



**CONSUMER-PERCEIVED VALUE OF CHINESE SPORTS PRODUCTS
AND ITS IMPACT ON BRAND LEADERSHIP**

By

HE ZHIHAN

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra
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Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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This study investigates the challenges and opportunities facing Chinese sports merchandise brands in achieving brand leadership within the domestic and international markets. Through a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, the research explores consumer perceptions of brand elements that influence brand leadership. The study focuses on four key areas: product quality, brand marketing, brand technology, and brand image. The findings reveal that despite recent improvements, Chinese sports brands face persistent challenges in product durability, originality, and responsiveness to consumer feedback. Additionally, they struggle to establish a competitive digital presence and are often perceived as imitators rather than innovators. The lack of a robust brand personality and alignment with organizational values further hinders their ability to resonate with target audiences. Confirmatory factor analysis identified four critical elements of brand leadership—perceived quality, perceived value, perceived innovation, and perceived popularity. These were

complemented by three brand attitude components: brand intelligence, consumer and marketing strategy, and product quality and performance. These elements formed the basis for a novel brand leadership framework tailored to the Chinese sportswear industry. The study contributes to the literature by addressing gaps in understanding consumer-perceived brand leadership in emerging markets. It offers actionable recommendations for managers, including strategies to enhance product quality, differentiate marketing approaches, and build strong brand identities. The finalized framework serves as a guideline for product developers and designers to align branding strategies with consumer expectations. While the study's focus on the Chinese sportswear sector provides valuable insights, its findings may have broader implications for branding strategies across other industries and cultural contexts. Future research should explore the applicability of the framework in diverse markets, the impact of emerging technologies on brand leadership, and longitudinal trends in consumer-brand dynamics. This research provides a comprehensive roadmap for Chinese sports brands to strengthen their global competitiveness and establish enduring brand leadership.

Keywords: Brand leadership framework, China, confirmatory factor analysis, consumer perceived value, sportswear

SDG: GOAL 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth, GOAL 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, GOAL 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**NILAI YANG DILIHAT PENGGUNA TERHADAP PRODUK SUKAN CHINA
DAN KESANNYA TERHADAP KEPEMIMPINAN JENAMA**

Oleh

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November 2024

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Kajian ini menyiasat cabaran dan peluang yang dihadapi oleh jenama barangan sukan China dalam mencapai kepimpinan jenama di pasaran domestik dan antarabangsa. Melalui pendekatan kaedah campuran yang menggabungkan tinjauan kuantitatif dan wawancara kualitatif, penyelidikan ini meneroka persepsi pengguna terhadap elemen jenama yang mempengaruhi kepimpinan jenama. Kajian ini memberi tumpuan kepada empat bidang utama: kualiti produk, pemasaran jenama, teknologi jenama, dan imej jenama. Penemuan menunjukkan bahawa walaupun terdapat penambahbaikan baru-baru ini, jenama sukan China terus menghadapi cabaran berterusan dalam ketahanan produk, keaslian, dan respons terhadap maklum balas pengguna. Selain itu, mereka bergelut untuk mewujudkan kehadiran digital yang kompetitif dan sering dianggap sebagai peniru dan bukannya inovator. Kekurangan personaliti jenama yang kukuh serta ketidakselarasan dengan nilai organisasi turut menghalang keupayaan mereka untuk berhubung dengan khalayak sasaran. Analisis faktor

pengesahan mengenal pasti empat elemen kritikal kepimpinan jenama—kualiti yang dirasakan, nilai yang dirasakan, inovasi yang dirasakan, dan populariti yang dirasakan. Elemen-elemen ini dilengkapi dengan tiga komponen sikap jenama: kecerdasan jenama, strategi pengguna dan pemasaran, serta kualiti dan prestasi produk. Elemen-elemen ini membentuk asas bagi rangka kerja kepimpinan jenama baharu yang disesuaikan untuk industri pakaian sukan China. Kajian ini menyumbang kepada literatur dengan menangani jurang dalam pemahaman tentang kepimpinan jenama yang dirasakan pengguna di pasaran yang sedang berkembang. Ia menawarkan cadangan yang boleh diambil tindakan untuk pengurus, termasuk strategi untuk meningkatkan kualiti produk, membezakan pendekatan pemasaran, dan membina identiti jenama yang kukuh. Rangka kerja yang dimuktamadkan berfungsi sebagai panduan untuk pemaju dan pereka produk bagi menyelaraskan strategi penjenamaan dengan jangkaan pengguna. Walaupun tumpuan kajian terhadap sektor pakaian sukan China memberikan pandangan yang bernilai, penemuannya mungkin mempunyai implikasi yang lebih luas untuk strategi penjenamaan di industri dan konteks budaya lain. Penyelidikan masa depan harus meneroka kebolegunaan rangka kerja ini di pasaran yang berbeza, kesan teknologi baharu terhadap kepimpinan jenama, dan trend jangka panjang dalam dinamika jenama-pengguna. Penyelidikan ini menyediakan peta jalan yang komprehensif untuk jenama sukan China memperkukuh daya saing global mereka dan membina kepimpinan jenama yang berkekalan.

