NBA RED CARD
2020
CHINA DIGITAL PERFORMANCE INDEX
FOREWORD


The 2019/20 NBA season was like no other for the NBA in China. It started with great enthusiasm for the NBA’s Global Games in China, but quickly became steeped in controversy following the infamous tweet in October 2019. Fortunately, the games did go ahead, which featured the Brooklyn Nets and Los Angeles Lakers, and by all accounts the fans embraced the games as they always have done. Yet the year proved to be full of uncertainty in China as the league, broadcasters, and sponsors slowly navigated their way back to a positive climate.

Beyond the obvious turmoil the COVID-19 pandemic created globally, China has since recovered well and the NBA has ramped up its efforts to match. While the disrupted regular season was eventually played out, NBA China continued their diplomacy and support with more CSR initiatives in the mainland. For its patience and commitment, the league was rewarded with a successful return to broadcasts and a healthy sponsor environment.

As the season came to a close, there were many positive signs to suggest business would continue to thrive, even with a cloud of political instability and economic pains the league may have endured. CCTV, the national broadcaster, was back airing live games, sponsors were again providing support, and online engagement from fans achieved record growth.

The NBA Red Card 2020 report is a comprehensive assessment on the digital performance of NBA teams, players, and legends in 2020. The report provides a guide to broader NBA digital trends, interests, and insights as the digital landscape continues to evolve at a rapid pace.

We hope you enjoy.

Andrew Collins
CEO
MAILMAN
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Limited broadcasts, reduced games, and strapped resources meant NBA teams encountered difficulties launching China campaigns and activating with local partners in 2020. However, average engagement across team Weibo accounts rose 50% compared to the previous season. When the NBA rebooted in Orlando, the hashtag #NBA Returns# generated 1.3B reads and 314K discussions, proving fandom not only never wavered, it increased.

The COVID-19 hiatus presented an opportunity for NBA China to expand its content offerings to reach fans and stay relevant. Without game coverage, NBA social accounts increased bespoke video content by 300%. The programs, which were originally designed and produced with Chinese talent, featured non-game related content like fashion and fitness. During times with no active gameplay, sports IPs must adapt content to engage fans, and NBA China showed initiative during the postponed season while most NBA teams were limiting output.

KOCs (Key Opinion Consumers) are proving effective at engaging audiences and creating communities in the NBA. Many top players who haven’t opened social media accounts in China have fan pages with millions of followers. LeBron James, absent from Weibo and Douyin, has over 16M fans following his unofficial ‘fan led’ accounts. There is opportunity for teams, the league, and players to work with KOCs and their audiences as engagement channels and provide greater value for partners.

Weibo has been the go-to platform for years, but now short-form video platforms have captured the attention of young people drawn to ‘snackable entertainment’. Bytedance-owned Douyin (TikTok of China), led the way in 2020, with all 30 team accounts sitting within NBA China’s management and 40+ NBA players launching new accounts this year. Short-form video is fast becoming a central pillar of the NBA’s digital engagement strategy.

Without home team fan allegiances in China, it’s the mega-stars of the NBA who have enormous pull in drawing new fans to their teams. Domestic and international brands have embraced star power, with many activating digital campaigns. Examples include Wilson and Nick Young’s collaboration on Douyin, Under Armour’s continued story-telling with Stephen Curry’s Weibo, Anta and Klay Thompson’s trending video series, and LeBron James partnering with Nike across the country.
MOST POPULAR
TEAMS ONLINE

2019 RANKING
GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS 01
HOUSTON ROCKETS 02
LA LAKERS 03
TORONTO RAPTORS 04
BOSTON CELTICS 05
CLEVELAND CAVALIERS 06
MILWAUKEE BUCKS 07
PHILADELPHIA 76ERS 08
DALLAS MAVERICKS 09
SAN ANTONIO SPURS 10
MIAMI HEAT 11
MINNESOTA TIMBERWOLVES 12
DENVER NUGGETS 13
OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER 15
NEW ORLEANS PELICANS 16
PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS 17
ATLANTA HAWKS 18
BROOKLYN NETS 19
CHARLOTTE HORNETS 20
CHICAGO BULLS 21
INDIANA PACERS 22
SACRAMENTO KINGS 23
DETROIT PISTONS 24
ORLANDO MAGIC 25
PHOENIX SUNS 26
NEW YORK KNICKS 27
UTAH JAZZ 28
MEMPHIS GRIZZLIES 29
WASHINGTON WIZARDS 30

