Attention Is Scarce: Media in China's Mobile Games

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1 Abstract

China's mobile game market offers a clear view of how attention, not only price and content, governs the results. Exposure from creators and mainstream media first determines whether a game is even seen and considered. Only then do usage, retention, and monetization follow. I propose to collect these business mode data in a weekly title-level panel assembled from public sources (store rankings and featuring logs, creator schedules, review text and ratings, and official license approvals). Identification comes from the timing of exposure and featuring bursts and from the institutional policy shock whereby license approval toggles legal monetization. Reduced-form estimates will be translated into a minimal mechanism that distinguishes limited consideration from learning about latent quality and allows promotion ROI to depend on quality, capturing the industry reality that heavy promotion can harm low quality titles and overexposure can deplete the value of games. Counterfactual exercises will discuss the timing and intensity of promotion and simple platform allocation rules under attention capacity constraints.

2 Introduction

Digital content markets are governed as much by visibility as by value. In games, the first battle is to be noticed; the second is to be chosen; only then can a title earn time and money. My experience in China's game R&D shaped this view. Mainstream media often sends mixed messages about games; creators and streamers can redirect the public gaze within hours, and licensing approval, granted in batches, determines whether a launched title may monetize at all. These features create natural variations in exposure and incentives that are rare elsewhere and ideal for empirical work.

This proposal treats the market as an attention-constrained environment. Exposure raises salience; salience alters the set of titles a player seriously considers; and conditional on being considered, players allocate their limited time while updating beliefs about quality. This logic implies heterogeneous returns to promotion: high-quality titles convert attention into durable usage; low-quality titles may see negative returns once early play and reviews reveal their weaknesses. It also implies strategic re-timing around the moment a title becomes monetizable. While there is a paradox, overexposure

may lead to low attraction in some contexts, which occurs more frequently in story-driven games and interactive movie games.

The project asks, in turn, how much exposure and featuring shift salience and entry into consideration? When one title captures attention, from which rivals and genres is time reallocated? How does licensing approval change firms' and platforms' timing choices and the payoff to promotion? And, using the estimated elasticities and learning speeds, what simple allocation rules should platforms adopt when featuring capacity is scarce? The answers connect reduced-form evidence to a light mechanism that preserves interpretability.

3 Preliminary Literature Review

Building on classic information economics, Nelson (1970) explains how consumers learn about quality differently for search versus experience goods, implying that market interventions that lower search costs disproportionately shape early adoption. Anderson and Renault (2006) endogenize the content of information disclosure: when attention is scarce and match quality matters, firms choose what to reveal to steer discovery and competition. Empirically, Ackerberg (2001) separates informative from prestige effects of advertising and shows that the informative function of ads primarily moves inexperienced consumers. Extending this to dynamics, Ackerberg (2003) models advertising and experience-driven learning jointly, finding that advertising's impact decays with usage as consumers accumulate private signals.

Together, these papers suggest a general mechanism highly relevant to platform featuring in mobile games: exposure operates as information provision that lowers discovery costs and is most powerful at the entry margin. Featuring can thus be interpreted as platform-controlled "advertising content" that selectively discloses match-relevant signals (e.g., curation tags, screenshots), with the largest demand effects among first-time or low-experience users. This lens generates testable implications for supply-side responses: because early demand composition shifts with exposure, developers' monetization choices (e.g., licensing vs. in-app purchases) may endogenously adjust to the user mix and learning trajectory. The gap this project fills is to relocate informative advertising from firm-driven media buys to platform-controlled ranking/featuring, and to connect discovery shocks to downstream monetization-switch decisions within a two-sided marketplace.

4 Assumptions

The analysis rests on a small set of testable assumptions. First, attention and playtime are scarce each week; players cannot inspect or play all available titles. Second, a title becomes a live option only if it enters a player's consideration set, and the probability of entry rises with salience, an index constructed from creator exposure, platform featuring, and mainstream-media stance, and with perceived quality. Third, quality is latent but revealed gradually: players update beliefs using public signals (exposure, reviews, ratings), with new information weighed more heavily than old. Fourth, license approval changes legal monetization without forcing launch timing, providing externally verifiable events that may nonetheless be anticipated; pre-trend diagnostics will therefore accompany all designs. Finally, the platform featuring capacity is limited, so allocation choices have real consequences for market outcomes.

5 Proposed Methodology

Empirics begin with dynamic reduced-form designs. Exposure bursts (creator premieres or returns), changes in featuring status, and license-approval announcements define shocks at weekly resolution. Event-study plots around these dates trace the response of weekly outcomes, revenue proxies constructed from monthly estimates, survival on Top-X charts, ratings, and review volumes, controlling for title and calendar fixed effects and for platform by genre seasonal patterns. Staggered difference-in-differences estimators handle variation in timing across titles. Robustness uses platform calendars and creator schedule collisions as instruments for exposure, approval batches for monetization intensity, placebo windows, and flexible horizons.

To move from effects to mechanisms, I plan to adopt a minimal two-step bridge. In the first step, I need to model the probability that a title is "in consideration," proxied by entering a chart threshold, receiving a featuring tag, or crossing a review-volume threshold, as a function of salience and quality. Instruments based on creator and platform calendars address endogeneity in exposure. In the second step, conditional on being considered, outcomes depend on contemporaneous salience and on beliefs about quality. Beliefs evolve through a simple exponential decay rule: fresh exposure and user-generated content receive more weight than older ones. Fitting the shape of the empirical impulse responses delivers an estimate of the learning half-life and the conversion of belief into outcomes.

Heterogeneity is central. Interaction terms allow promotion returns to vary with quality, making room for negative ROI in low quality titles. Competitive spillovers are measured by tracking outcomes for close rivals within the same genre when a focal title receives a shock; the extent and persistence of crowd-out quantify attention reallocation. Around licensing approval, I plan to examine whether firms and platforms re-time promotion and featuring, and whether the payoff to exposure increases once monetization is legal. Together, these pieces connect institutional facts to estimates that have clear behavioral interpretations.

6 Proposed Data

The study builds a weekly, title-level panel for iOS and major Android channels. Publicly accessible sources provide five complementary layers. First, store data yield chart positions and featuring flags with timestamps that can be aligned to weeks. Second, creator activity, livestream and video schedules, counts, and interactions mark exposure bursts. Third, review and rating streams provide both outcomes and signals; text analysis isolates themes that proxy for polish and performance (e.g., bugs, lag), useful as quality cues and congestion markers. Fourth, official announcements and marketing materials time major in-game events and promotions when available. Fifth, policy releases record license approval dates and status. Harmonization centers on resolving title identifiers across platforms, standardizing timestamps, and constructing a salience index from its components with transparent weighting or principal components. Revenue proxies are converted from monthly to weekly measures and matched with rank-based outcomes to mitigate measurement error.

7 Expected Contributions

The project may offer a coherent account of how attention becomes revenue in a content market, supported by causal evidence and a mechanism. It quantifies attention-to-consideration elasticities and the speed of learning about quality; shows when promotion helps, when it hurts, and for whom; explains how a monetization switch reshapes timing; and translates estimates into practical guidance for platforms featuring under capacity constraints. The design is replicable from public data and extensible to other markets where visibility, not just price, organizes competition.