

RED CARD



CHINA SPORTS DIGITAL,
DATA & INSIGHTS

A REPORT BY **MAILMAN**

THE FANS ISSUE

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INTRODUCTION

Examining European football fans in China

Chinese fans are the most in demand in the world. Whilst we are seeing new challenger sports regularly enter the race for their allegiances, UFC and NHL to name two recent examples, nowhere is the competition for attention more fierce than for fans of European football. At this point, all of the world's biggest football clubs are actively focused on the Chinese market.

As they are finding, China's sports landscape is very different to anything that they have encountered before. Chinese fans have different motivations, goals and

behaviours to anywhere else in the world. Understanding 'the Chinese fan' is undoubtedly the challenge with the biggest reward for a sports organisation in the world today.

It is also becoming increasingly important. Not only are more teams online than ever before, but more high level talent is visiting China through preseason club tours and promotional visits with individual sponsors. As such, a lack of understanding of what works in China is more heavily penalised.

In the second issue of the RED CARD+, we have taken a deep dive into what defines a European football fan in China.

“Understanding ‘the Chinese fan’ is undoubtedly the challenge with the biggest reward for a sports organisation in the world today.”

The data presented in this report was collected in collaboration with Chinese football app Sike (ENG: Score Sports), through an online survey and 12 one-on-one interviews. In total, 30,362 fans, distributed throughout China, submitted responses.

Of the responders, two thirds were male and 45% were under 21 years of age. Unsurprisingly with such a young demographic, 54% were students whilst the remainder was made up of white collar professionals across a range of industries. The group was also well educated, with 79% holding an undergraduate degree or higher.

This report examines the preferences, habits and the underlying reasons to give a detailed look at what makes today's Chinese fan so unique. From why they support the teams they do, to who they watch matches with, and what merchandise they want to buy.

It will also highlight some of the unique opportunities that both fan preferences and fan culture in China can present to clubs and marketers alike. We hope that you enjoy reading Issue 2 of the RED CARD+.