Kata Kunci: Rangka kerja kepimpinan jenama, China, analisis faktor pengesahan, nilai persepsi pengguna, pakaian sukan

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 introduces the study's context by describing the trends and factors that have challenged China's sports merchandise brands in both domestic and international consumer markets. The study's aim, research questions and objectives, and the scope of the study are stated, followed by a brief roadmap of the thesis.

1.2 Background of Study

Brands play a key role in making products more valuable and attracting consumer interest. Well-known brands usually have higher recognition and are preferred by consumers, leading to higher brand value and more sales revenue (Gaurav et al., 2020; Ilias et al., 2020; Khamwon & Sorataworn, 2021). In the past, Chinese sports brands mainly focused on making products for international brands that took advantage of China's low-cost labour and production (Hanson, 2021). However, things started to change in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Guo & Gui, 2023). With a growing middle class and more consumer spending, Chinese companies began creating their own brands and products, aiming to capture a bigger part of the market at home. Despite these efforts, the place of Chinese sports merchandise brands in the market remains unclear. Their way of managing brands lacks consistency and perceptiveness, resulting in a big gap between the sales performance of Chinese sports merchandise brands and their well-established foreign

competitors (Zhang, 2020c; Guo & Gui, 2023).

Sports, and sportswear by association, are important for everyday life and help in keeping fit. The overall fitness of a nation's people often indicates their collective energy and spirit. This is especially true for China, a country with a long history of traditional sports and martial arts (Zhang et al., 2021). With sports being so important culturally and socially (Zhou et al., 2023), and the focus on health becoming more prominent, the demand for sportswear in China has seen a big increase.

Sports merchandise, which was first made for the comfort of athletes, has become much more than that. It's now a fashion choice for many people, leading to the growth of many sports merchandise brands. City life and Western fashion trends have made sports merchandise even more popular among Chinese consumers. Major sporting events, like the Olympics, likewise have a strong effect on the popularity of sports merchandise brands. The Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 were a key moment for Chinese sports merchandise brands, giving them a chance to showcase their products to the world. The industry began an upward trend that year and took off at a significantly faster rate after 2012 (Zhuo et al., 2020). Similarly, the Tokyo Olympic Games in 2021 and anticipation for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics led to a 56% increase in sportswear sales compared to the previous year for Chinese brand Li Ning (SGB Media, 2022).

The growing interest in sports and health among China's residents is also boosted by government support and has produced a society that cares more about health (State Council, 2020; Lu, 2022; Zhou et al., 2023). This creates a big chance for Chinese sports merchandise brands. However, even with these favourable conditions, international brands have been leading China's sports merchandise market. This has put national brands at a disadvantage, resulting in lagging sales and brands with weak reputations (Li, 2022). Understanding the factors that are necessary to strengthen a brand's standing can help us figure out what drives brand leadership in China's sports scene and give these sports brands a guide to strengthen their position in consumers' minds.

These factors contribute to a company's overall brand leadership, and the way brand leadership helps brands succeed in different industries has gotten a lot of attention from researchers. In sports, brand leadership is about a sports brand's ability to create a unique and appealing image in the minds of consumers, influencing their thoughts and feelings about the brand. Things like brand name, logo, slogan, and packaging, for instance, are crucial in creating a brand's image and overall identity (Guo & Gui, 2023).

As such, this study aims to explore this issue by looking into what consumers think are important brand elements that lead to strong brand leadership in the Chinese sports industry and transform these elements into a new brand leadership framework.

Moreover, this study fills a gap in academic research about how consumers perceive brand elements in China's sports industry. While there is abundant research on how global consumers see brand elements of sports brands (Gaurav et al., 2020; Kunkel & Biscaia, 2020; Zhang, 2020b; Khamwon & Sorataworn, 2021; Iskander et al., 2022), the situation in China has not been studied much. This study will add new data and findings to the research on consumer perceptions of brand elements in the context of China's sportswear industry.

In summary, by finding out what consumers think about brand elements in Chinese sports brands, this study aims to add to the discussion on brand leadership in sports and give useful insights for sports brands wanting to strengthen their leadership in consumers' minds.

1.3 Problem Statement

The growth of China's sports goods market, coupled with the importance of brand leadership, emphasizes the need for sports brands to understand the factors that consumers consider crucial for brand dominance. The main challenge facing these brands is the lack of comprehensive knowledge of these consumer-perceived brand elements. This lack of understanding hinders their ability to identify and leverage key brand components necessary for establishing a dominant brand leadership position in China's sports goods market.

