

The Analysis and the Influence of Different Spectator Groups on the NBA

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Abstract. NBA (national basketball association), It was officially founded in 1949, consisting with 30 basketball teams that compete together for the championship. This event has become one of the most influential sports competitions globally and has garnered a massive fan base and audience. This study mainly focuses on the impacts exerted on the NBA by the following three dimensions: Young fan groups and middle-aged/elderly fan groups; Different geographical regions; Fans with different psychological motivations like emotionally driven fans and investment-driven fans. this study mainly conduct our research by collecting and analyzing data. Different ages spectators --Young fans drive digital engagement & emerging consumption. Middle-aged/elderly support traditional revenue. NBA responds with streaming partnerships (ESPN+) & nostalgic content for seniors. Domestic fans in the United States form the foundation of the NBA, while China serves as the cornerstone of the NBA's digital and broadcasting economy. Countries like those in Europe are key directions for the NBA's major expansion efforts. Emotionally driven fans require emotional connections with teams, such as the display of retro jerseys or commentary from retired star players. Investment-driven fans need relevant guidance and data support provided by teams.

Keywords: Young/mature NBA audiences, emotion-driven audiences, investment-driven audiences, high-Loyalty Core, digital pioneers, spectators.

1. Introduction

The NBA undoubtedly become one of the most successful sporting events in the world today. Its success is inseparable from the rapid expansion and rapid commercial development and that's all because of the huge number of fans. Its revenue streams include media right (eg. ESPN, Tencent in China, TNT in the US) and sponsorship (eg. Nike), and the tickets sales really depend on all kinds of different spectators' engagement. So, the main topic this study want to research is the analysis and the influence of different spectators' groups on the NBA.

There are big differences between all these participants, the degree of participation is different, the culture is different, the age of the audience is different, the local spectators are differing from international viewers. Therefore these things are really interesting, how much do different people contribute to the NBA? What role do they play in their respective fields to help promote the development of NBA? So questions like these are very important because they help us understand how an association or club can continue to develop in a targeted way. It is mainly reflected in the team's management and the team's strategy to cater to the audience participation. This study will help NBA and other leagues to adjust the allocation of resources, optimize the schedule of teams, and promote global influence. The study will help team improve the fan experience and increase ticket sales. The following study will define and introduce different spectators in NBA. Our criteria are based on local and foreign audiences, live and online viewers, young and middle-aged and elderly audiences.

Next, the study will analyze their respective participation and contribution to the NBA and the scope of their fields (such as social media influence and ticket sales). Finally, the thesis will estimates their influence on the NBA's expansion scope, schedule and other decisions and put forward appropriate adjustment suggestions. The study will refer to authoritative papers on the internet, collect authoritative data for analysis, and combine them with the alliance's revenue and potential benefits. The following articles will introduce NBA first and define various spectators, analyze global participation, analyze the behavior and influence of each spectator in detail, and then analyze the

differences in preferences of different spectators and finally put forward suggestions for the future development of the NBA based on the audience experience.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Introduction of NBA

The NBA was founded in 1949 with 30 teams divided into Eastern and Western Conferences competing for the championship. The regular season and playoffs each select eight teams from each conference to compete in the postseason, with different games featuring varying ticket prices and broadcast costs. For example, when LeBron James and Anthony Davis joined the Lakers, local TV ratings for their games increased 31% (Data from: Sports Business Daily).

Now, this study will discuss different spectators. First, about age. Young NBA audiences and mature NBA audiences. Young NBA audiences refer to viewers aged 13-34, consisting of two key generational segments--Gen Z NBA viewers (aged 13-24) and Millennial NBA viewers (aged 25-34). Mature audiences (35+) are defined as long-term and high loyalty to “veteran players” or traditional team. It consists of Middle-aged NBA viewers (35-49) and Senior NBA viewers (50+). About region [1]. Second, high-Loyalty Core refers to the NBA domestic U.S market (NBA 2024-2025 Domestic Audience Report), 2025, Digital Pioneer refers China as the NBA’s largest overseas market [2]. The Growth Engine refers to Europe as the most diversified international market [3]. Third, it is divided according to different motives of consumption, Emotion-driven consumers and Investment-driven consumers. Emotion-driven consumers refer to those fans who like a particular star very much (such as seasonal subscribers). Investment-driven refers to people who want to make money by investing (such as selling star-played cards).