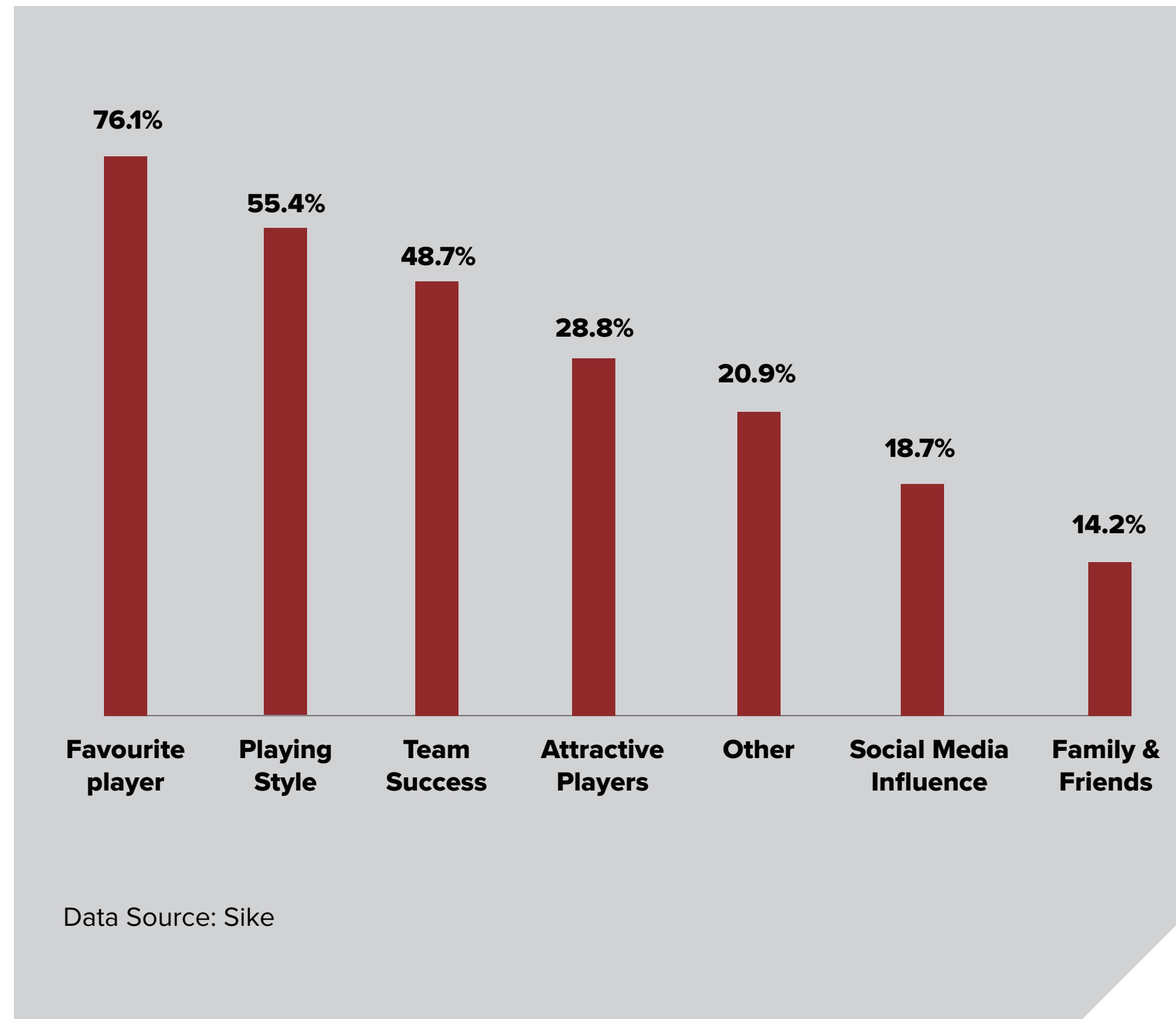




What motivates fans to follow their team?

In the West, it is often the case that fans' allegiance is chosen for them. Whether it be through geography or family tradition, few fans need to give much thought as to which team they support. In China, however, this is very different.

WHAT ATTRACTS FANS



The lack of an established football culture in the past has left fans widely free to choose whichever club they like. Unsurprisingly, the most popular clubs in China are generally the most successful in terms of on field performance. However, our survey has shown that it is not just winning that attracts fans, with many more fans following their favourite player over the club itself. "76% of fans follow their favourite player over the club." Also of interest is that Chinese fans value playing style over success.

Both of these insights should influence club's marketing strategies by putting a greater focus on their star players and, in the right examples, playing style. Attitudes such as this give interesting advantages to some clubs over their rivals, for example Arsenal, who are famous for their fluid passing, should focus on marketing their style. Alternatively, a team with more recent success, like Chelsea, would do better to focus on their stars and victories.

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Another interesting outcome is that just under one third of fans ranked the physical appearance of the players as important. This can be seen to a large extent in the popularity of the German national team and Bundesliga clubs. For example, Borussia Dortmund boast players like Mario Gotze and Marco Reus, both of whom are very popular with female Chinese fans.

Average Age of Supporters



20.7
YEARS OLD

The average age of club's fans fits well with the story of European football over the last decade. The recent success of the German national team and the Bundesliga's efforts online in China have given them a great deal of appeal to the younger fans. Close to them, Real Madrid and Barcelona's recent dominance, lead by undeniably two of the biggest football stars of all time has also attracted many younger fans.



26.5
YEARS OLD

Premier League teams occupy an older demographic, mainly due to the league's prowess in the late 2000's and early 2010's. The Italian teams also have an older fan base due to several factors. They were some of the first teams to agree broadcasting rights deals in China in the 1980s, which gave them a strong head start with those generations. They have also taken much different approach on social media, pitching more content to their established fans rather than primarily focussing on recruiting millennial followers.