This lack of insight into consumer-perceived brand aspects leads to several dilemmas. Without a clear understanding of these elements, sports brands struggle to develop and implement effective branding strategies that resonate with China's sports goods consumers. Additionally, this gap limits the brands' ability to differentiate themselves from competitors, impeding the creation of a unique brand identity and market positioning.

1.3.1 Chinese Sportswear Brands behind International Brands

Despite an increase in sales of Chinese sports brand footwear, they have not completely closed the gap with established international leaders in aspects like brand persona, legacy, technology, and marketing strategies (Xu, 2017). Giants like Nike and Adidas have long dominated the Chinese sports merchandise market, overshadowing the marketing efforts of local brands (Zhang, 2015). According to data from Da Xue Consulting (2020), Nike and Adidas led the market in 2019 with shares of 22.95% and 20.4% respectively, surpassing the local brand Anta at 16.4%. This dominance continued into 2021. A concerning trend is some Chinese brands' inclination to imitate foreign designs, lacking originality (Zhang & Wang, 2021). The post-1995 generation's consumption metrics increased from 23.1% in 2017 to 26.6% in 2018, highlighting the challenge where Chinese brands are overshadowed by their international counterparts.

1.3.2 Lack of Brand Leadership in Chinese Sports Brands

Brand leadership represents a brand's strong market presence, allowing it to influence and shape consumer preferences (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000;

Jiang et al., 2006; Liang, 2009; Miller & Mills, 2021; Chang & Ko, 2014; Lu et al., 2015; Zeng, 2019; Zhang, 2020a). Despite this, consumer preferences tend to favor international brands like Nike and Adidas, often due to a perception that Chinese sports merchandise may lack innovation (Zhu et al., 2014). When analyzing brand market share dynamics, global brands have consistently held the lead (Li, 2014). Although China is the world's second-largest consumer of sports goods, its local sports merchandise brands often remain in the shadows of international brands (Wang et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022). This disparity is further emphasized by contrasting sports merchandise penetration rates: a solid 31.8% in the USA versus a modest 12.5% in China. Since the early 2000s, renowned global sports merchandise brands, especially Nike and Adidas, have strategically targeted China's youth demographic, gaining significant market share (Li et al., 2010). As a result, Chinese sports merchandise brands face the challenge of establishing true brand leadership within their domestic market.

1.4 Aim

The research aims to develop a new brand leadership framework for Chinese sports products based on consumer perceived value elements. The framework as a reference or guideline for product developer or designer for the establishment of brand leadership in the design and development of a new product.

1.4.1 Research Questions

To tackle the challenges faced by Chinese sports merchandise brands and aid in their brand development and growth, this study proposes the central research question: "How can the perception of brand leadership for Chinese sports merchandise brands be enhanced by leveraging consumer-perceived brand elements?" To further explore this main question, it is broken down into three sub-research questions:

- RQ1: What is the importance of consumer perceived value elements for Chinese sports merchandise products toward brand leadership?
- RQ2: What are the elements of consumer perceived value for Chinese sports merchandise products toward brand leadership?
- RQ3: How can the elements of consumer perceived value for Chinese sports merchandise products toward brand leadership be integrated?

1.4.2 Research Objectives

Based on the problem statement and the defined research questions, the study is centred around the following objectives:

- RO1: Evaluate the importance of consumer perceived value elements for Chinese sports merchandise products toward brand leadership.
- RO2: Identify the elements of consumer perceived value for Chinese sports merchandise products toward brand leadership.
- RO3: Develop a new framework that integrates the elements of consumer perceived value for Chinese sports merchandise products toward brand leadership.

1.5 Significance of Research

This research provides vital insights into the evolving sports merchandise market in China, a topic that remains largely under-explored, especially in the context of brand leadership and its influence on local brands. By examining the elements of brand leadership and understanding the perceived shortcomings of Chinese sports merchandise brands, the study offers invaluable information that can help brands develop effective strategies that resonate with their audience. Its significance extends beyond academic circles, as strengthening brand leadership could notably boost the Chinese sports merchandise industry's economic impact. Additionally, by comprehending the preferences of Chinese consumers, businesses can refine their products and marketing strategies, enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty.

1.6 Scope and Area of Research

To address the study's research questions and objectives, this study focuses on brand leadership elements affecting consumer perceptions of Chinese sports merchandise brands. Existing brand leadership research, as introduced in Chapter 2, suggests that the failure of these brands to capture larger segments of the Chinese domestic and international markets are tied to issues with brand leadership. By studying the perceptions of real consumers and consulting industry experts, the study aims to identify the most relevant issues for these brands and formulate a new brand leadership framework tailored to the Chinese sports merchandise industry that can help its brands

successfully gain a larger market share. As highlighted, overcoming these challenges could have significant results for the Chinese sportswear manufacturing sector since it is the world's second largest producer of sports merchandise but currently captures only fractions of the domestic and international markets, which are led by foreign manufacturers. Additionally, while the scope of this thesis is limited to consumer perceptions of Chinese brands, this topic is not well represented in the literature and this study will contribute meaningfully to this research area.