NBA is one of the most globally influential leagues in the world. According to fig 1. The impact of pandemic in 2020, its revenue has continued to grow over the past decade, reaching more than 11 billion dollars. This graph is 2012/13 to 2023/23 seasons’ total NBA revenue unit: 1 billion dollars (data from Fobes).

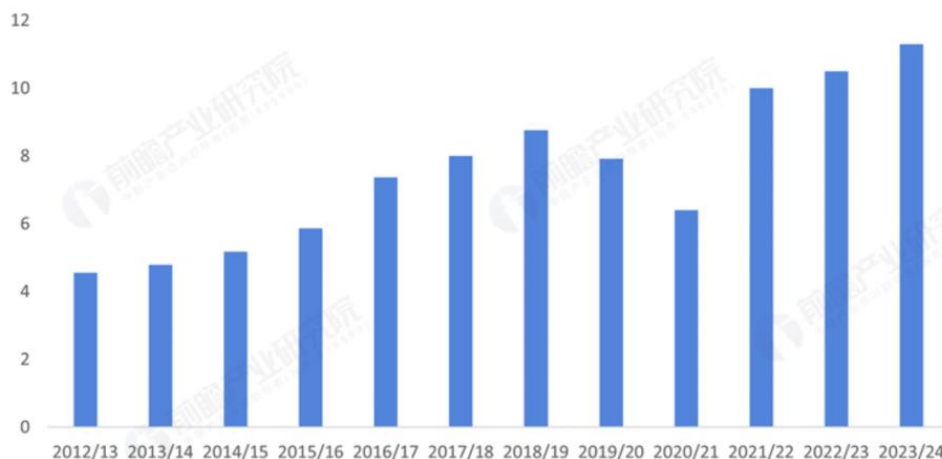


Figure 1. Revenue of NBA

As can be seen from the figure 2 below, the NBA league operates revenue from various sources, including ticket sales, media broadcasting, merchandise sales, and others such as sponsorship and naming rights.

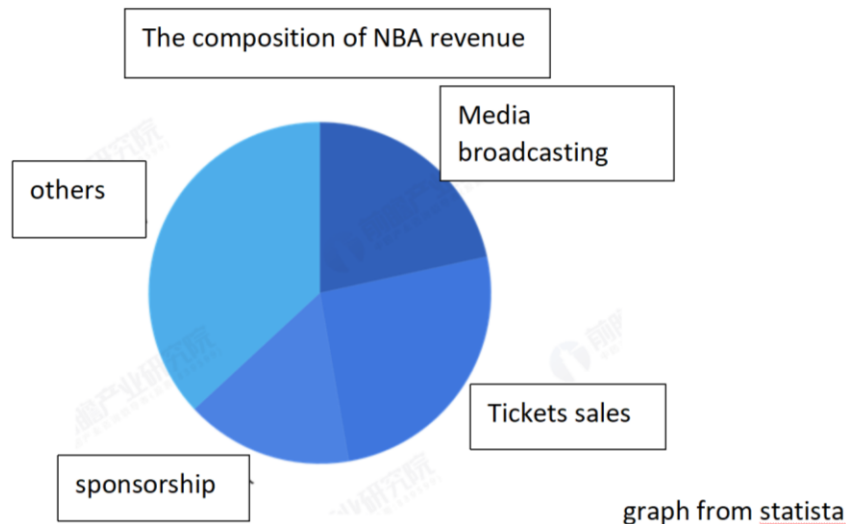


Figure 2. Different revenue sources of NBA

Globally, the NBA broadcasts games in 42 languages to 212 countries, and its global reach is unquestionably extensive.

According to Fig 3, data indicates that as many as 90% of adult basketball viewers in China watch the NBA, a proportion far higher than that in Europe and even the US. Currently, the NBA is actively interacting with Chinese fans through various means, such as collaborating with Chinese platforms like Douyin and Chinese brands including Li-Ning and Anta, hosting preseason games, and launching youth training camps. The NBA has cultivated the Chinese market for over four decades, forming a comprehensive industrial chain, with its business in the Chinese market exceeding 5 billion dollars. Currently, China's NBA-related market is largely driven by fan economy. A typical example is James Harden's wine—J-Harden Wine, which he endorses—sold 10,000 bottles within 5 seconds during his China tour when he promoted it in streamer Xiao Yang Ge's live broadcast room. This fully demonstrates the enormous commercial potential of the NBA in China. However, this economic model still has instability, as most Chinese fans favor veteran players like LeBron James and Stephen Curry, who are approaching retirement.