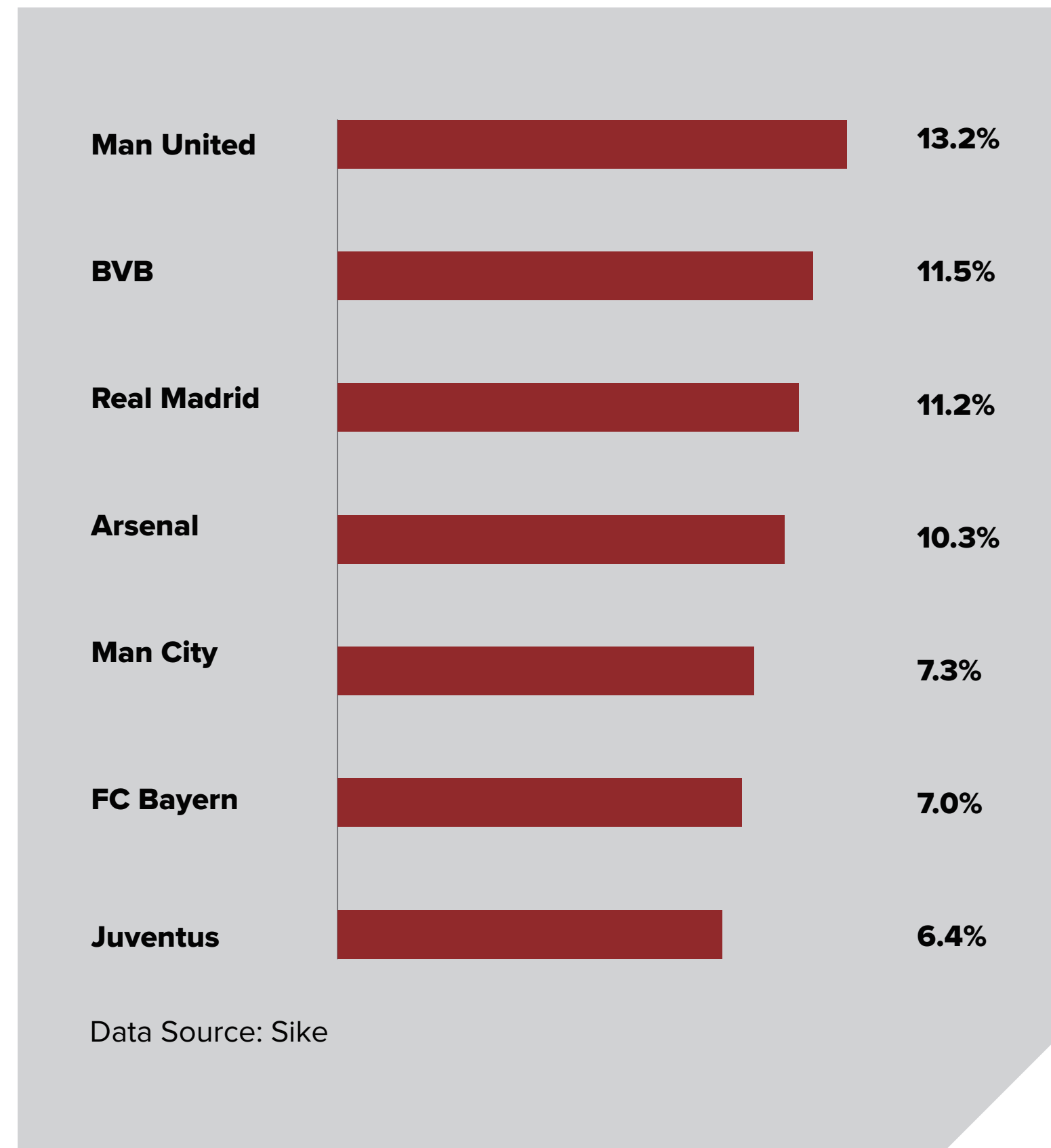


25.4
YEARS OLD



20.5
YEARS OLD

Fans Follow a Second Team



71.6%

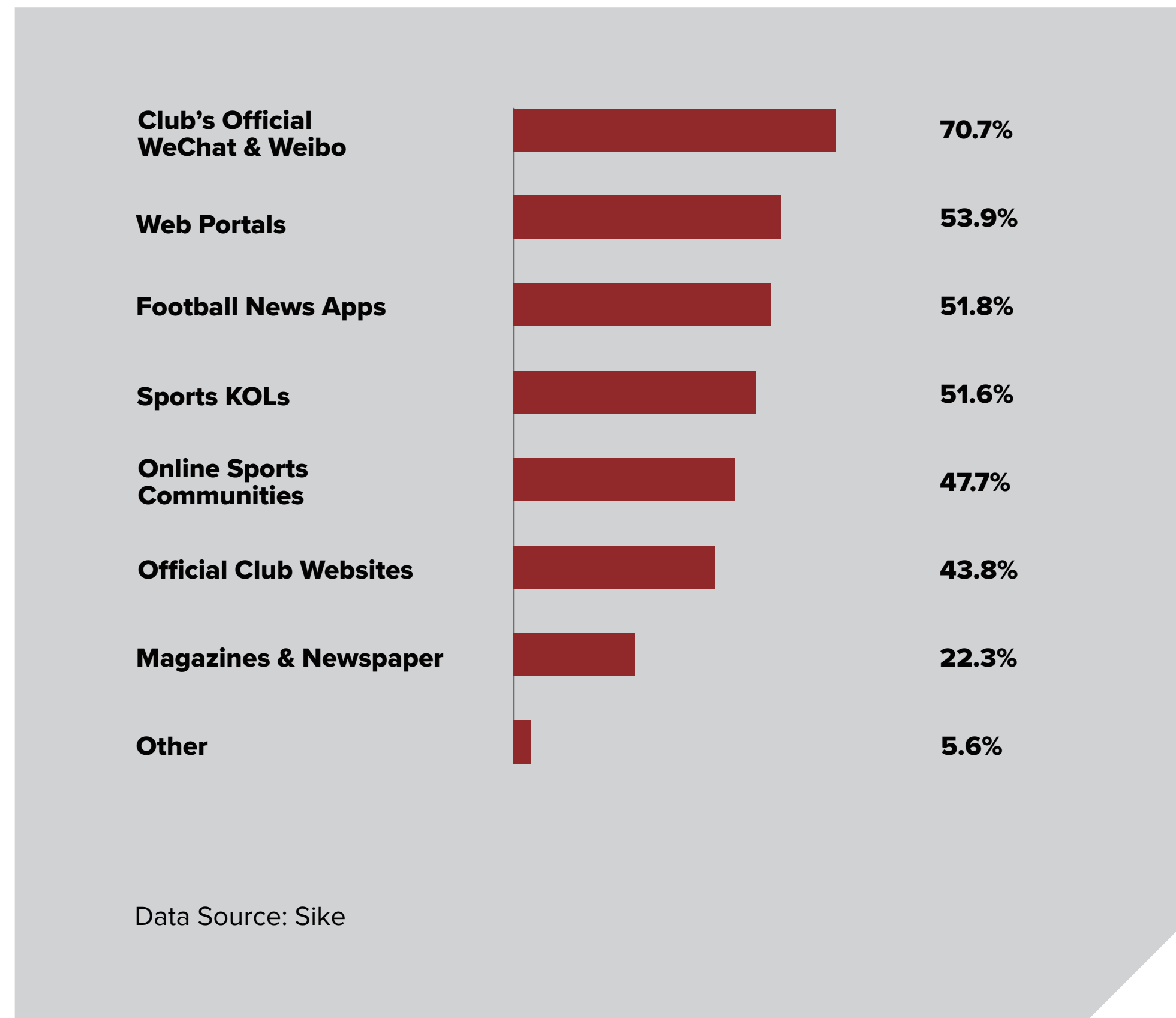
of Chinese fans said that they supported a second team. Generally, fans choose to support historically successful teams from a different league alongside their primary team. As such, it is little surprise to see Manchester United, Real Madrid, Manchester City and Bayern Munich at the top of this ranking. Borussia Dortmund may seem a slight outlier here. They have achieved this status by capturing the imagination of fans through their culture, German national team pedigree, legendary stadium atmosphere and commitment to the Chinese market through two summer tours to China.



Where do fans get news from?

This is another big difference to Western fans, who primarily get their news from established, official platforms. With the recent trend shown by Twitter becoming more of a breaking news than social media platform it is possible that China is leading European trends in this area.

WHAT FANS WANT



Chinese fans prefer official WeChat & Weibo accounts for several reasons. Content from official sources is seen as trustworthy, it's designed for mobile (therefore fits into everyday life) and allows interaction with other fans and the clubs in a way that traditional platforms cannot. Tied to this is the influence of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) online in China. They too are trusted but also give the added advantage of breaking rumours before official accounts. This plays very well with China's love for gossip and being first to know things.

Football specific apps, namely Dongquidi and Sike (Score Sports) have seen strong growth recently. This is primarily due to their community aspects and the fact that they're designed specifically for mobile, millennial China's primary internet access point. They are also renowned for more comprehensive, analytical content than general sports platforms which is preferred by

71%
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accounts

China's avid fans. Having constant access to this kind of news, analysis and the accompanying communities will continue to be crucial features for Chinese fans.

