

MLB league marketing: MLB in the Chinese market development analysis and future strategy

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Abstract:

Baseball is a “Global sport” with strong viewership ratings and widespread participation in many countries. For a very long-time, Major-League Baseball (MLB) has been a vital component of American sports culture. Baseball is a “Global sport” with strong viewership ratings and widespread participation in many countries. However, the company’s entry into the Chinese market has presented both fresh possibilities and difficulties. This paper will start with a summary of baseball’s history in China, examine MLB’s initiatives there, and attempt to make sense of the sport’s tactics, meaning, and potential strategic importance. The research employed a hybrid methodology to gather qualitative data from Major League Baseball’s marketing efforts in China, which it then used to explore customer behavior and market trends. The results demonstrate how MLB engages with Chinese consumers in a variety of ways, including digital marketing tactics, grassroots development initiatives, and cultural adaptation. This research also clarifies the difficulties caused by cultural disparities, legal restrictions, and competition from domestic sports leagues. In summary, this paper will provide a thorough analysis of the current market conditions and offer some recommendations for MLB’s future growth in China.

Keywords: Baseball; MLB; China; Flaw; Improvement.

1. Introduction

MLB is one of the most popular professional sports leagues in the US. For a long time, it Major League Baseball (MLB) has occupied a prominent position in American sports culture and embodied the essence of American sports heritage. MLB is one of the most popular professional sports leagues in the US. According to a recent Ipsos poll found that 31% of American adults identified as MLB fans, ranking it second behind the NFL (44%) but ahead of college football, the NBA, and college basketball. With its global appeal and the wide participation of many countries, baseball has become a truly international sport, attracting fans from all over the world. According to the research [1], 42.4% of Japanese households watched the WBC (World Baseball Classic) Final, so baseball’s popular is not just in the U.S. but around the globe. But the development of MLB, and even baseball in China as a whole, is not optimistic and has encountered many challenges. There are only about 3,000 baseball players in China, a country with a population of almost 1.4 billion people, and there must be some obstacles to its development [2]. This paper aims to deeply study the historical background of baseball in China and study the strategic initiatives of MLB in China.

The study uses text analysis, comparative analysis, MLB’s multi-faceted engagement with Chinese consumers, including digital marketing strategies, grassroots development programs, and cultural adaptation. By exploring these avenues, this study reveals the various ways in which Major League Baseball is seeking a foothold in China’s complex market landscape. In addition, the survey reveals the complexities created by cultural differences, domestic sports league competition and venue constraints, providing a nuanced understanding of the challenges MLB faces in this unique context.

In the following part, this paper first discusses MLB’s marketing strategy in the US market, analyzes the reasons for its success, then introduces the development process of MLB in the Chinese market and analyzes the problems, and finally puts forward constructive suggestions for the future development of MLB, aiming to improve the development of MLB in China.

2. The Success of MLB Development in the United States

2.1 MLB’s Fan Base in the United States

MLB is the oldest professional sports league in the United States. Its rich history is closely linked to American cul-

ture and legacy. Many people consider baseball to be the “national pastime” and an exemplar of American ideals such as community, collaboration, and competitiveness. Other sports leagues could find it difficult to equal MLB’s fan base and brand awareness because of its cultural relevance [3].

MLB has a huge fan base in the United States, with more than 170 million fans across the country. The average fan base of a Major League Baseball team is more than 2.5 million. MLB has the highest percentage of fans watching games in their home market compared to other major sports leagues [4].

2.2 Analysis of MLB’s Marketing Strategies in the American Market

In order to understand the success of MLB’s marketing strategy in the United States, it is crucial to examine the deep-rooted links between baseball and American culture. But the unique marketing strategy used by MLB is also worth focusing on.

Firstly, MLB has implemented a diverse, multi-channel marketing approach, utilizing TV, digital, social media like Instagram, Tiktok and Twitter to reach fans. For example, MLB has found success on Instagram by posting visually appealing images and videos that entice users to scroll down. The use of visual content approach has increased interaction [5].