1.7 Thesis Outline

Chapter 2 provides a summary of the scholarship on brand leadership and the strengths and challenges currently faced by the leading competitors in the Chinese sports merchandise market. Chapter 3 then explores the study's research methodology, sample and test instruments, and the theoretical motivations behind the approach. Chapter 4 shares and discusses the results of the study, including the elements of brand leadership that should be most relevant for Chinese sports merchandise brands. Chapter 5 follows with the introduction of a new framework based on these findings, and Chapter 6 provides a summary of the study with reflections on the contributions of the study and directions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2, we look deeper into the topics discussed in the previous chapter by reviewing existing studies on Chinese sports merchandise brands and brand leadership. In addition to presenting earlier research about why these brands are not seen as leaders in their own market, this review also points out what is missing in the literature. The information here builds on the problems discussed in Chapter 1 and gives a clear background for the research that comes next. Figure 2.1 below illustrates the research's theoretical framework, which is based on literature examining brand leadership theory, the leading sports brands in China, and the brand leadership issues faced by domestic brands.

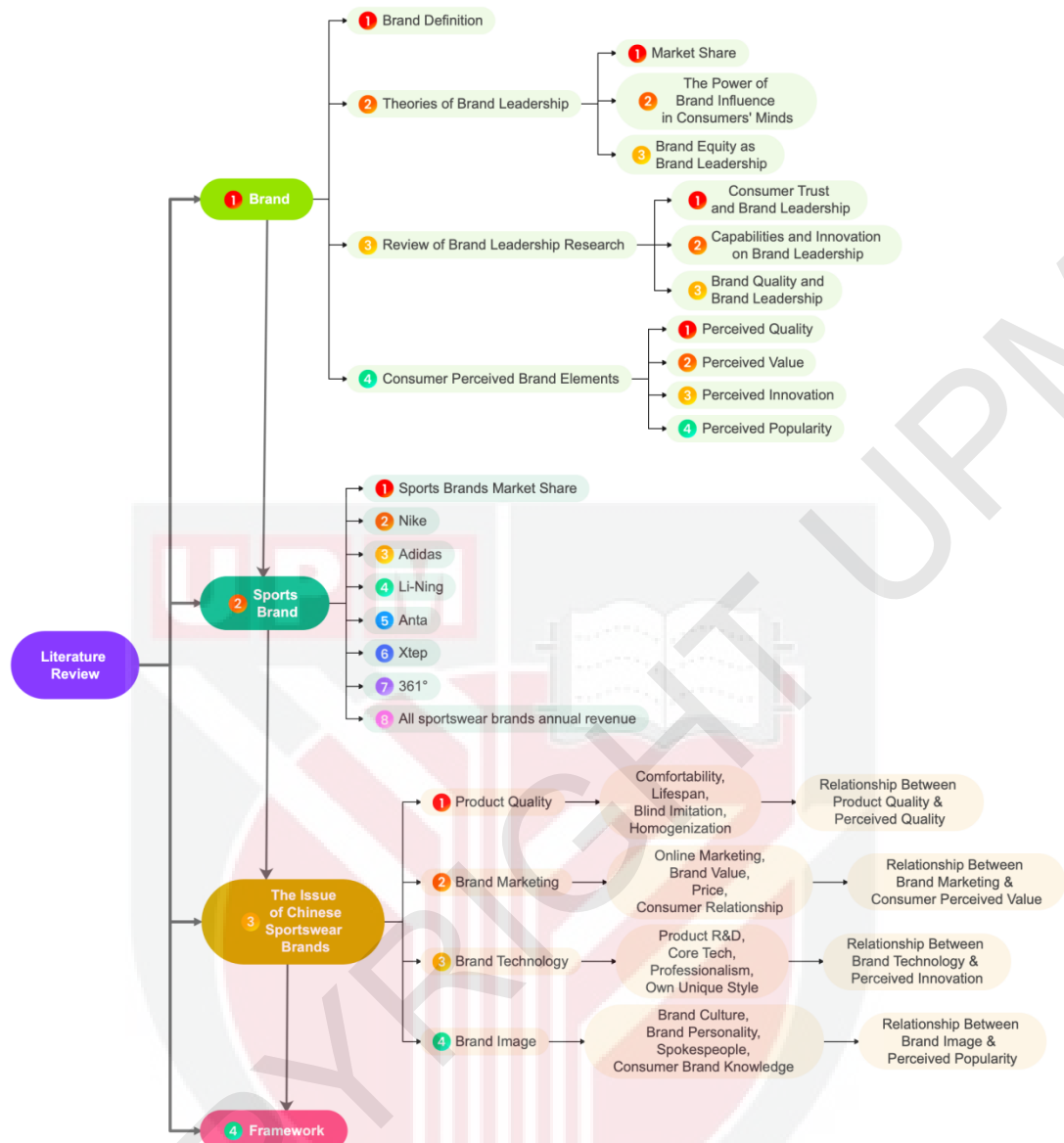


Figure 1 : Research Theoretical Framework
(Source: Author)