What video content do they like?

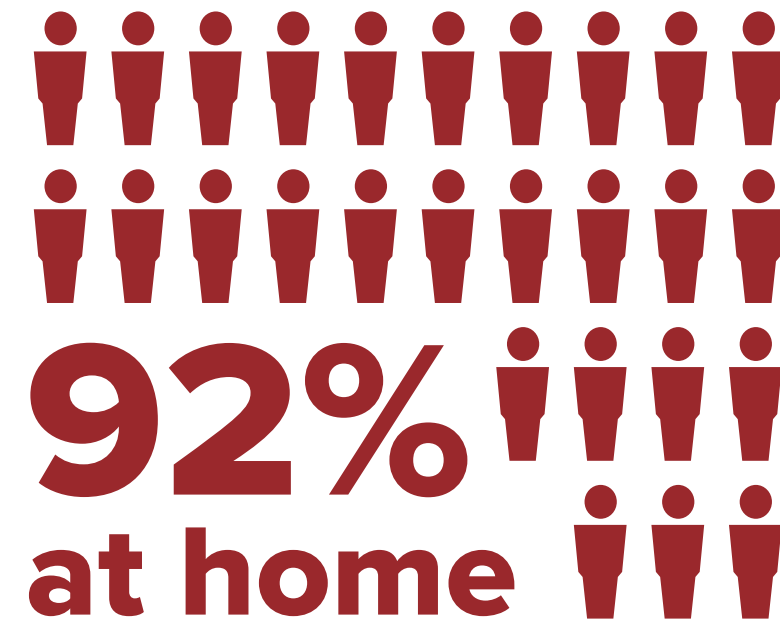
Most Western social media content is focused on giving the fans more access behind the scenes and to players. However, Chinese tastes differ again here with content showcasing player's skill and professionalism coming out as more popular than documenting their fun side. That said, the results do show that all 6 categories were popular and, as such, a well rounded video strategy that does not neglect any of these styles is the key to best practice.

74% of fans prefer videos of training sessions

Where do fans watch matches?

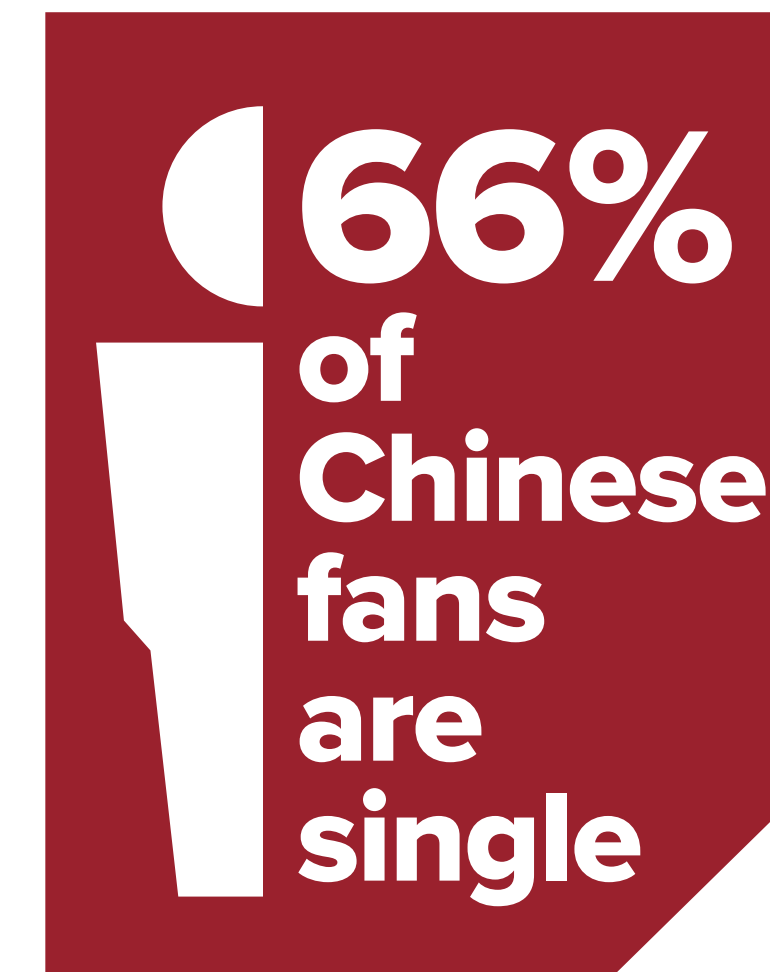
92% of fans watch games at home. This is partially due to the time difference, as most games kick off at 10pm or later China Standard Time, it means watching matches anywhere other than home becomes undesirable for many fans. There are other factors that lead to this, namely the 'single dog' culture which is explained further below.