2020 RANKING

*The data was collected from October 23rd, 2019 - October 13th, 2020
Points were awarded across the following metrics:
Full methodology available upon request
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>2020 RANKING</th>
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<td>+2</td>
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<td>UTAH JAZZ 21</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORLANDO MAGIC 30</td>
<td>22</td>
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LAKERS NATION TAKES OVER

The Lakers’ 19/20 season ended with them winning a championship and claiming the #1 ranking in the NBA Red Card 2020. They were dominant this year, leading in every performance metric except Weibo Total Followers where they ranked #2. The Lakers grew 2.27M followers on Weibo, 34% higher than any other team and their engagement increased by 385% year over year. This can be attributed to their star-power, on-court success, and a dedicated strategy that helped establish ‘Lakers Nation’ in China.

Leverage The Stars

The Lakers excelled at showcasing their talent, especially LeBron James. The team launched a successful UGC initiative to collect fans’ birthday wishes for the star. Previously, the Cleveland Cavaliers experienced similar success on Weibo, but have subsequently dropped in the rankings since LeBron left. Kobe Bryant is still a huge influence for many Lakers and basketball fans. With his passing this year, the Lakers’ paid homage to him by livestreaming his memorial and producing bespoke video content. This resulted in record breaking engagement as followers bonded over Kobe’s contributions to basketball culture.

Commitment to China

The Lakers are dedicated to providing their fans with quality content through a focused local strategy. They engage their fan base to co-create content, but also integrate Chinese elements, such as local dialects, into their content portfolio. Ahead of the NBA Season Returns campaign, the Lakers used local artists and KOCs to create graphics that were connected to specific regions.

Launching Lakers Nation

Organising and connecting the Lakers fan base is an integral aspect of the China strategy. Before the 2019 China Games, the Lakers embarked on their first China focused digital strategy by galvanising 20+ fan led communities towards a central call to action, ‘Join Lakers Nation.’ Their 10-part video series featured stories from KOLs and fan leaders who inspired further participation. This was the largest social campaign from an NBA team this season with 16M impressions.
NBA TEAMS ANALYSIS

Most Improved: Brooklyn Nets Popularity Surges
The NBA China Games 2019 appearance, signing Kevin Durant to join Kyrie Irving, and Joseph Tsai becoming the owner in 2019, all elevated the Brooklyn Nets to jump 14 places into the Top 5. The Nets’ Weibo average engagement increased 356% compared to last year, and ranked #2 in follower growth behind the Lakers. Follower growth on Douyin was also impressive, ranking #3 for all NBA teams, but average engagement (#13) and total engagement (#12) lagged due to a lack of original content and infrequent posting.

Strong and Steady: Golden State Warriors Keep Pace
Co-produced 10 episodes of a Pop Show with a local dance studio called SINOSTAGE. This series is a precursor to other NBA teams building partnerships. Adapting to local culture is also a proven method, as the Warriors find opportunities to reach fans of trending Chinese celebrities with simple yet creative crossovers. A happy birthday post for a TV celebrity reached 13K engagement due to traffic from the celebrity’s fanbase. This one post from the Warriors achieved higher engagement than two NBA teams had all season.

On the Rise: Los Angeles Clippers Come On Strong
Climbed 6 spots to reach the #8 ranked NBA team in 2020. The groundwork was done on Weibo, which was ranked #5 due to 333% growth in average engagement year over year. Thanks to new superstars and improved on-court performance, the Clippers aim to maintain upward trajectory to challenge the Top 5 next year. The Clippers boast the largest official Weibo fan group of any NBA team, now with 1,474 members, plus large fan pages of 930K on Weibo and 197K on Douyin. Paul George’s fan pages are impressive, 2.06M on Weibo and 211K on Douyin.