MLB has also concentrated on developing branded hashtags to get followers to engage with the team’s social media accounts and post their own content [5]. By these methods, MLB teams saw a significant increase in social media engagement and followers in 2022-2023, with players like Corbin Carroll and Gunnar Henderson seeing their social media presence grow by 327% and 97% respectively. With a significant emphasis on social media, MLB has been able to engage with younger audiences and forge closer bonds with supporters on a variety of channels [6]. Secondly, The league has also embraced media distribution, signing lucrative broadcast deals with networks like ESPN, Fox, and Turner to make games widely available to fans [7]. This not only allows the league to have more money to make profits, but also to use the platforms of these broadcasters to promote MLB games.

Thirdly, MLB has focused on creating branded games and events such as the World Series, All-Star Game, and other marquee matchups. These branded games and events are considered core elements of the sports industry’s development and help drive fan engagement and attendance. For example, the New York Yankees’ 2014 ticket sales revenue surpassed \$300 million, and \$3 billion of total MLB income exceeding \$10 billion in 2016 was attributable to ticket sales for these types of marquee events [7].

Last but not least, the MLB League and even each MLB team has a variety of sponsors. As fan engagement and viewership increases, it makes them attractive to sponsors and advertisers. A clear example is MLB’s \$1.5 billion in sponsorship revenue, up 23 percent year over year, by providing new advertising assets such as dynamic dugout signage during games [8]. These funds make them have more sufficient funds to carry out publicity, expansion and operation, forming a virtuous circle and attracting more investment.

2.3 Player Development System

The United States has a strong youth baseball system, including programs like Little League Baseball, which involves over 2.4 million children aged 4-18. For example, The Little League World Series, held annually in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, is a highly popular and prestigious youth baseball tournament that attracts global attention [9]. With the growing of age, there are numerous amateur and college baseball leagues and competitions in the US, including the NCAA College World Series, which is a major annual event [10]. To the professional level, there are also different level of League. One represented example is Minor League System: The United States has an extensive minor league baseball system, with 19 affiliated minor leagues and 246 member clubs across the country, Canada, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Venezuela. The minor league system serves as a developmental pipeline for players aspiring to reach the major leagues, with teams at various levels of competition. This is the effective method for developing players that MLB has put in place, and it helps them and elite potential flourish. A consistent stream of gifted athletes has been brought in by the league’s dedication to player development, enthraling spectators with their compelling on-court exploits. MLB preserves its image and keeps fans interested in the sport by upholding a high quality of play and encouraging the development of exceptional players.

3. MLB in China

3.1 Origins and Development of Baseball in China

The origin and development of baseball in China have been relatively modest compared to other countries. According to the research, baseball’s growth and popularity in China has been relatively modest compared to other Asian countries like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan in China [11].

China was originally exposed to baseball in the late 1800s; the first games were played at Shanghai and Beijing colleges in 1895. But because baseball was associat-

ed with Western ideas, it was almost eliminated in China during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. Baseball's comeback in China started in 1976 with the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution, a decade that saw unparalleled levels of interest in the game. To develop the sport, China has created professional baseball leagues including the China National Baseball League (CNBL) and the China Baseball League (CBL). Since the 1980s, the Chinese national baseball team has also taken part in international tournaments, such as the World Baseball Classic, Beijing Olympic Games [12].

However, the sport's grassroots foundation in China is still overall in its early stages, and there are significant gaps in terms of mass participation and popularity.

3.2 Overview of MLB's Development in China

MLB has made notable efforts to promote and develop baseball in China.

Firstly, MLB has established several baseball development centers (MLB DC) in cities like Wuxi, Changzhou, and Nanjing [13].

MLB China initiated its developmental program in 2009 with its first center in Wuxi, recruiting 16 players aged around 12 from across China. By 2014, two more centers were established in Changzhou and Nanjing. These centers not only focus on baseball skills but also prioritize education, with Wuxi serving as a junior high school and the other centers as senior high schools. Graduates from the program have seen considerable success, with 34 playing for the China National Team, 83 earning baseball scholarships (mostly to Chinese universities), and seven signing with MLB clubs. Tony Qi, Managing Director of MLB China, views this as significant progress towards their goal of nurturing elite Chinese players.