This stark contrast with domestic audiences poses several interesting questions to clubs looking to market to these fans. One fundamental is ensuring that the games can be easily accessed on smartphones, the first choice format for not just football fans, but all sports fans; 65% of last season's NBA games were viewed via mobile.



Another is marketing during games. In the West, betting, alcohol and snack foods dominate the advertising space. However, in China it is very different. For example, Manchester United's official mattress partner, Mlily, is advertised before anyone is able to access game footage through the Super Sports app. Opportunities for other sectors, such as home merchandising or food delivery services, are huge.

Marital Status



something of a badge of honour for these fans due to the importance of demonstrating how strong one's passion and dedication is.

Obviously, even though the role football plays in the lives of these fans is huge, this population of individuals with such similar interests does provide opportunities for apps like Tinder, or its Chinese equivalent Tantan. The recent partnership between Tinder and Napoli proves that these apps are looking to increase their presence in the public eye and, as will be reviewed in Section 3, this approach in China is likely to be far more successful than in the West due to how much Chinese fans are influenced by advertising.

The majority of football fans are single and make up the 'single dog' culture. This is used to describe people for whom their main romantic attraction is football, testament to how strongly these fans feel about the game and their teams. It is

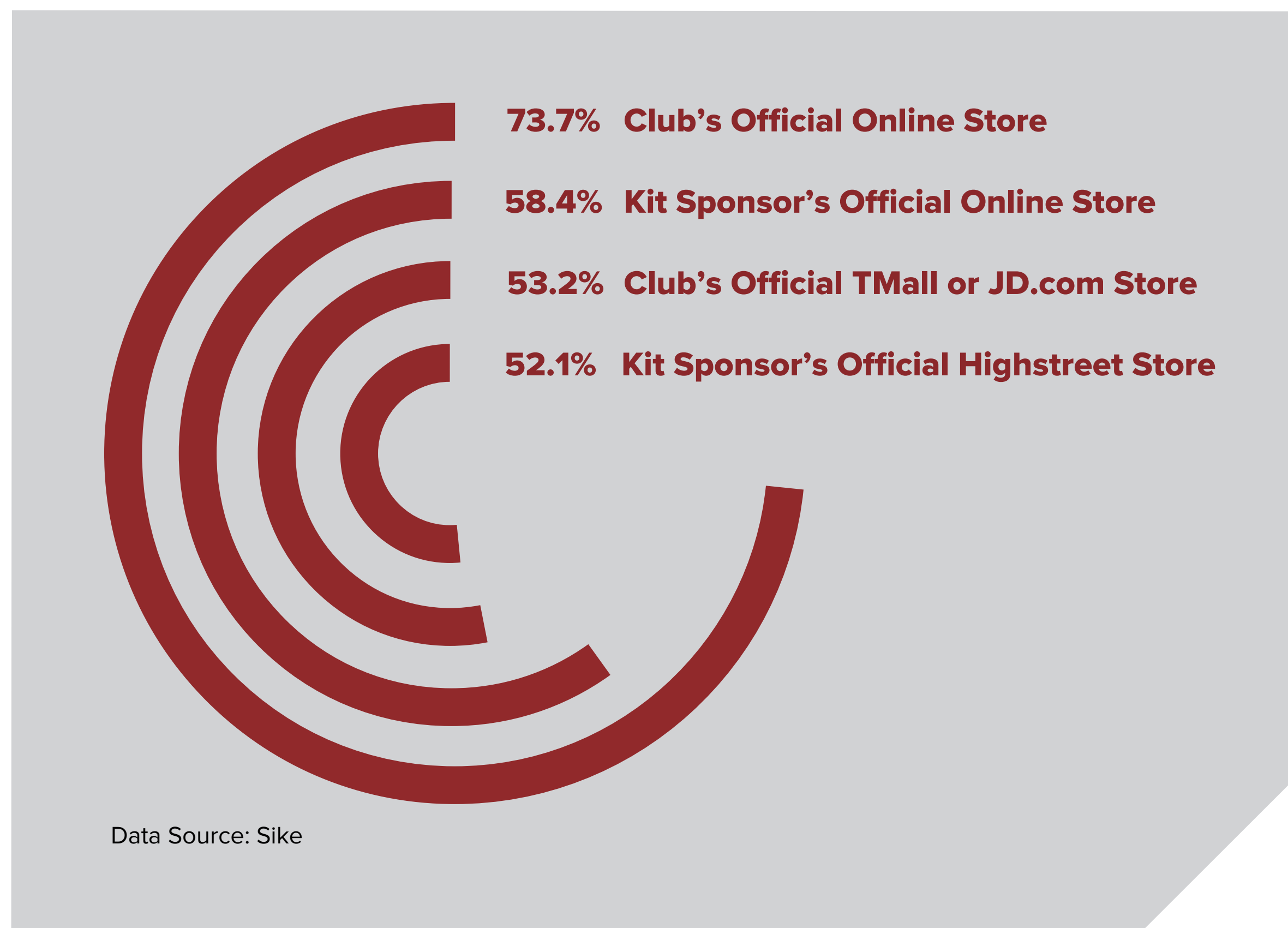
3.