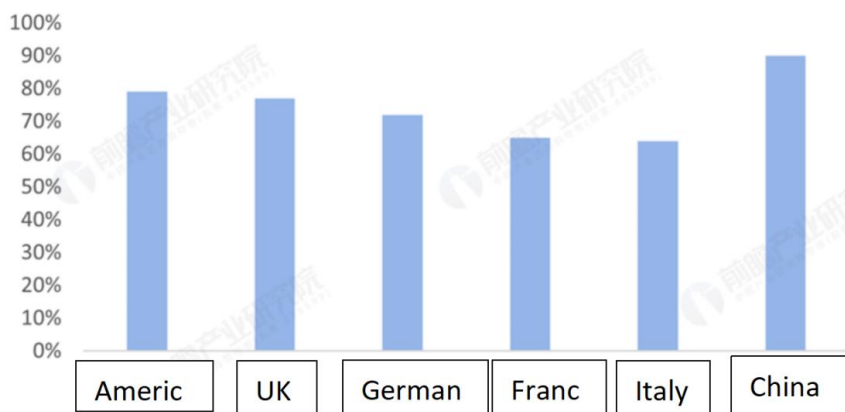


Figure 3. Attention of different nations to NBA

2.2. Analysis of Different Spectators

First, young NBA audiences and mature NBA audiences. Young NBA audiences have decreased but still dominate the NBA's core audiences. In the United States, young NBA audiences account for approximately 42% of the total audience [4]. Most of them watch games through media platforms such as ESPN and NBA LEAGUE PASS, and they also make up the majority of discussions about games on the Twitter platform (this amount is lots more than mature audiences). Mature NBA audiences account for 58% of the total audience [5]. Most of them rely on traditional television to

watch NBA games, are more driven by a traditional sense of nostalgia, and the majority fall into the category of loyal NBA fans. In China, approximately 70% of NBA fans are young NBA viewers [6]. They mainly watch games through digital platforms (such as Tencent Sports). Most of these fans pay close attention to players' statistics and rely on NBA-related short videos. However, the number of fans who watch complete games among this group is relatively small. In China, approximately 30% of NBA fans are mature NBA audiences [7]. Most of them rely on traditional television to watch games (such as CCTV-5). An overwhelming majority of this group have a strong interest in Yao Ming, a renowned Chinese native player, and his former team, the Houston Rockets.

In the United States, the NBA generates substantial revenue from media advertising fees. The viewership rating of the 2024 NBA Finals on the ABC platform reached the highest level in recent years. For mature audience. Television broadcast rights (such as ESPN's 11-year, \$77 billion contract) and on-site consumption (including tickets and merchandise) are the NBA's primary sources of revenue. Tencent's broadcast contract is the NBA's largest overseas source of revenue (a 5-year, \$1.5 billion deal). Young NBA viewers pay to watch games through platforms like Tencent. Meanwhile, since Portland Trail Blazers' sign Yang Hansen, he sales volume of Yang Hansen's jerseys has exceeded 10,000 units, boosting consumption of Portland Trail Blazers' merchandise. However, the 2019 "Morey Incident" caused the NBA to suffer an annual loss of over \$1 billion in the Chinese market [8]. Nevertheless, after the NBA resumed its preseason games and training camps in China in 2025, and with the return of brand sponsorships, the league's commercial value has gradually recovered.

In summary, although the age growth rate of NBA fans in the United States is lower than that of fans in other leagues, the NBA still needs to continue innovating. It can attract the attention of new-generation fans through advertising or co-branding initiatives, therefore as to avoid the crisis caused by the aging of its fan base. For the Chinese market, the NBA can incorporate Chinese elements into games (such as on jerseys) or launch co-branded collaborations with popular Chinese games to appeal to the young fan demographic. At the same time, it is also necessary to actively identify and appropriately recruit Chinese players to continuously expand its presence in the Chinese market.

