

Leveraging Social Media for Athlete-Brand Building: A Multi-Model Analysis of Li-Ning's Digital Transformation

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Abstract. This study examines how social media contributes to Li-Ning's brand value in China's competitive sportswear market, focusing on its dual identity as both an Olympic heritage brand and a digital innovator. Employing a multi-model analytical framework—integrating the AISAS model for consumer behavior mapping, SWOT analysis for internal and external brand positioning, and PEST analysis for macro-environmental factors—this paper investigates Li-Ning's 2024 "Name It After Me" campaign. Findings reveal that the brand effectively leverages athlete IP through historical authenticity, emotional resonance, and algorithmic amplification across social platforms such as Douyin, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu. The AISAS model highlights Li-Ning's effective consumer journey management, with cross-platform strategies driving attention, engagement, and conversions. Strategic recommendations include optimizing product lines, strengthening online-offline integration, and utilizing artificial intelligence tools for personalized communication. It offers practical implications for domestic sportswear brands navigating digital transformation and contributes to broader discussions on athlete branding, consumer co-creation, and platform-based marketing in the Chinese context.

Keywords: Li-Ning, Social Media Branding, AISAS Model, Athlete IP, Consumer Behavior

1. Introduction

The digital revolution has fundamentally disrupted traditional marketing paradigms, with social media emerging as a dominant force in reshaping brand-consumer interactions in the sportswear industry [1]. In China's rapidly evolving sportswear market, Li-Ning serves as a compelling case study, embodying both an Olympic heritage brand and a digital innovator. This dual identity originates from its founder's Olympic achievements in 1984 and is increasingly propelled by social media campaigns targeting Generation Z, reflecting the tension between tradition and innovation in contemporary brand building. The present study aims to address critical gaps by (1) systematically analyzing how social media enhances Li-Ning's brand value through measurable pathways and (2) proposing athlete IP-centered communication strategies for the highly competitive sportswear industry. Methodologically, this study employs an innovative hybrid approach that integrates AISAS consumer journey analysis (tracking Attention-Interest-Search-Action-Share metrics across platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu) with a case study of Li Ning's 2024 "Name It After Me" marketing campaign. The tripartite analytical framework utilizes AISAS as the primary

diagnostic tool, complemented by SWOT analysis (for strategic positioning) and PEST analysis (for macro-environmental scanning). Practically, this research makes significant contributions: it provides brands with empirically validated communication strategies to optimize content across China's fragmented social media platforms. As international competitors like Nike accelerate their localized digital investments, these findings offer urgent strategic guidance for domestic sportswear brands in defending their market share.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Core concepts

To fully capture the evolving dynamics of the customer-to-brand relationship in the era of digital transformation, this study adopts an expanded conceptualization of athlete-brand dynamics within the context of social media. Based on the theoretical foundation proposed by Arai et al., the athlete-brand effect is understood across three dimensions [2].

First, historical authenticity is expressed through the evidenceable brand heritage attributes, such as Olympic history or the founder's history. Research on the social media strategies of professional sports teams shows that content often highlights brand heritage and sport-related activities, reinforcing historical authenticity and connecting audiences to the team's legacy [3]. Second, emotional resonance captures the affective responses elicited through digital engagement. It can be measured using social media sentiment analysis tools that assess consumer reactions to emotionally charged content. Studies show that features such as live updates and behind-the-scenes posts, increase fan engagement and satisfaction. Social live streaming services, for example, enhance social well-being and foster affective connections between fans and brands, supporting the importance of emotional resonance in digital interactions [4]. Third, algorithmic amplification, which encompasses the platform-facilitated dissemination and rationalization of brands' stories. Evidence from both sports and academic contexts shows that social media algorithms and strategic posting (e.g., timing, use of images) significantly amplify content reach and engagement. Scheduled and visually enhanced posts lead to greater dissemination and audience interaction, illustrating the power of algorithmic amplification in spreading brand narratives [3, 5]. Together, these three dimensions form a tripartite framework that serves as a robust instrument for verifying digital authenticity.