2.2 Brand Theories

A brand is a unique mark that sets a company's products apart from others. It includes a mix of the company's name, logo, design, and messages, creating a strong impression in people's minds (Kotler et al., 2002). Brands have become extremely important, leading companies to invest heavily in making their brands powerful and memorable (Aaker, 1996).

Many studies show that strong brands greatly benefit businesses. They can give a company an advantage over competitors and keep customers coming back (Keller, 1993). However, branding can also be complex, sometimes being used to influence customers' choices (Ritzer, 1999).

Effective brands can build trust and reliability among customers. A good brand can also make a company stand out and potentially attract more customers (Keller, 1993). But there are negatives too. Some argue that brands can create artificial needs and encourage unnecessary purchases (Celestin & Vanitha, 2021). Brand ownership and the status associated with certain brands can also lead to people judging each other based on what they own (Pesowski & Powell, 2023).

New branding trends, like associating products with social or environmental causes, appeal to customers who care about these issues (Peattie & Peattie, 2001). Many companies use their brands to showcase their commitment to the environment and social responsibility (Le, 2023).

Brands greatly influence purchasing decisions. Research indicates that brand perception can significantly impact consumer choices. A strong brand can foster loyalty, with customers choosing it over similar alternatives (Kotler et al., 2002). Brand equity, the added value a brand brings to a product, can increase customer loyalty and perceived value, benefiting a company's profits (Aaker, 1996). However, measuring brand equity can be challenging due to various influencing factors (Hoo & Moosa, 2024).

With the growth of online shopping, digital branding has become crucial. Companies use social media, influencers, and other online strategies to engage with customers (Ngai & Cheng, 2018; Tian & Li, 2021). Yet, this digital landscape brings its own challenges, requiring brands to adapt to evolving technologies.

In summary, branding is a complex and influential aspect of business. It's multifaceted and has a significant impact on both companies and consumers. From visual identity to the challenges of digital branding, it's evident that brands play a critical role in the modern business environment.

2.3 Theories of Brand Leadership

2.3.1 Market Share-Based Brand Leadership

The idea of 'brand leadership' was first introduced by Aaker (1996) to describe supportive brand processes. About ten years later, Chinese researchers, like Jiang et al. (2006), interpreted this as meaning the main aim of brand management is to gain brand leadership in the market. In this view, a strong brand has the biggest market share in its category, which is also the aim of building a brand for a business. More recently, in 2020, Zhang (2020) studied how private universities build brand leadership. He suggested that brand leadership is the top position and ability of a business to grow its brand in the market. Zhang (2020), like Aaker (1996) and Jiang et al. (2006), believed that having strong brand leadership has the same goals as building a brand for a business.

2.3.2 The Power of Brand Influence in Consumers' Minds

In the 2010s, a new idea of brand leadership emerged, measuring success by how consumers see the brand, not just by economic growth. Chinese brand expert Liang (2009) said that brand leadership is how a brand influences consumers. When a brand is deeply set in the minds of consumers, it shows the brand has some leadership among those consumers. Also, in a study on luxury fashion brands, Miller and Mills (2012) suggested that brand leadership is about consumers thinking a brand shows good foresight and keeps up with trends.

Building on Aaker's research, Chang and Ko (2014) redefined brand leadership as how consumers view a brand's ability to be unique. They meant a brand's ability to constantly excel by combining trend leadership and brand position in a market segment, as Miller and Mills (2012) mentioned. Chang and Ko (2014) also created the first brand leadership scale.

Similarly, focusing on how consumers see brands and word meanings, Kumar and Jayasimha (2019) introduced the idea of brand synonymity. They said that if consumers can use a brand name as a verb, noun, or adjective, and it often appears in their talks, it has strong brand leadership. For instance, the brands 'Google' and 'WhatsApp' have become words for 'doing an online search' and 'sending a message.' Overall, this research sees brand leadership as how strong a brand's psychological influence is on consumers.

2.3.3 Brand Equity as Brand Leadership

Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) thought of brand leadership as a new way to manage brands, with the goal of making brands with a competitive edge and strong brand equity. However, this early idea was mostly based on how well brands did in the market. Later, ideas of brand leadership grew beyond just looking at how brands affect consumers, to describe the two-way link between a brand and its consumers.