Second, highly loyal and core fans have a long-term emotional connection with the NBA and form the core fan base of the NBA league. Meanwhile, fans in different regions across the United States provide the most fundamental emotional and financial support to their local NBA teams. They prefer traditional TV broadcasts, such as regular-season games and finals aired on ESPN. ESPN alone has secured direct NBA TV broadcasting rights with an 11-year, \$77 billion deal. Additionally, they drive frequent in-person ticket purchases and team merchandise consumption, accounting for 55% or more of the NBA's domestic revenue [9]. Meanwhile, they also exert a certain influence on countries overseas, thereby attracting more international fan bases. They have a strong preference for complete live game broadcasts, and their viewership support is particularly robust for the playoffs and finals. Their TV ratings are the highest globally, though they have declined slightly this year. In-person tickets, merchandise, and domestic sponsorship—such as those from Nike and Coca-Cola—are among their core revenue sources, with steady growth rates. Moreover, there is a profound community culture surrounding basketball in the U.S. The NBA regularly organizes team-based public welfare activities, emphasizing geographical connections between fans and teams to ensure the stability of the league's viewership and avoid disruptions. For instance, when the NBA's market in China dropped sharply in 2019, domestic U.S. revenue supported the league's normal operations.

For digital pioneers, Chinese fans rely heavily on digital platforms such as Tencent or Douyin to access NBA content. They also have an extremely high acceptance of NBA virtual avatars and games. They prefer fragmented content like highlights or player interviews, providing strong support for the NBA on digital platforms. In the digital realm, the NBA has promoted virtual merchandise such as star cards and NBA 2K. Among these, the total revenue of NBA 2K in the Chinese market accounts for 25% of its global revenue [10].

For the growth engine, the European basketball market already has a certain foundation due to the existence of the Europe League. However, the NBA's penetration in Europe remains lower than

in the United States and China. That said, in recent years, through the establishment of preseason games in Europe and localized promotions by star players—such as Luka Dončić and Giannis Antetokounmpo—the size of the European fan base and sponsorship have grown significantly. European fans prefer paid TV services like Sky Sports and digital platforms to watch NBA content, with viewership rates rising rapidly in recent years.

Third, Emotion-driven consumers and Investment-driven consumers. For emotionally driven consumers, they express strong emotional identification and a sense of belonging to star players or teams. They purchase jerseys and tickets and participate in offline viewing events. For example, after Yang Hansen joined the Portland Trail Blazers, the sales of the team's merchandise increased by 40%. They also actively participate in offline events, such as fan meetings. Most of them are middle-aged and elderly individuals, who form the majority of the viewership in ESPN's broadcast contracts. For investment-driven consumers, they pursue more economic returns and asset appreciation. They may collect star cards or sell autographs, among other activities. They tend to watch games in fragmented ways, which has boosted the growth of sales on trading platforms. For instance, the annual transaction volume on the NBA Top Shot platform has exceeded \$1 billion. These young and middle-aged users have also driven the sales and growth of some paid platforms. For investment-driven consumers, they pursue more economic returns and asset appreciation. They may collect star cards or sell autographs, among other activities. They tend to watch games in fragmented ways, which has boosted the growth of sales on trading platforms. For instance, the annual transaction volume on the NBA Top Shot platform has exceeded \$1 billion. These young and middle-aged users have also driven the sales and growth of some paid platforms.

2.3. The Reasons for the Differences in the Proportions Among Different Spectators

Data shows that the regional identification rate with hometown teams reaches as high as 62% [11]. Among Chinese fans, the emotional connection formed by middle-aged and elderly fans through local stars like Yao Ming and Yi Jianlian stands at 78%. (data from Nielsen) Thus, according to social identity theory, fans gain a sense of belonging by supporting their hometown teams or local players. This emotion enables them to form easier and longer-lasting loyalty to the team over time. In particular, star players significantly boost and contribute to the viewership ratings and ticket booking rates of their teams' games. In China, 73% of young Chinese fans follow the NBA because of star players (data from Hu Pu), such as LeBron James or Stephen Curry, among others. On short-video platforms, highlight reels of star players account for approximately 59% of total views, thereby contributing to the growth of the fan base.

Even for some relatively less popular teams, they can still gain community recognition and attract fans. For example, during the 2023-2024 season, when the Oklahoma City Thunder ranked first in the Western Conference, despite having only one-third as many nationally televised games as the Los Angeles Lakers, their fan engagement surged significantly. Moreover, numerous videos analyzing their tactics appeared online, exceeding the league average. Nostalgic themes also serve as a way for less popular teams to gain fans. In China, for instance, the Houston Rockets once earned a large group of loyal fans thanks to Yao Ming. Even though Yao Ming has now retired, the team can still boost the vitality of fan culture through initiatives like tactical simulations and the release of retro jerseys.