2.2. Integrated analytical framework

To systematically examine how Li-Ning leverages social media for brand enhancement, this study adopts a multi-level analytical framework that captures both micro-level consumer behaviors and macro-level strategic considerations. The primary analytical model is an Enhanced AISAS Framework, adapted from Dentsu's original consumer journey model [6]. This enhanced version incorporates cultural dimensions, particularly national pride indicators in Olympic-related campaigns, as well as platform-specific behavioral metrics. These metrics encompass the participation rate in social media challenges (e.g., TikTok, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu) and the product sales conversion rate, among others. Complementary strategic tools include a SWOT Analysis Matrix and a PEST Environmental Scan. The analytical value of this framework lies in its hierarchical integration: the AISAS model provides real-time behavioral tracking, the SWOT analysis enables competitive benchmarking, and the PEST factors ensure macro-contextual relevance. This multi-layered approach responds to Kim and Ko's call for contextually grounded

analysis in digital branding research [7]. The framework's diagnostic capabilities are particularly valuable for sportswear brands navigating China's complex digital ecosystem amidst intensifying global competition.

3. Li-Ning's social media ecosystem analysis

This section analyzes Li-Ning’s external and internal environments using the PEST and SWOT frameworks to assess the brand’s positioning and strategic potential within China's rapidly evolving sportswear and digital media landscape.

Table 1. External environment analysis based on PEST framework

Factor	Key Elements	Data Source
Political	"National Fitness 2030" policy promoting domestic brands; Special subsidies for Olympic-related marketing	State Council, 2021 [8]
Economic	China’s sportswear market projected to reach \$65B by 2025; Per capita sport consumption still only 20% of U.S. levels	Euromonitor, 2023 [9]
Social	82.6% of Gen Z preference for domestic trend brands; Douyin fitness content engagement up 134% year-on-year	China Economic Net, 2024 [10] Douyin, 2022 [11]
Technological	Xiaohongshu's 2023 algorithm update increased video content weighting; AI-powered livestreaming achieving higher conversion rates than traditional formats	Xinmin Evening News, 2023 [12]

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, Li Ning should fully leverage the synergy of opportunities and advantages to achieve stable development by seizing policy dividends and domestic market trends, relying on the unique Olympic IP resources and exclusive sponsorship rights of the national team passed down by the founder, and deepening the layout in the domestic market.

However, alongside these opportunities, risk prevention and control remain critical. Key strategic recommendations include (1) strengthening brand trust management to avoid reputation risks triggered by incidents like the Xinjiang cotton issue; (2) optimizing the product line layout, focusing on core businesses, and avoiding excessive diversification; and (3) actively exploring technology-driven strategies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) marketing, to enhance core competitiveness in the fierce competition with brands like Nike.

Table 2. Internal environment analysis based on SWOT matrix

Category	Key Findings
Strengths	Founder's Olympic legacy IP uniqueness Exclusive sponsorship of Chinese national teams
Weaknesses	Limited international market share Overly diversified product lines
Opportunities	Policy incentives and rising sports events Growing domestic demand for fashionable sportswear
Threats	Fierce market competition (e.g., Nike) Brand trust crisis (e.g., Xinjiang cotton incident)

4. Empirical analysis: application of the AISAS model

This section presents a systematic examination of Li-Ning's 2024 "Name It After Me" marketing campaign through the theoretical lens of the AISAS (Attention, Interest, Search, Action, Share) consumer behavior model, which specifically highlights how the brand's athlete-founder identity creates unique consumer engagement pathways.

4.1. Attention stage: capturing consumer focus

Li-Ning deployed a cross-generational celebrity strategy, involving sports legends (e.g., Li Ning, Ma Long), pop idols (e.g., members of Teenage Boys), and niche athletes to penetrate diverse demographics. Concurrently, the brand launched dual-location activations merging urban and cultural contexts: Shanghai's Oriental Pearl Tower hosted street sport experiences, while Jingdezhen's ceramics kiln showcased China-chic aesthetics. These spatially grounded narratives generated high visual impact and cultural resonance. In the Attention phase, Li-Ning deployed large-scale experiential events at landmark locations. According to its 2024 Interim Report, nine large-scale offline activations across major cities reached over 50,000 participants in the first half of 2024, with the Shanghai "Everyone's Sports Meet" at the Oriental Pearl Tower serving as a flagship case. Meanwhile, the brand increased its marketing investments by 9.6% year-on-year, reinforcing celebrity engagements and live-streaming promotions.