Linked to psychological brand leadership, Lu et al. (2015) were the first to look at how consumers' ideas of authenticity link to their view of brand leadership, including four brand equity parts (brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand loyalty). Their results showed that the size of brand equity decides how real the brand seems and can change how willing consumers are to choose the brand. However, their study only looked at ethnic restaurants in the United States, so it's not clear if it applies to other countries. According to their research, brand equity affects how consumers see brands and influences their brand choices. They split brand leadership into four parts: perceived quality, perceived value, perceived innovation, and perceived popularity.

Zeng (2019) also talked about the importance of brand equity in a study on reviving a brand from Guangzhou in the pharmaceutical industry. Zeng emphasized that brand leadership is the process of two-way influence between the brand and its followers, where the brand is seen as the leader, and consumers, employees, shareholders, and others are followers.

Table 1 : Influential Brand Leadership Studies

Definitions of brand leadership	Authors
Market share-based: Brand leadership refers to supportive brand processes and the ability of a brand to continually achieve excellence and hold the leading market position which is the goal of enterprise brand construction.	Aaker (1996), Jiang et al. (2006), Zhang (2020)
Psychological: Brand leadership is measured by the influence of a brand on consumers. Success is measured by the perceptions of consumers (being on trend, being original, influencing communication) rather than solely economic markers of growth.	Liang (2009), Miller & Mills (2012), Chang & Ko (2014), Kumar & Jayasimha (2019)
Brand equity: Brand leadership is now based on a two-way relationship between brands and consumers instead of the one-way influence of brands. Competitive advantage can be measured across dimensions of brand equity.	Aaker & Joachimsthaler (2000), Lu et al. (2015), Zeng (2019)

(Source: Author)

2.3.4 Reflection on Theories of Brand Leadership

Looking at past research, brand leadership is seen as the aim of making and growing a brand, as well as its place in the market. If a brand holds a top spot in the market, it shows strong brand leadership. Brand leadership happens when consumers like and follow a brand. The way consumers affect brands, however, is also important. Parts of brand equity became tools for researchers to check their brand's strong and weak points and to change according to what consumers like. A brand's leadership also leans on how consumers feel or think about it. When consumers think a brand has high value, the brand gets related brand leadership based on how much consumers perceive it.

2.3.5 Review of Case Studies

Some studies link consumer trust with strong brand leadership. Beverland and Luxton (2005) examined luxury wine companies and their ability to keep brand heritage while leading. They found these companies separate their outer image and inner support plans, a method called “decoupling.” This helps companies innovate but keep consumer trust in their known brand identity. So, they suggest using different inside and outside strategies in managing brands to keep tradition and stay modern. Khamwon and Sorataworn (2021) looked at brand leadership in the electronic market. They found brand leadership affects brand loyalty, either straight or through brand trust. They believe brand leadership can boost consumer trust in brands and make them more loyal through this trust.

Beverland et al. (2007) studied global brand leadership in industry from a capabilities view. They found brand leadership identity is built around five abilities: relational support, coordinating network players, brand architecture thinking, adding value, and measuring the unmeasurable. It also needs five supports: entrepreneurial, reflective, innovative, brand-supportive logic, and execution abilities. These methods lead to global brands leading, showing internal management strategies in brands are important. Gehlhar et al. (2009) researched brand leadership in food. They stress keeping brand leadership needs reacting to changes in consumer wants and improving product innovation. From their study, product innovation is important for brand leadership. Lindgreen et al. (2012) linked corporate social responsibility (CSR) with brand leadership and discussed its core. Research shows key managers

are very important in developing CSR brand leadership, especially the entrepreneurial spirit of bosses and CEOs. So, from this research, the influence of managers' styles on brand leadership development is important to focus on.

Hanaysha and Abd Ghani (2013) found a significant, positive relationship between brand quality, which encompasses both product and service quality, and brand leadership. They suggest that these metrics should be utilized when analyzing brand leadership. Chang and Ko (2014) developed a measurement scale for brand leadership that assesses four dimensions: quality, value, innovativeness, and popularity. This tool aids in objectively evaluating brand leadership and in comprehending the competitive dynamics between leading and trailing brands. However, their research was confined to certain industries. Investigating the luxury services sector, Chang et al. (2016) discovered that quality is a crucial predictor of word-of-mouth (WOM) influence, while value and popularity are also important for predicting individual WOM effects. Consequently, quality significantly boosts brand leadership performance through WOM.

In their focus on brand verbs, Kumar and Jayasimha (2019) identified four dimensions of brand synonymity: word strength, word of mouth strength, the degree of prototypicality, and one-word brand positioning. They propose that these dimensions contribute to brand leadership, exemplified by a brand becoming a commonly used term among consumers, indicating its leadership status. The research by Safitri et al. (2020) reveals that brand identity,

leadership, and communication have an impact on employee job satisfaction. This implies that brand leadership may play a role in enhancing the job satisfaction of internal employees. Chiu and Cho (2021), in their examination of online consumer behavior, concluded that all aspects of perceived brand leadership (quality, value, innovativeness, popularity) have a positive effect on consumer satisfaction, which in turn significantly influences purchase intentions. Therefore, the perception of brand leadership can affect consumers' willingness to buy. Analyzing e-commerce customer satisfaction, Skandar et al. (2022) suggested that all dimensions of brand leadership (quality, value, innovation, and popularity) have a positive impact on customer satisfaction. This indicates that brand leadership contributes to improved consumer satisfaction with brands.

