

Sport Development Meets Consumer Culture: Basketball, Generation Z, and Business Opportunities in Vietnam

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Abstract: Though commercially integrated worldwide, basketball remains relatively underdeveloped in Vietnam's secondary schools compared to the United States, Europe, and China. The U.S. has well-established high school and NCAA college basketball systems, China has expanded professional operations and leagues, while Vietnam has relied largely on state-sponsored initiatives and the informal reach of social media to engage the population. This research focuses on basketball within the context of secondary schools in Vietnam, with particular emphasis on the unique and often overlooked challenge of promoting offline physical leisure to teenagers in the digital age. This study adopts a mixed-methods design, combining survey data from 500 high school students in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City with interviews involving educators, coaches, and sport business professionals. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was used to test the influence of online engagement, peer influence, and institutional support on basketball participation. Results show that online engagement ($\beta = 0.42$) and peer influence ($\beta = 0.36$) are stronger predictors of participation than institutional support ($\beta = 0.19$), underscoring the centrality of digital culture for Generation Z in Vietnam. Theoretically, the findings extend the Sport Development Model by highlighting digitally mediated entry points into sport participation and demonstrate how Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) explains identity construction through both physical and digital basketball consumption. From a business perspective, the study suggests that sporting goods companies can capitalize on Vietnam's digitally active youth by leveraging influencer-driven campaigns, sponsoring grassroots tournaments, and gamifying training experiences. By integrating digital ecosystems with grassroots investment, firms can accelerate both cultural adoption and commercial growth of basketball in Vietnam.

Keywords: Basketball in Vietnam, Generation Z, sport business, online engagement

1. Introduction

Basketball is one of the most important sports worldwide, with strong cultural and commercial integration in the United States and China. The U.S. is the largest revenue contributor, supported by its club-based systems and the NCAA. Basketball has also emerged as a rapidly growing sport in China.

Unlike in other countries, basketball in Vietnam is still in its developing stages. Despite efforts by the Vietnam Basketball Association (VBA) and exposure through international media, basketball has not been widely integrated into high school athletic curricula. Most students are introduced to the sport through informal extracurricular activities or, more commonly, by self-teaching via the Internet rather than participating in structured practice sessions and tournaments (Quang, 2023). This is particularly concerning given the digital culture of Generation Z, who spend much of their free time passively engaged with social media and online videos. While the online environment exposes youth to basketball, it does not translate into meaningful, real-world participation.

Although basketball is gaining popularity globally, there is limited research on the cultural impact of high school basketball in Vietnam compared to other countries. Existing

studies primarily focus on physical education or formal sport development, leaving the roles of social media, peer influence, and school-based frameworks in promoting basketball in Vietnam underexplored.

This research aims to address this gap by examining the state of basketball in secondary schools in Vietnam and comparing it with the United States, Europe, and China. It further seeks to apply culturally grounded educational and sport business perspectives relevant to Generation Z. In doing so, the study contributes to sport development theory while offering practical insights for sporting goods manufacturers seeking to expand into emerging markets.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations

Currently, sports within the educational system are understood through the Sport Development Model, which outlines three stages of development: mass participation, talent identification, and elite performance (Green, 2005). When applied to real contexts, these stages are highly dependent on the availability of organizational backing and the presence of a systematic teaching framework. In Vietnam, the challenge lies primarily in the first stage, where

disengagement is high due to the scarcity of available programs and facilities (Quang, 2023).

Another relevant theoretical lens is Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which examines how people consume products through culture and its associated social phenomena (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In the case of sports, basketball engagement for the Gen Z population extends beyond the physical game to include issues of self-formation, social media presence, and sponsorships. For example, Gen Z individuals in Vietnam, as noted by Dinh (2024), are more likely to buy branded sports footwear for recognition, social media visibility, and self-affirmation rather than purely athletic purposes.

In Vietnam, the UTAUT2 model of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) has been leveraged to highlight the positive effects of ease of use, perceived enjoyment, and peer influence in e-commerce and metaverse adoption. This enjoyment framework can be applied analogously to physical sports to better understand the nature of online-driven engagement.

International Experiences in Basketball Development

In the United States, the NCAA system thrives at the secondary and higher education levels. High school students train rigorously, developing technical skills and physical conditioning while also engaging in the social structures that promote cohesion and participation (Smith & Washington, 2020).

In Europe, countries such as Spain and Lithuania exemplify the club-associated model. Here, basketball is organized through community clubs that operate alongside the education system, offering structured programs that integrate student and community participation. This model facilitates the transition from youth amateur levels to professional play, as clubs actively invest in and nurture wide-ranging development programs for younger players.