Secondly, despite the comparatively modest baseball community in China, Major League Baseball (MLB) realizes the enormous business potential in that country. Building on baseball's long history in China, MLB hopes to increase participation through influence and partnerships with regional authorities and baseball groups. Since opening operations in China in 2007, MLB has quickly increased the scope of its efforts. Originally known as Play Ball, the MLB CUP event has expanded over the years, from five locations in 2008, each with one age group, to twenty cities in China, with up to five age groups competing now. Furthermore, in 12 Chinese cities, MLB launched the First Pitch initiative, which is aimed at elementary school pupils. This program, implemented in regular Physical Education classes, exposes children to various aspects of baseball to spark their interest and create a foundation for future engagement [14].

So, in general, MLB has made a great contribution to the development of baseball in China, but it is clear that these activities may not be able to change the overall development environment of baseball in China. In another sense, these developments need to be improved, not just at the grass-roots level, but to keep up with The Times and develop with more advanced means.

3.3 Analysis of Challenges and Unsuccessful Factors

Despite MLB's efforts, the brand has faced challenges and encountered difficulties in establishing a strong foothold in the Chinese market. Several factors contribute to the limited success of MLB's endeavors.

The cultural divide between Chinese culture and baseball is one important aspect. The issue that baseball has as a Western import into China is that it is not a deeply embedded part of Chinese culture. Baseball has a relatively weak cultural link and emotional resonance compared to other sports with longer national traditions. In contrast to other sports like table tennis and basketball, which have a strong cultural connection in China, baseball has not gained the same level of emotional resonance or cultural relevance among Chinese people. Due to this cultural divide, MLB finds it difficult to win over Chinese customers' hearts and minds, which makes it more difficult to build a strong brand presence [15].

Moreover, MLB faces fierce competition within the Chinese sports market. Domestic sports leagues, such as basketball and soccer, have already captured significant attention and a loyal fan base. The intense competition for viewership and sponsorship deals poses a formidable hurdle for MLB's expansion in China. In this highly competitive landscape, MLB must find effective ways to differentiate itself and attract the attention and interest of Chinese sports enthusiasts.

Additionally, the localization of MLB's marketing strategies in China has proven to be less effective. Adapting marketing tactics to suit the local context and preferences is crucial for success in any foreign market. However, MLB's marketing efforts in China have struggled to effectively localize their strategies, resulting in limited resonance with the target audience. To thrive in the Chinese market, MLB needs to refine its approach, considering the unique cultural nuances, preferences, and consumption patterns of Chinese consumers.

4. MLB's Future in China

4.1 Increasing Localization Efforts

Increasing localization efforts on social media and digital platforms and leveraging local influencers to increase

brand awareness is a good direction for MLB. MLB can draw inspiration from the success stories of other sports in China that effectively use social media and digital platforms for local marketing. For example, the NBA will invite Chinese stars to participate in their All-Star activities, China's obvious Dylan Wang was invited this year, MLB used his well-known influence and fan base in China, so that more people pay attention to basketball and improve the fan base. MLB could adopt a similar approach by partnering with influential sports personalities or social media stars who have large followings among young Chinese, Such as popular Chinese Movie Star Yangzi, she took lots of video to show her baseball learning experience with the MLB China and have a great influence on internet. These partnerships include content creation, live streaming of games or events, and interactive Q&A sessions, all aimed at engaging and stimulating interest in baseball among Chinese fans. By harnessing the influence and appeal of local influencers, MLB can effectively increase brand awareness and generate enthusiasm for the sport.

4.2 Enhance Fan Engagement and Experiences

Enhance fan engagement and experiences, host more local events and interactive activities in China, continue developing youth-oriented baseball programs: To further engage Chinese fans, MLB can draw inspiration from successful sports events and activities that have captured public attention in China. For example, the Chinese Super League (CSL) has organized fan festivals and interactive fan zones during matches, allowing fans to interact with players, participate in skill challenges, and win exclusive merchandise. MLB can adopt a similar approach by hosting fan festivals or interactive zones during games, where fans can meet players, participate in baseball-related activities, and enjoy a memorable experience. Additionally, MLB can collaborate with local schools and communities to organize grassroots tournaments, coaching clinics, and talent identification programs. By providing opportunities for young Chinese athletes to showcase their skills and receive specialized training, MLB can cultivate a strong talent pool and contribute to the development of baseball at all levels in China.