4.2. Interest stage: deepening engagement

The brand documentary "Name It After Me" employed a self-deconstructive narrative approach, portraying younger consumers unaware of founder Li Ning's legacy and thereby acknowledging generational disconnect. To convert emotional resonance into product interest, Li-Ning created three experiential zones at its tech launch: a historical innovation timeline, interactive demonstrations of six core technologies, and new product debuts, including the "Jueying 3" running shoes. This dual approach balanced emotional storytelling with tangible product experiences. Performance data supports strong conversion during this stage. According to Sohu Fashion, the professional running shoe "Chitu 7PRO" recorded over 1.9 million pairs sold in H1 2024, driving a 25% year-on-year increase in omnichannel revenue within the running category. The mass-market "Soft Series" surpassed 1 million units sold, reflecting nearly 400% year-on-year growth—evidence of the brand's functional products entering mainstream markets. Notably, R&D investment intensity increased to 2.2% of revenue in the same period, with six major technological innovations launched, reinforcing the brand's professional image (CICC Online).

4.3. Search stage: guiding information seeking

Li-Ning established a hierarchical topic architecture to guide user searches. The master hashtag #NameItAfterMe SportingHero# anchored the campaign, while subtopics like #SongYaxuanLiNingShow# and #LiNingDragonSparrow# covered celebrity and product dimensions. User-generated tags like #MySportingHeroMoment# extended organic reach (TOPic Creative, 2024). Search touchpoints were optimized through platform-wide slogan consistency, geo-tagged locations for offline events, and seamless member integration directing searches to mini-program content.

During the search phase, empirical data on search behavior can be collected and analyzed to gain insights into how individuals or groups approach information retrieval. In Q2 2025, Li-Ning's

virtual stores recorded mid-single-digit year-on-year growth in sales volume—contrasting with a low-single-digit decline in offline channels—underscoring online search-to-conversion advantages. Additionally, during the Paris Olympics, the brand sponsored the "Dragon Suit" for the Chinese table tennis team. Although it sparked discussions due to design controversies, the brand's search index significantly rose during the Olympic period. Although its specific data was not disclosed, the financial report clearly indicated an increase in marketing investment related to the Olympics.

4.4. Action stage: driving conversions

Li-Ning integrated retail and experience by creating contextualized purchasing environments. Basketball courts sold co-branded apparel, tech zones enabled scan-to-purchase functions, and livestreams featured "show-to-cart" functions. During the CBA Finals, the brand executed real-time conversion tactics, including product experts co-commentating on broadcasts, 5G cameras highlighting shoe technologies, and championship-themed collections launching at victory moments. This synchronized physical-digital strategy reduced purchase friction.

Key indicators of purchasing behavior include differentiated category performance. Sohu News reported that, in H1 2024, footwear revenue reached 7.844 billion yuan (+4.4%), while clothing revenue was 5.375 billion yuan (-4.7%), indicating that the product strategy needs to be optimized for the clothing category. Inventory health remained stable, with a 3.9-month inventory-to-sales ratio and over 80% full-price sales of new products within three months, indicating improved channel efficiency (CICC Online). Furthermore, the closure of 18 underperforming stores by Q2 2025 reflects an ongoing focus on single-store efficiency.

4.5. Share stage: amplifying advocacy

Creative user-generated content (UGC) facilitated sharing. Examples include absurd table tennis matches (using unconventional rackets), inverted photo installations honoring fitness influencers, and personalized jersey customization transforming brand logos into self-identity markers. A tiered incentive system encouraged participation: basic sharing earned official engagement, story submissions received athlete feedback, and product redesign contests offered customization privileges.

Social proof metrics support the campaign's effectiveness. Scale of UGC content: During the "Everyone's Sports Day" event on Xiaohongshu, users generated content such as "Strange Ping-Pong Challenge" and "Handstand Check-in," driving the exposure of the #NameItAfterMeSportingHero# topic (the platform did not disclose the total volume, but the event was listed as a key cooperation case for Xiaohongshu in 2024). Social sharing of customized products: Personalized designs like name-customized T-shirts promoted social sharing. According to CICC Online, the financial report clearly stated that "deepening consumer interaction" is a key achievement for 2024 but did not disclose specific UGC data.