What channels do fans like to buy through?

FAN SPENDING HABITS

Despite the well documented issues that official kit suppliers and clubs have with the grey market in China, the results of our survey show that Chinese fans aren't all about getting merchandise as cheaply as possible. To a large extent, this is due to the previously discussed dedication that fans feel towards their clubs which gives them pride and status by wearing official merchandise. Interestingly, most fans opt for standalone official eCommerce platforms rather than going through the vastly popular platforms JD.com or Tmall which offer far greater convenience to shoppers.

What is clear is that if a club has ambitions of catering to the Chinese fans, an online store is a necessity. However, it is important to note that e-commerce strategy in China cannot simply involve throwing products online and leaving them there. An understanding of Chinese tastes and shopping habits is crucial and will directly correspond to the success of an official store online in China.



What do fans think of club sponsors?

The data highlights again the importance of recognising the key differences between China and the West. Nowhere is this more obvious than in attitude to sponsors. 65% of fans intend to buy official sponsor's products and 58% consider these brands to be very influential due to their partnerships with clubs. These attitudes show how much a brand can gain from association with the right club. Sponsorship deals with European clubs can work for both international brands looking to establish a reputation in China, and domestic brands who are aiming to market themselves as global players.

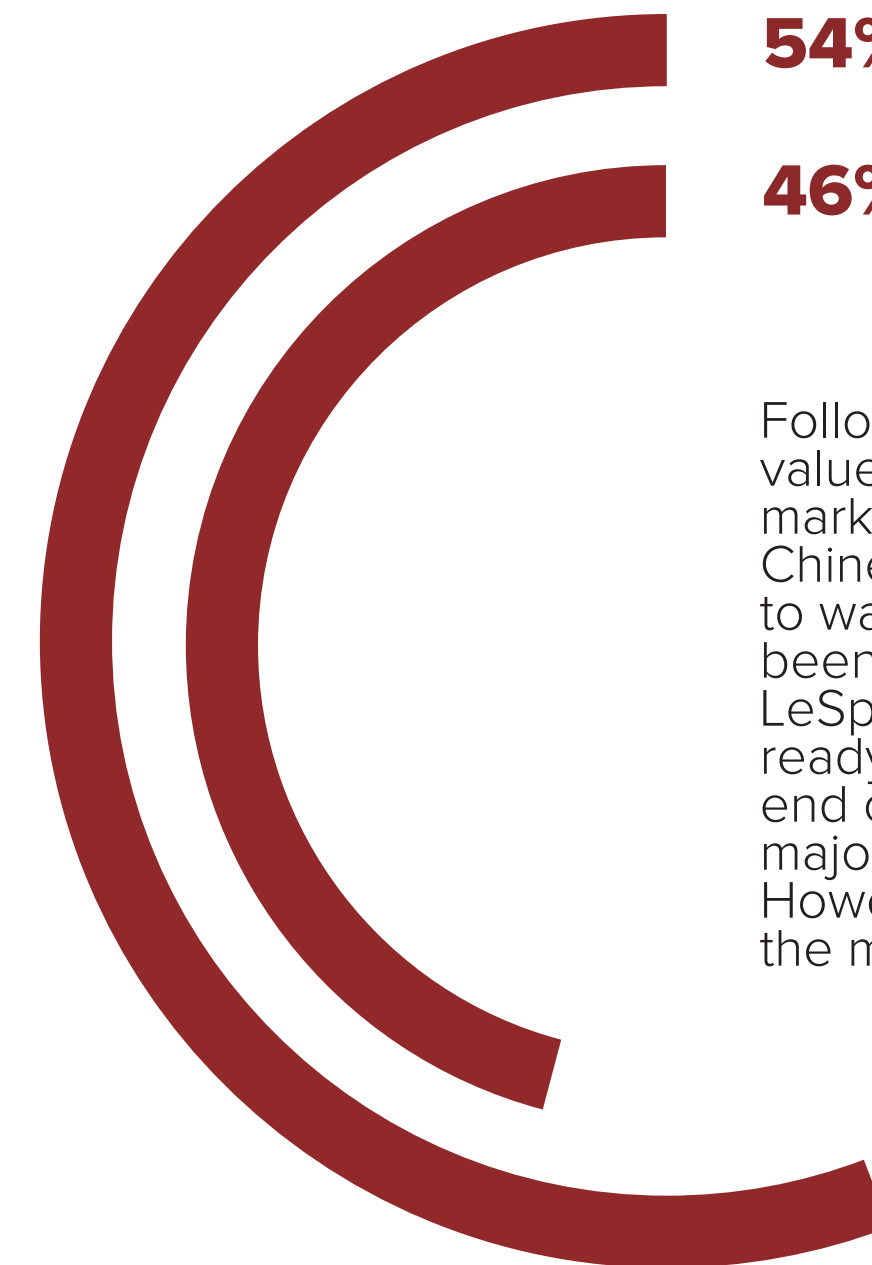
Interestingly, the mechanism behind this is largely down to getting logos in front of customers. Less than a third of fans consider the brand's association with their team to be a sign of quality, however, they still see the company and its products as desirable. Fans want the products because they see them more and associate them with their team, providing a

58%
see sponsors as very influential

good example of how heavily Chinese fans are influenced by these marketing practices. This is also reinforced by the power that KOLs hold over their communities, both in terms of the loyal following, and the manner in which they can inspire widespread activation.