China, by contrast, demonstrates a state-driven approach. Through the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) and government-sponsored educational initiatives, basketball ranks second only to soccer and enjoys widespread grassroots participation supported by extensive commercial sponsorship (Wang, 2021). This illustrates that, with proper structuring, schools, clubs, and government systems can work collaboratively to enhance the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of sport.

Research Gap

Despite the abundance of resources on how basketball is culturally and commercially practiced in the United States, Europe, and China, Vietnam still lacks comparable

information. Existing studies often focus narrowly on basketball's role in physical education (Quang, 2023) or analyze consumer behavior among the broader Gen Z population (Nguyen, 2025). However, there is insufficient research on digital engagement, structural constraints, and actual basketball participation within Vietnamese high schools.

Moreover, the specific situation of Vietnamese Gen Z, who spend a disproportionate amount of time on social media and video-sharing platforms such as TikTok and YouTube (Nguyen, 2025), requires rethinking the pathways through which basketball can exert influence. Unlike the U.S. or China, Vietnam lacks a well-developed infrastructure for systematic basketball training. As a result, interest in basketball risks being relegated to passive, non-participatory, and digitally mediated consumption rather than active engagement.

In this context, the present research seeks to fill the gap by examining how online exposure, peer influence, and school support collectively shape basketball participation among Vietnamese high school students, while using international frameworks for comparison. The findings are expected to contribute both to academic knowledge and to practical strategies for sport business investors in Vietnam.

3. Methodology

The researchers adopted a convergent parallel design, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the impacts of basketball on high school students in Vietnam. A structured survey (quantitative) was used to examine the relationships between respondents' online behavior, peer participation, and organizational support with basketball involvement. In-depth qualitative interviews with teachers, educators, and sports industry managers provided contextual insights and enriched the interpretation of survey results.

Quantitative Data Collection

High school students in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City—the two cities selected due to their relatively high visibility of basketball activity—were administered a structured questionnaire. The survey included items on:

- **Online engagement:** time spent on basketball-related content on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram.
- **Peer influence:** support and participation of friends.
- **Institutional support:** schools' provision of facilities, coaching, and formal competitions.
- **Basketball participation:** attendance at practices and matches, and access to basketball equipment.

All constructs were measured using Likert-scale items adapted from prior studies on sport and digital participation (Dinh, 2024).

Qualitative Data Collection

In addition to the survey, 12 key stakeholders—including physical educators, club coaches, and employees of sports marketing companies—were interviewed using a semi-structured format. The interviews explored digital engagement strategies, structural challenges, and business opportunities related to basketball products.

International Comparative Data

Secondary datasets were also collected for cross-national comparison:

- **United States:** NCAA and National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) participation data.
- **Europe:** EuroLeague and regional club development reports.
- **China:** Government white papers on youth sport and CBA development statistics.

These datasets provided comparative insights into participation pathways and institutional structures.

Data Analysis

Quantitative results were analyzed using AMOS Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), focusing on interrelationships among latent variables. Model fit was assessed using CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR indices. Qualitative interviews were transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed, then triangulated with survey findings to contextualize the patterns identified through SEM.

4. Results

Domestic Scale: Secondary School and University Contests

Basketball is beginning to gain greater popularity at the high school level in Vietnam's two largest cities. In Ho Chi Minh City, from May 18 to June 9, 2024, the *Festival School Basketball Tournament – Nestlé MILO Cup 2024* was held at Phu Tho Stadium, featuring more than 1,500 students from 81 teams representing 22 districts. According to the Ho Chi Minh City Basketball Federation, the 2024 season saw participation from around 2,000 athletes and coaches across 113 teams, demonstrating growing grassroots interest in the sport.

Similarly, Hanoi has integrated basketball more actively into its annual student sports festivals, such as the 2024–2025 Đông Đa District Games, which recorded 2,398 student athletes across 11 sports, including basketball. Hanoi also saw its first attempt to establish a yearly high school competition structure with the launch of the 2024 *Youth Basketball League – Ziaja Cup*.

At the tertiary level, the *National University Championship (NUC) Basketball 2024* featured 75 teams from 48 universities over a 20-day calendar. This was one of the largest university basketball tournaments in Vietnam, reflecting progress in advancing the sport at the higher education level. Nevertheless, basketball in Vietnam remains fragmented, lacking a cohesive, strategic, and systematic structure that connects high school, university, and professional levels.