Honorable Mention: Houston Rockets Persevere
In the aftermath of the Daryl Morey tweet, average engagement on Weibo from Oct 2019 - June 2020 dipped by 13% compared to last season, and follower growth was last in the NBA. From July - Oct 2020, the Rockets shot up to 769 average engagement, which was 2nd only to the Lakers. It’s natural that being in the playoffs leads to better results, but engagement saw a massive boost during their matchup with the Lakers.
THE DOUYIN OPPORTUNITY

The average NBA team posted 60 videos on Douyin during the 2019-20 NBA season, compared to 2.4K average posts on Weibo, showing how far Douyin’s strategy is lagging behind Weibo. The NBA teams have not caught up to their biggest competitors for fans in China - European football teams. Many top-tier football clubs have focused on Douyin in recent years, and are seeing tremendous growth and success.

Football Clubs Dominate on Douyin

- Reached 500K Douyin Followers
- Achieved 1M+ Engagements this Year
- Average Output Per Team

Football Clubs Over 2x More Active

The Real Winner Is...

The NBA China account now has over 12.3M followers and 410M likes on its official channel. It is extremely active, matching the average NBA team’s season output in just 8 days. Once teams invest in the platform the same way that the league has, there will be notable growth for the respective teams.

Massive Potential

The top two teams on Douyin and Weibo are the same: Los Angeles Lakers and Golden State Warriors. Beyond the top two, differences appear between the rankings on Weibo and Douyin, showing that many teams could benefit from creating a unique content strategy for their Douyin account, as many have done on Weibo.

Grizzlies Stand Out

Despite being one of the worst performing teams on Weibo, the Memphis Grizzlies Douyin account was top 10 in all engagement metrics. The success comes from posting comical off-court videos, which matches the light-hearted tone for Douyin. Meanwhile, the Clippers mixed in photos and graphics on Douyin instead of only videos. Graphics and images clearly perform better on Weibo, which explains why the Clippers have thrived on Weibo, but are struggling on Douyin with a #12 rank.

Takeaway

Because teams do not have Douyin specific content plans, performance is reliant on the content from their global accounts, like TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram. Each platform in China should not be treated the same, so teams will need unique content for Weibo and Douyin if they plan to grow both simultaneously.
MOST POPULAR PLAYERS ONLINE

NO.1
Stephen Curry
56 POINTS

NO.2
Dwight Howard
44 POINTS

NO.3
Derrick Rose
26 POINTS

NO.3
Klay Thompson
26 POINTS

NO.5
PJ Tucker
24 POINTS
ANALYSIS AND INSIGHTS - NBA ATHLETES

Social performance is not tied strictly to current on-court performance, but is based on dedication to content and platform strategy. Stephen Curry and Klay Thompson both didn’t play most of the season due to injury. Dwight Howard and Derrick Rose found success despite not being stars on their teams anymore. PJ Tucker has been a role player his entire career, and still managed to crack the Top 5.

Curry Reigns
Stephen Curry’s Weibo does not post everyday, but when he does share a post, people take notice. His account is #1 for current NBA players in both followers (4.8M) and engagement metrics (8x more average engagement than #2 Kyrie Irving). Curry has earned a strong reputation by putting heart into his content.

Care for the Market
Curry never hesitated to send best wishes to fans in China, whether it was in a time of need during COVID-19, or a time of celebration for Chinese New Year. Even though the concepts are simple, these efforts have taken Curry to the pinnacle of NBA players.

Follow the Trends
Curry also produced crossovers with trending Chinese personalities, resulting in impressive social traffic. When the one-armed basketball sensation Zhang Jiacheng rose to fame, Curry was the first player to interact with him by recording a shoutout video which went viral.