The research reviewed offers several insights. Gehlhar et al. (2009) show that product innovation plays a role in brand leadership. According to Chang et al. (2016), Chiu and Cho (2021), Khamwon and Sorataworn (2021), and Iskandar et al. (2022), brand leadership increases consumer trust, satisfaction, purchase intention, and word-of-mouth, and it enhances consumer loyalty through brand trust. Kumar and Jayasimha (2019) suggest that when a brand becomes commonly spoken by consumers, it indicates the emergence of brand leadership. Lindgreen et al. (2012) find that a manager's style affects the development of brand leadership in companies. Beverland and Luxton (2005) and Beverland et al. (2007) point out that internal organization and management impact brand leadership construction, while Safitri et al. (2020) indicate that brand leadership can improve job satisfaction.

Hanaysha and Abd Ghani (2013) indicate that product and service quality influence brand leadership.

The table below summarises the findings of the studies on brand leadership:

Table 2 : Summary of Brand Leadership Studies

Author & Year	Statement
Beverland & Luxton (2005)	Suggested that luxury wine companies can maintain brand heritage while leading by separating their outer image from inner support plans, using different strategies for internal and external brand management to keep tradition and modernity.
Beverland et al. (2007)	Identified that global brand leadership is built around five capabilities and needs support from five different abilities, emphasizing the importance of internal management strategies in leading global brands.
Lindgreen et al. (2012)	Linked corporate social responsibility (CSR) with brand leadership, highlighting the importance of key managers, especially their entrepreneurial spirit, in developing CSR brand leadership.
Hanaysha & Abd Ghani (2013)	Found a significant positive relationship between brand quality (product and service quality) and brand leadership in Malaysia, suggesting these metrics be used in analyzing brand leadership.
Chang & Ko (2014)	Developed a scale to measure brand leadership across four dimensions: quality, value, innovativeness, and popularity, helping to objectively measure brand leadership and understand competitive dynamics, but limited to specific industries.
Chang et al. (2016)	Discovered in the luxury services sector that quality is a crucial predictor of word-of-mouth (WOM) influence, with value and popularity also important for WOM, hence, quality enhances brand leadership performance through WOM.
Kumar & Jayasimha (2019)	Focusing on brand verbs, identified four dimensions of brand synonymity that lead to brand leadership, showing that when a brand becomes a common word among consumers, it indicates leadership status.
Safitri et al. (2020)	Indicated that brand identity, leadership, and communication impact employee job satisfaction, implying that brand leadership can enhance job satisfaction among internal employees.
Chiu & Cho (2021)	Found that all factors of perceived brand leadership (quality, value, innovativeness, popularity) positively affect consumer satisfaction, which significantly impacts purchase intentions.
Skandar et al. (2022)	Suggested that all dimensions of brand leadership (quality, value, innovation, and popularity) positively affect customer satisfaction in e-commerce, indicating brand leadership contributes to improved consumer satisfaction with brands.
Khamwon & Sorataworn	Observed that brand leadership affects brand loyalty, either directly or through brand trust, in the electronic market, and can

Table 2 : Continued

(2021)	boost consumer trust and loyalty through this trust.
Gehlhar et al. (2009)	Emphasized that maintaining brand leadership in the food industry requires adaptation to consumer wants and product innovation, deeming product innovation essential for brand leadership.

(Source: Author)

However, these studies have limitations. Beverland and Luxton (2005) focus only on wine brands. Beverland et al. (2007) concentrate on global industrial brands, which may not apply to other sectors. Gehlhar et al. (2009) look at corporate strategy in the food industry. The context of Lindgreen et al.'s (2012) study may limit its generality. Hanaysha and Abd Ghani (2013) are confined to the auto industry. Chang et al. (2016) gather data from just five golf clubs. Kumar and Jayasimha (2019) focus on leading international brands, excluding niche brands. Khamwon and Sorataworn (2021) look only at e-market brand leadership with Thai respondents. Chiu and Cho (2021) focus on Chinese consumers in e-commerce. Skandar et al. (2022) consider only e-commerce brands, omitting offline brands. Therefore, this research will focus on Chinese sports merchandise brands, exploring the development and promotion of their brand leadership. It will discuss sales of enterprises of different scales and brands, both online and offline.