Sports organisations working with brands online in China is still a developing area. One category that we expect to grow over the next 12 months is the sponsorship of digital content, as clubs begin to commercialise their digital presence in China.

Do fans pay to watch games?



54% Willing to Pay

46% Only Watches free Games

Following the skyrocketing value of the broadcasting rights market over the last few years, Chinese fans' willingness to pay to watch sports content has been under close scrutiny. LeSports gambled on fans being ready to accept a paywall at the end of 2016 and it played a major part in their collapse. However, our survey shows that the market is beginning to

mature in that now, most fans are willing to pay to watch content. That is not to say that they are all ready to sign up to a comprehensive subscription package, only 30% paid for the whole of last season, but it does show that they are coming round to the realisation that eventually they will have to pay for most top tier content.

This maturation is set to continue as the pool of free games becomes less and less and the net continues to tighten on illegal streams of games. The Premier League has made a well documented effort to put an end to illegal streaming in its home market and is now beginning to do the same abroad. It seems, then, that the 2017/18 season is likely to be the key turning point in China's sports broadcasting industry.

Data Source: Sike

THANKS FOR READING



We hope you have enjoyed reading this issue of the RED CARD+. If you have any questions about the report or would like to know more about how to build a successful brand in China, please reach out to us.

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About RED CARD+

The RED CARD+ report is produced by Mailman. It offers a monthly inspection of digital trends and fan insights from China's sports industry.

About Mailman

Founded in 1999, Mailman is a sports digital consultancy and marketing platform. We help global rights holders, athletes, and organisations build a successful business in China.

www.mailmangroup.com

About Sike

Sike is one of the top football news apps in China. It is a content platform offering customised global football news, in-depth analysis, live scores, live streaming, match data and fan communities.

www.qiuduoduo.cn