4.3 Collaborate with the Chinese Sports Bureau

Collaborate with the Chinese Sports Bureau (and establish partnerships with Chinese sports organizations and companies) to seek policy support: MLB can learn from successful collaborations between international sports organizations and the Chinese government to further its development in China. For example, the English Premier

League (EPL) has formed partnerships with Chinese sports organizations and companies to establish football academies, promote grassroots development, and facilitate the exchange of coaching expertise. MLB can explore similar collaborations with the Chinese Sports Bureau, local sports associations, and corporate partners to establish baseball academies, develop coaching programs, and enhance infrastructure for the sport. By aligning with the government's sports development policies and leveraging the resources and expertise of local partners, MLB can create a conducive environment for the growth of baseball in China, attracting more participants, fans, and ultimately, generating long-term success.

4.4 Continue to Strengthen the Investment in Baseball Youth Training in China

Continue to strengthen the investment in baseball youth training in China and build more MLB China Development centers to allow more young people to participate in baseball training. In addition, more organizations should communicate with American universities and professional leagues to train athletes who meet MLB standards as soon as possible. In Formula 1, Chinese driver Zhou is a good example. At the just-concluded Formula 1 Chinese Grand Prix in Shanghai, Chants of "Guanyu, Guanyu, Guanyu" drowned out all other sound at the Shanghai International Circuit on Sunday as Zhou Guanyu, China's first and only Formula One driver, stepped on to the starting grid ahead of his first Chinese Grand Prix.

It can be seen that baseball, like F1, is not a popular sport in China. However, ten years ago, Ferrari Driver Academy signed Zhou, and now he is an opportunity to open the Chinese market. The huge fan base in China has greatly benefited both Ferrari and F1. MLB can learn from this, can produce real Chinese MLB players, then baseball will develop as fast as F1 has.

5. Concession

Although Major League Baseball's (MLB) efforts in the Chinese market have been thoroughly examined, this research has several limitations that should be noted. First off, there may be limitations to fully capturing the subtleties of MLB's marketing techniques and customer behavior in China because the majority of the data included in this study comes from qualitative analysis and publically accessible sources. Furthermore, although an attempt has been made to examine MLB's endeavors and difficulties, more research may be necessary due to the possibility of other variables and complications. Furthermore, there are inherent uncertainties and potential alterations in consumer preferences due to the dynamic nature of the sports sector and changing market dynamics. These factors may

eventually affect the validity and application of research results. Therefore, even if this study offers insightful information, future research projects should try to overcome these shortcomings by utilizing quantitative approaches, combining a variety of data sources, and remaining relevant in the face of changing market conditions.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, this essay has offered a thorough examination of Major League Baseball's (MLB) growth in the Chinese market, looking at its origins, current issues, strategic objectives, and possibilities for the future. This research provides light on MLB's varied connection with Chinese customers, including digital marketing strategies, grassroots development initiatives, and cultural adaptation efforts. It does so by utilizing a hybrid technique that integrates qualitative data analysis with comparative insights. Although MLB's efforts have resulted in notable advancements, as seen by the creation of baseball development centers and the cultivation of top Chinese players, there are still considerable obstacles to overcome, such as cultural differences and local rivalry. This study is important because it sheds light on MLB's strategy for growing its worldwide presence, especially in a complicated market like China. This study offers insightful information for industry practitioners, legislators, and scholars interested in international business, cross-cultural management, sports marketing, and sports marketing by clarifying the advantages and disadvantages of MLB's activities. Additionally, this study emphasizes the need of ongoing localization and adaptation in global marketing strategies, highlighting the necessity of customized techniques to appeal to a range of customer bases.

Going forward, more research projects might focus on particular facets of MLB's marketing tactics in China, like the efficiency of social media interaction, the influence of grassroots development initiatives on youth involvement, and the function of policy advocacy in promoting MLB's expansion. Furthermore, comparative analyses examining MLB's experiences in other foreign countries may offer insightful information about the dynamics and best practices of cross-cultural marketing. Researchers may further our understanding of the global sports market and help MLB and other international sports organizations make strategic decisions by expanding on the study's results.

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