA Chinese digital media agreement. The broadcasting right is at a level equivalent to 1. In a five-year span, an investment totaling 5 billion US dollars underscores the importance of digital technology innovation cooperation for the expansion of consumption scenarios and the enhancement of user adherence. Over a five-year span, an investment of 5 billion US dollars indicates the necessity for cooperative digital technology innovation to broaden consumption horizons and enhance user retention.

The development of a digital cooperative ecosystem is a viable cooperative path. The collaborative endeavor of

the two entities results in the co-creation of new products, such as virtual competitions and digital collections. The brand can capitalize on the event's intellectual property to launch a special digital jersey and, by applying big data analysis to user needs, can achieve targeted marketing, reflecting the sports competition performance industry's application of big data, cloud computing, and other technologies to stimulate fan participation. The digital transformation trend in "analysis and dynamic perception of user needs" is consistent, which is associated with an increase in the precision and efficacy of collaborative endeavors [10]. The second aspect requires the augmentation of cultural value coordination. Sports events should scrutinize their cultural connotations. Yao Ming's "collectivist spirit" is highlighted by the CBA, which emphasizes the sacrifice of personal interests for the greater good. The integration of Chinese cultural elements into team uniforms and the scheduling of traditional performances like calligraphy and zither are indicative of this approach. Sports brands utilize these cultural motifs to differentiate their products, fostering cultural exchange and brand value. In the third instance, increase the framework of international partnership. The NBA's model is employed to initiate expansion in emerging markets, specifically those along the "Belt and Road," by synergizing competitive outputs with brand localization, including the placement of local ads in overseas competitions, thereby gradually broadening international presence while circumventing market-specific vulnerabilities. The NBA's model is employed to initiate expansion in emerging markets, specifically those along the "Belt and Road," by synergizing competitive outputs with brand localization, including the placement of local ads in overseas competitions, thereby gradually broadening international presence while circumventing market-specific vulnerabilities.

Concurrently, propose ideas across various viewpoints and echelons. Suggested modifications are needed in the government's digital property rights regulations. Establishment of a pertinent liability framework for copyright violations in sports events and programming is imperative, along with the delineation of rights and interests concerning data exchange and copyright progression for events and brands. Establishment of a pertinent liability framework for copyright violations in sports events and programming is imperative, along with the delineation of rights and interests concerning data exchange and copyright progression for events and brands.

In unison, implement a dedicated fund to bolster the participation of SMEs in cooperative projects, fostering market vibrancy. Standardization of industry-level cooperation is essential, encompassing the regulation of competition resource authorization, the demarcation of brand rights and interests, the avoidance of destructive competition, and the promotion of industry coherence. In the

corporate landscape, sports events must refine their intellectual property management and broaden their business development framework. In order to strengthen the event's ties with brands, a shift from sponsorship to collaborative product and service development is proposed, with the objective of establishing a long-term and stable strategic partnership. Enhancing the event's integration with brands necessitates a shift from conventional sponsorship to a collaborative product and service development model, with the goal of establishing a long-term strategic alliance.

6. Conclusion

The collaborative framework between the NBA and multinational corporations reveals the transcendent role of sports globalization beyond commercial transactions, facilitating cultural discourse and the exertion of political soft power. Findings suggest that the NBA has created an integrated operational model, merging sports, capital, and culture, by leveraging its high-caliber competitions and star athletes, in conjunction with international corporations like Nike and Coca-Cola. This model has not only enhanced revenue growth but also engendered a strong cultural affinity across the globe. The approach, albeit effective, is not devoid of its flaws, which encompass an overreliance on elite partners, a superficial application of cultural symbols, and an vulnerability to political and market instability. Should relations with key partners worsen or cross-cultural missteps arise, the league's financial performance and brand reputation may face substantial adverse effects. The NBA's challenges are largely a result of its reliance on a few core sponsors and its disregard for cultural integration in favor of profit maximization. The NBA's challenges are largely a result of its reliance on a few core sponsors and its disregard for cultural integration in favor of profit maximization.

The research's contribution extends past the NBA's business rationale, presenting a viable roadmap for China's professional basketball league. The CBA must mitigate the risks of over-reliance and token localization as it learns from the NBA's experience. In order to cultivate a distinctive and sustainable competitive edge, the CBA must establish a multi-tiered sponsorship structure, reinforce cultural autonomy, delve into indigenous cultural resources, and align these with global outreach. As digital transformation accelerates, league-brand collaborations should increasingly utilize emerging technologies to diversify engagement platforms, thereby fortifying user loyalty and diminishing external vulnerabilities. In the context of the accelerating digital transformation, league-brand partnerships should progressively utilize new technologies to diversify engagement scenarios, thereby fortifying user loyalty and mitigating external risks.

The study acknowledges inherent constraints. The pre-

dominant reliance on case studies and literature reviews, without empirical surveys or extensive statistical data, limits the scope of the findings' applicability. Subsequent studies would benefit from incorporating quantitative methodologies and cross-national comparisons to understand the operation of sports branding across cultures and the management of global-local tensions. An enhanced methodological methodology will yield actionable insights to propel the branding initiatives of China's professional basketball sector. An enhanced methodological methodology will yield actionable insights to propel the branding initiatives of China's professional basketball sector.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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