5. Discussion: strategic recommendations

5.1. Strengthening core advantages

Li Ning should fully leverage its unique resources to consolidate its competitive edge. The company can deepen the integration of the Olympic legacy IP of its founder, Li Ning and the exclusive sponsorship rights of the Chinese national team, and combine national team events (such as the Olympics) with marketing campaigns like "Name It After Me" to strengthen the emotional

connection with consumers through the identity of an "athlete-founder." At the same time, relying on the policy support of the "National Fitness 2030" initiative and the continuously growing domestic sports consumption market (with per capita sports consumption only 20% of that in the United States), the company should focus on the domestic market, especially the niche markets favored by Generation Z (82.6% of Generation Z prefer domestic trend brands), and launch domestic trend products to tap into market potential. On the technological front, the company should promote AI live streaming (which has a higher conversion rate than traditional forms) and incorporate research and development achievements (such as the core technology of the "Jueying 3" running shoes) into product promotion to enhance its differentiated competitiveness.

5.2. Addressing its weaknesses

To address existing deficiencies, Li-Ning Company must first optimize its product portfolio. It should reduce excessive diversification by focusing on high-performing core categories (e.g., footwear) while enhancing underperforming segments (e.g., apparel) through functional innovations (such as technology-integrated fabrics) and design upgrades aligned with national trends. Regarding distribution channels, the company should continue phasing out inefficient physical stores (having reduced 18 flagship stores by Q2 2025) and strengthen online-offline integration. This can be achieved through strategies like geotagging to redirect offline event participants to mini-programs and implementing "watch-and-shop" features during live streams to enhance conversion efficiency, thereby compensating for sluggish offline channel growth. Furthermore, while consolidating its domestic market presence, the company could explore international expansion by introducing sportswear aligned with national trends in overseas niche markets, gradually amplifying its global influence.

5.3. Proposed communication strategies

Building strong brand influence and audience engagement for Li-Ning relies on targeted communication strategies that foster emotional connections and leverage technology for personalized storytelling. Key drivers of engagement include authentic interaction, influencer partnerships, and tailored content that resonates with specific audience segments. Sharing the founder's story and highlighting the brand's long-term commitment to athletes can strengthen emotional bonds and brand-customer relationships. Emotional and authentic narratives are crucial for building trust and engagement, especially when delivered through influencers or brand representatives who audiences identify with [13, 14]. Using AI to tailor legacy stories for different audience segments can enhance the relevance and emotional intensity of brand messages, leading to higher engagement. Personalization and congruence between the brand and audience interests are shown to increase content consumption and participation [14, 15]. Collaborating with influencers who have strong parasocial relationships (a sense of friendship or identification) with their followers significantly boosts engagement, trust, and positive attitudes toward the brand [13, 14]. Visual congruence—aligning the brand's visual style with influencer content—further strengthens these effects [15]. Posts that include event information or promotional incentives are more likely to engage audiences. However, simply mentioning the brand without context may reduce engagement. Longer, more detailed posts can generate more likes and interaction among young consumers [16].

6. Conclusion

This study focuses on how Li-Ning, a brand in China's highly competitive sportswear market, builds its brand value through social media, particularly highlighting its dual identity as both an "Olympic heritage brand" and a "digital innovator." By adopting a multi-dimensional framework integrating the AISAS consumer behavior model, SWOT analysis, and PEST macro-environmental scanning, it conducts an in-depth analysis of its 2024 "Name It After Me" marketing campaign. The research finds that Li-Ning effectively enhances its brand value by relying on three core elements: historical authenticity (the founder's Olympic legend and national team sponsorship resources), evoking emotional resonance (documentaries presenting intergenerational dialogues that resonate with Gen Z), and leveraging algorithms to amplify (cross-platform topic architecture on Douyin/Weibo/Xiaohongshu driving UGC dissemination). The AISAS model tracking shows that the brand successfully attracted attention through landmark experience activities (attracting over 50,000 participants); during the interest and conversion stages, core running shoe categories achieved a 25% year-on-year growth, and AI live streaming significantly improved efficiency; in the sharing stage, it achieved social viral spread through user-customized content (such as the "Strange Ping-Pong Challenge"). Based on this, the study proposes key strategic recommendations: optimizing the product line structure (focusing on the strength in footwear and improving the performance of clothing), deepening O2O integration (geographic tag redirection + live streaming for immediate purchase), using AI technology to achieve personalized narratives of the Olympic IP, and leveraging the "Healthy China 2030" policy to further penetrate the domestic trend market. Ultimately, it is proven that the dual genes of Li-Ning's athlete-founder IP and digital innovation constitute a differentiated barrier in international brand competition, providing a social marketing model for the digital transformation of domestic sportswear brands.

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