2.4. Suggestions for the Future Development of NBA

In recent years, to ensure NBA players maintain strong competitiveness during the regular season and thereby attract more fan attention, the league has established the In-Season Tournament system. This event not only provides an excellent platform for young players but also significantly enhances the viewing experience for audiences. However, there is still ample room for improvement in other aspects.

The NBA can leverage other industries, such as the film and television industry, to help expand its audience base. For instance, it can produce NBA-themed short films or mini-variety shows and use star players to broaden its influence. For popular teams like the Lakers and the Warriors,

consideration can be given to collaborating with well-known brands to create practical or entertaining merchandise. This helps tap into the brand's premium potential in depth, thereby attracting and expanding the audience base that pays attention to the teams. For relatively less popular (or niche) teams, they can consider actively organizing team-related events to build a strong emotional bond with local fans, with a focus on solidifying their local fan base. For emotional fans, the NBA can set up dedicated historical exhibition areas in specific sections of the arena—such as displaying championship trophies and vintage jerseys—to showcase the team's culture. This helps strengthen the emotional bond with this group of fans. For investment-oriented fans, consideration can be given to assigning data analysts in designated areas and sharing relevant team data for their reference. At the same time, the NBA can also strengthen the application of digital technology and continue to promote VR (Virtual Reality) technology, allowing fans to experience the on-site atmosphere of the NBA from multiple dimensions and levels. By integrating more advanced digital technologies, the league can meet the needs of different fans and provide the public with a fresher and more diverse sense of experience [12].

3. Conclusion

Through research, it shows the rapid development and expansion of the NBA are inseparable from the contributions of different spectators. Different types of spectators exert distinct impacts on the NBA, and their focuses of attention and content needs regarding the NBA also vary. Only by gaining a profound understanding of their differences and needs can better promote the further development of the league. Young audiences have a greater preference for and reliance on short videos, game highlights, as well as various reviews and opinions on media platforms, and they place more emphasis on the entertainment value of games. The NBA can collaborate with the film and television industry to produce public service advertisements or mini variety shows featuring star players. This approach not only enhances the NBA's entertainment appeal and generates entertainment-related topics but also allows for the additional launch of exclusive player interviews. Mature audiences tend to prefer watching complete games. They also have a deep emotional connection with former local stars, local teams, or legendary players in NBA history, which drives them to become loyal fans of a specific team. The NBA could consider promoting vintage jerseys or setting up historical exhibition areas for their enjoyment. Additionally, it could enhance the visual experience of game-watching or invite former star players from various countries to serve as commentators. For NBA audiences in different regions, the NBA should adopt varied development approaches. In the United States (its home market), the league can actively organize local events, enhance the competitiveness of games, and strengthen the bond between teams and local fans. For Chinese fans, it can invest more resources in NBA-themed games and vigorously develop the short video sector to cater to the younger demographic. For fans in Europe and other regions, the NBA can invite local-born NBA stars to actively host or participate in various forms of events—such as training camps or promotional activities—to strengthen cultural connections in these regions through the players. For emotional fans, the NBA should strengthen the promotion of its history and increase the participation of retired stars. For investment-oriented fans, it should set up data analysis stations and share part of the team data with them.

However, this research still has certain limitations. First, in terms of integrating digital technology, it may lead more young consumer groups to make purchases or engage in experiences. Relevant authorities should consider the actual situation, pursue moderate development, and strengthen supervision. Second, regarding cultural differences across regions, the definition of "niche teams" in this research may be biased, and adjustments should be made based on local contexts. Additionally, this study has overlooked the impacts of internal league policies and external competition. Variables such as adjustments to the NBA salary cap, the frequency of star player transfers, and developments in leagues like the Premier League can all affect fan experience and business expansion—potentially leading to an incomplete assessment of the NBA's business prospects.

The purpose of this research is to enhance the viewing experience of different types of fans, propose solutions to meet their diverse needs, and at the same time provide insights for the NBA's future business layout and development. Through research on different spectators, other sports leagues can also draw lessons from it.

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