Honorable Mention - Jeremy Lin  143 points.
His dominance on China social cannot be ignored, largely due to his ethnic & cultural roots and ability to secure domestic partnerships to co-create content. He would have retained the #1 spot on China social media again this year easily. He is still the most followed and most engaged NBA athlete in China, with nearly 14.2M followers and 15M engagements this year across Weibo and Douyin.

PJ Tucker, the Sneaker King
Several newcomers arrived in the top player rankings this year. Their keys to success have been leveraging unique traits that distinguish them from other players. Take PJ Tucker for example, known as the NBA’s biggest sneakerhead, Tucker launched a #Sneaker King# challenge in collaboration with Douyin. Tucker became the first NBA player to connect with fans via Douyin livestream, resulting in over 3M video views.

How to Stay on Top
Much of Curry’s content could be repurposed for Douyin, and would cement his #1 ranking against other NBA players. Most others have already transitioned to Douyin, with over 40 new athletes launching on the platform this year alone.
NBA’S MOST WANTED STARS

The Brooklyn Nets benefited from uniting Kyrie Irving and Kevin Durant, the Clippers rose up the ranks after Kawhi Leonard and Paul George arrived together, and the Lakers became #1 after Anthony Davis joined forces with LeBron James. While they drive attention to their team accounts, some of these famous players are not growing their own social channels in China.

Star Players Not Capitalising
Kevin Durant and Anthony Davis haven’t posted since February 2019, Kyrie ranks 20th amongst all NBA athletes, and LeBron James has yet to open China social accounts. Building these strong platforms gives players commercial opportunities in China for the rest of their careers and retirement, like we have seen from NBA legends like Kobe Bryant, Dwyane Wade, and more.

Opportunity is Undeniable
The vast network of fan pages also proves the market exists for certain players. Stephen Curry has a fan page with 1.1M followers and 37.2M likes on Douyin, and he hasn’t launched on the platform yet. The same is seen on Weibo, where Kyrie Irving’s official Weibo account has 290K followers, but three of his fan pages have over 1M followers each.

Athlete Commercialisation Models
MORE Sports, a made-for-China platform and social influencer network, focuses on providing high quality original content. MORE is a prime example of an innovative offering to the Chinese market where brands can reach a qualified audience that is built by the players. The roster of player partners includes James Harden, Donovan Mitchell, Trae Young and retired Hall-of-Famers Steve Nash and Kevin Garnett, to name a few.

Takeaway
There is a clear desire for NBA players in the social media landscape, but the demand is not being met with enough genuine China-specific content from star player accounts. Many NBA athletes are underperforming in China given their global marketability, and can learn from players like PJ Tucker to fully capitalise on their star status.
MOST POPULAR LEGENDS ONLINE

A new crop of Legends are rising in the rankings in China, and are doing so through the power of Douyin as opposed to Weibo. The likes of Nick Young, Allen Iverson, and Steve Nash will be looking to catch Dwyane Wade in the years to come as they take on a new market.

Cross-platform Success
Dwyane Wade and Stephon Marbury excelled on both Weibo and Douyin, leading to them being #1 and #2 in this year’s rankings.

On Weibo, many of Wade’s most popular posts were not about himself, but focused on relatable topics that he could speak about from experience - such as anecdotes from playing with LeBron James and against Kobe Bryant. Wade’s strong following in China is reinforced by his partnership with Li-Ning, a Chinese sports apparel brand.

Stephon Marbury became a legendary player in the CBA during the 2010s and now coaches in Beijing. He has fully immersed himself into the culture, and naturally that means his main outlets are on China social media, leading to him being the most active and most engaged Legend on Douyin this year. The content about his daily life, titled “My Life in China” performs especially well, as it provides a mix of entertainment and intimacy for his fans and viewers.