VBA: Professional League and Digital Reach

Founded in 2016, the Vietnam Basketball Association (VBA) currently oversees six professional teams. The Saigon Heat dominates the league, winning five consecutive championships by 2024. Despite its professional competitions, the VBA continues to face challenges. In 2024, several teams were relocated to a single arena in Ho Chi Minh City, raising concerns about the league's long-term sustainability.

To expand its digital presence, the VBA has partnered with companies such as Genius Sports and Magnifi AI, investing heavily in producing and distributing multi-format highlights (16:9, 9:16, 1:1) across Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok. The league's Facebook page has 727,000 likes, indicating strong domestic brand recognition, while its Instagram page has 36,000 followers, showing moderate engagement. However, TikTok performance has been underwhelming, with highlight clips receiving only 600–1,000 likes—relatively low given the platform's popularity among Gen Z. This suggests that the VBA has yet to effectively capture the attention of the digital-first youth audience.

International Benchmarks

The United States is the most developed basketball market, home to the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), which oversees more than 900,000 high school athletes and 18,000 schools with basketball programs. Each year, the NCAA integrates approximately 35,926 student athletes, reinforcing the pipeline from high school to university and ultimately to professional basketball.

In Europe, youth basketball development is primarily club-based. Countries such as Spain and Lithuania host hundreds of thousands of registered youth players, supported by regional federations and international competitions like the Adidas Next Generation EuroLeague.

In China, basketball is strongly backed by state-sponsored programs. The Chinese High School Basketball League, together with Jr. NBA initiatives, organizes tournaments and online events. In 2024, the Guangdong Jr. NBA League Finals drew 10.5 million livestream viewers, underscoring the power of institutional support when paired with digital platforms.

Quantitative SEM Analysis

Surveying 500 students in high school in Vietnam, strong model fit was indicated through the SEM analysis. Summary of findings is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. *Structural Equation Modeling Results*

Pathway	Standardized β	p-value	Significance
Online Engagement → Basketball Participation	0.42	<0.01	***
Peer Influence → Basketball Participation	0.36	<0.01	***
Institutional Support → Basketball Participation	0.19	<0.05	**

*Notes: Model fit indices – $\chi^2/df = 2.1$; CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.045. Significance levels: ** < 0.05, *** < 0.01.

The hypothesis that online engagement and peer influence have the most predictive power for participation in basketball activities is confirmed. Support from institutions is important, however, it does not have such a strong influence. The finding with the domestic tournaments and VBA's digital strategies suggest that basketball social media exposure and peer networks are the primary drivers for Vietnam while the opposite is true in other countries.

Analysis of Results

These outcomes highlight the stark contradictions in the development of basketball in Vietnam. Interest in the sport is clearly rising among high school and university students, as evidenced by the establishment of tournaments such as the *Festival School Basketball Tournament* in Ho Chi Minh City and the *National University Championship*. However, this interest remains fragmented, with no cohesive structure linking grassroots competitions to the professional level. This stands in sharp contrast to the United States and China, where competitions like the NFHS, CHBL, NCAA, and CUBA are seamlessly integrated into national sports frameworks.

The findings also reflect the structural issues revealed in the SEM analysis. Unlike in the United States and China, where institutional support is the strongest driver of participation, high school students in Vietnam are more influenced by social media ($\beta = 0.42$) and peer relationships ($\beta = 0.36$). This underscores the reality that Generation Z are digital natives: for many, “playing basketball” occurs via TikTok, YouTube, or gaming platforms rather than through physical activity. The relatively weaker institutional support ($\beta = 0.19$) explains the scarcity of organized activities, such as competitions, trained coaches, and facilities, which in turn limits the translation of interest into real-world participation.

Social and Educational Implications

Socially, the engagement of Vietnamese youth with basketball presents a double-edged sword: it holds great potential yet carries certain risks. On the negative side, while young people show affinity for basketball, the lack of offline participation may lead to long-term consequences, including increased screen exposure and sedentary lifestyles. This reinforces the need for comprehensive school basketball programs that are better integrated into city- and national-level competitions.

On the positive side, basketball has the potential to serve as an effective educational tool to counter sedentary behavior and screen addiction. Successful initiatives, such as the Jr. NBA Guangdong League, demonstrate that embedding gamified competition—even in digitally enhanced formats—can boost engagement across all levels of learning. For Vietnam, integrating basketball into physical education curricula could strengthen pathways between schools and emerging professional leagues, thereby creating a more sustainable model for sports development.