A New Star
Nick Young is popular in China due to his charisma, and is well-known for his time playing alongside Kobe Bryant on the Lakers. Young created branded content with Wilson, and also collaborated with two Chinese KOLs as part of his first Douyin livestream. The livestream topped Douyin trending lists, helping Young become the second most followed NBA Legend on the platform with over 1.94M followers.
KOBE’S LEGACY

Local Icon
Kobe Bryant has been one of the most beloved sports figures in China for decades. His unparalleled "Mamba Mentality", and obvious love for Chinese fans made him a legend. He was perennially one of the most active NBA players on social media, arranging frequent fan Q&A’s, participating in annual China tours, and activating partnerships with local brands.

His tragic passing early this year shocked the world, and in China the pain was equally felt. On Weibo, Kobe was the #1 trending topic when news broke, and the hashtag has received 330M reads to date. Fans flooded his personal account, his final post wishing followers a Happy Chinese New Year has since received more than 1.3M likes. In total, his passing received more than 10B reads across hundreds of topics on Weibo.

Tencent Memorial Stream
Tencent showed Kobe’s memorial via livestream so fans could pay respects. Despite the memorial taking place at 2am Beijing time, nearly 20M viewers joined the livestream plus an additional 5M views on the interactive H5 memorial page.

Remembering Kobe
There was a second wave of Kobe appreciation on his birthday this year, which also coincides with Kobe Day in China, 8/24. Brands like Nike and Panini America commemorated Kobe by sharing archival footage and creating original content, while others made billboards in China - most notably a mural was painted in Guangzhou.

Weibo Sports launched a campaign that propelled Kobe to the #1 trending spot for that day, resulting in the hashtag #Post for Kobe# reaching 15.72M views and 3.4M discussions.
CSR CAMPAIGNS
The return of NBA broadcasts on CCTV5 was a huge turning point for the NBA this year. The government-owned, nationwide sports channel cited the NBA's charitable efforts in China as a main reason for bringing live coverage back. As a result, we expect the NBA to continue launching more CSR campaigns in China to reinforce this sentiment, and will involve team accounts in a more collaborative way. This will show China that not only the NBA cares about this market, but that all teams and stakeholders mirror those values.

LIVESTREAMING
Without the ability to organise NBA China Games or China tours in 2020 and possibly 2021, athletes, brands, and teams will be looking for a way to connect with the China market in a more meaningful way throughout the upcoming season. To date, there still has not been a livestream hosted by an NBA team in China. 2021 will be the year for NBA teams.

THE BATTLE FOR SHORT-FORM VIDEO
Douyin and Kuaishou are both challenging Weibo for fan attention, especially as platforms look to secure short-video rights for the upcoming NBA season. Douyin is the clear front-runner in China, but there are emerging platforms that present an opportunity to reach a different target audience. The NBA just launched a Kuaishou account in September 2020, and Onyeka Okongwu recently became the first NBA player to launch on Bilibili. Each platform will make a hard push to bring more NBA related accounts to their platform in 2021.

CHINA-SPECIFIC PLAYER CONTENT
As more players find ways to commercialise platforms in China, teams will lean into the emerging player market. For some teams, it will be obvious who to work with (the Warriors and Stephen Curry, for example). However, in examples like PJ Tucker, teams can use players with less global star power to create unique content for China, given their popularity here.

TENCENT & NBA
Tencent’s long-term relationship with the NBA will be switching focus in 2021, as they offer the NBA streaming package on Tencent Video. This will give Tencent the opportunity to reposition the NBA as a lifestyle and entertainment brand. Crossover content between the NBA and other entertainment IPs will be a main focus for Tencent in 2021, opening the NBA up to a wider range of viewers and advertisers.
ABOUT MAILMAN

Pioneering China’s digital and sport ecosystem for a decade.

For over a decade we’ve been producing deep analysis of China’s expanding digital ecosystem, while providing valuable insights to professional sports organisations eager to grow their business in China.

Thank you to everyone from our team who have helped craft this year’s NBA Red Card, we’re very proud of your continued learning and diligence in producing a fair assessment for the teams of the NBA.

Mailman is a leading sports digital agency and consultancy. Through rich digital marketing, social media strategy, production and ecommerce we help the world’s leading sports brands build audiences and a sustainable business in China.

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