Impacts of Findings for Companies Selling Sporting Equipment

The findings also carry significant implications for businesses in the sporting goods industry. Since online engagement emerged as the strongest predictor of participation, companies should reconsider traditional approaches. Instead of focusing primarily on offline retail and sponsorship, firms should aim to embed themselves into the digital lives of Gen Z consumers. Three key strategies emerge:

1) *Integration into the Digital Ecosystem* – Companies should leverage TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels by sponsoring or creating short-form content, such as skill tutorials, merchandise showcases, and influencer-driven challenges, to capture Gen Z's attention.

2) *Talent Funnel and Grassroots Sponsorship* – Sponsoring high school and university tournaments not only

strengthens brand association with youth culture but also contributes to building a structured competition pipeline. This mirrors the successful strategies of Nike and Adidas in the United States and China.

3) *Gamified Engagement* – Companies can adopt gamified training applications and use augmented reality to merge real-world and digital basketball experiences. Such approaches move beyond traditional equipment to create interactive, hybrid consumer products that resonate with Gen Z.

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to sport development literature by showing that in contexts with limited institutional support, digital culture and peer influence may act as the primary catalysts for participation. It extends the Sport Development Model by incorporating digitally mediated entry points into sport engagement. Furthermore, it integrates Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) with sport studies by demonstrating how both digital and physical basketball consumption contribute to identity formation among Generation Z.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The survey was limited to two metropolitan areas, overlooking rural contexts where both digital access and sports infrastructure may differ substantially. Moreover, the SEM model examined only three constructs; future research should incorporate factors such as parental influence, socio-economic status, or exposure to eSports. Longitudinal studies would also be valuable to determine the extent to which digital engagement correlates with sustained physical participation over time.

5. Implications for Sport Business

Findings and Implications for Sporting Goods Companies

The findings of this study indicate that sporting goods companies should view Vietnam not only as a budding market for basketball equipment but also as an untapped arena for digital engagement strategies. Since peer encouragement and online engagement exert greater influence on participation than institutional support, strategies must be tailored to the business habits of Gen Z rather than restricted to conventional sponsorships. Three major observations emerge:

Finally, this study contributes to sport development literature by adding digitally mediated pathways to existing frameworks and underscoring the role of online identity construction for Gen Z. Practically, the findings suggest that sporting goods companies must adopt digital-first approaches,

invest in grassroots competitions, and explore gamified engagement models to build durable connections with young consumers. For Vietnam, the integration of digital technologies with long-term grassroots investment offers the most promising pathway to strengthen both the social and commercial value of its basketball ecosystem.

Hybrid Marketing and Influencer Administration

A large proportion of Gen Z in Vietnam engages daily with TikTok, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels. Sporting goods companies should therefore prioritize short-form video content. VBA players and youth influencers could, for example, be mobilized through campaigns such as the “#CrossoverChallenge” to promote equipment. Beyond traditional product placement, brands can experiment with AR filters that let users “wear” shoes or “bounce” basketballs virtually, thereby gamifying the shopping experience.

Grassroots Sponsorship and Community Building

While institutional support for basketball remains limited, grassroots tournaments—such as the *Festival School Basketball Tournament* and the *National University Championship*—already attract thousands of participants. Sponsoring these events through branded uniforms, basketballs, and digital scoreboards would not only provide visibility but also foster credibility. Long-term investment in grassroots sponsorship would create a sense of community ownership, positioning companies as co-developers of Vietnam’s basketball ecosystem rather than passive merchandisers.

Gamification and Hybrid Engagement Models

Considering Gen Z’s affinity for gamification, sporting goods companies can link physical play with digital platforms through hybrid models. For instance, mobile applications could allow players to use smart balls or wearables to track shooting accuracy, with results shared on online leaderboards. Integration of gamification elements—such as rewards, discounts, or exclusive merchandise—would transform basketball products into components of an experiential ecosystem, blending physical activity with digital engagement.

6. Conclusion

Basketball’s influence in Vietnam’s high schools and universities—though growing—is still shallow and fragmented, with participation heavily reliant on digital visibility rather than systemic support. Comparisons with the United States, Europe, and China demonstrate that while tournaments and the VBA create visibility, Vietnam lacks the structural integration that sustains long-term development elsewhere.

Online engagement, peer influence, and institutional support together highlight the unique participation dynamics in Vietnam, where internationally engineered structures cannot be directly transplanted due to systematically absent foundations.

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