2.4 Detailed Review of Consumer Perceived Brand Elements

Brands exert a significant influence on consumer purchasing decisions. This impact is especially pronounced in the sports goods industry, where the way consumers perceive a brand can be crucial in fostering brand loyalty and encouraging repeat purchases. The diverse components that form a brand's

image in the minds of consumers are known as consumer perceived brand elements. These elements are not only crucial for creating a favourable brand image but also for setting a brand apart from its competitors.

Building on the brand leadership framework by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (1996), Chang and Ko (2014) developed a comprehensive scale to measure brand leadership. According to their research, brand leadership stems from consumer perceptions of the brand, which include four key dimensions: perceived quality, perceived value, perceived innovation, and perceived popularity (Figure 2).

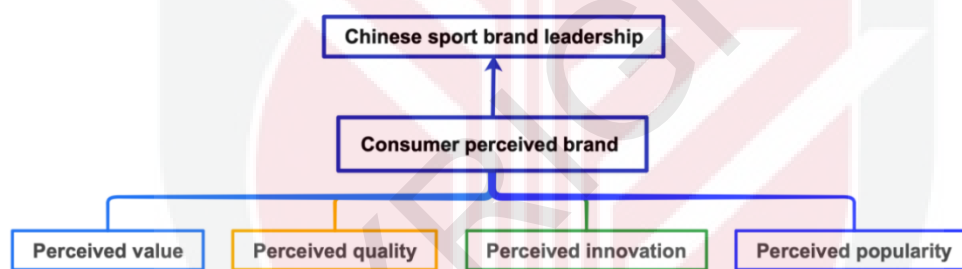


Figure 2 : Theoretical Framework of Consumer Perceived Brand Elements
(Source: Author)

The following literature review explores the theoretical foundations and empirical research related to these elements, shedding light on their impact on brand perception and subsequent consumer behavior.

2.4.1 Perceived Value

Perceived value is key in shaping how consumers act and what they buy, as many studies show (Kotler et al., 2002). It is the value that consumers think a

brand's products have. When consumers see high value in a brand, they are more likely to spend more on it (Liu & Yang, 2013). But if they think a brand has less value than others, they might choose different products (Chen & Chen, 2011). Perceived value also influences brand loyalty (Grier & Baker, 2000). People who see a brand as highly valuable are more likely to stay loyal and recommend it to others (Chen & Chen, 2011). This shows how perceived value, especially within one's social sphere, helps build and strengthen a brand's worth (Kotler et al., 2002; Zhao et al., 2022).

From a brand's view, perceived value can change; it can be shaped by marketing efforts (Grier & Baker, 2000). Brands can boost their perceived value by improving their products, offering special deals, or creating a unique brand story (Liu & Yang, 2013). On the other hand, bad experiences, like poor customer service or product issues, can lower this value (Chen & Chen, 2011).

In short, perceived value is a crucial part of how consumers see a brand. It greatly affects their buying choices and loyalty to the brand. Knowing this, it's important for companies to understand and always work on improving the value that consumers see in their brand.

2.4.2 Perceived Quality

Perceived quality is key in brand management and marketing. It's how consumers view a product or service's quality based on what they expect, believe, and experience (Zeithaml, 1988). This aspect strongly affects how

consumers act and their loyalty to brands. Perceived quality is a mix of visible (functional) and invisible (symbolic) parts of a product or service (Giese & Cote, 2000). The functional part covers things like how reliable and durable a product is, and how well it works. The symbolic part is about the product's image, its good name, and the social status it gives its users.

For a long time, perceived quality has helped consumers figure out how valuable a product or service is and compare it with others (Liu & Aaker, 1998). When people evaluate a product as being of high quality, they usually stick to the brand, feel happier, and are more likely to repurchase from that brand (Girsang et al., 2020). In the sports goods sector, perceived quality is also important. For example, Hong and Petrick (2004) looked at how perceived quality connects with customer happiness and loyalty, finding that it's a major factor that shapes how consumers feel and stay loyal.

In short, perceived quality is very important in brand management. It greatly shapes what consumers choose and do. This is true in many areas, especially in sports goods.

2.4.3 Perceived Innovation

Perceived innovation is how consumers see a brand's ability to create and offer new or improved products and services. In today's world of fast market changes and shifting consumer needs, this part has become more important. Interestingly, perceived innovation is closely linked with other key things consumers think about brands, like perceived quality and value.

Research shows that perceived innovation positively affects how consumers feel and their willingness to buy (Rao & Kurien, 2009). Studies including Velagaleti et al. (2009) found that people who see a brand as innovative often have good attitudes toward it and are more likely to buy from it. Also, brands seen as innovative usually have a better image and reputation (Javalgi & White, 2008).

However, it's important to note that defining and measuring perceived innovation can vary. Different studies and industries see it in different ways (Sánchez-Fernández & Iniesta-Bonillo, 2012). Some research views perceived innovation as consumers recognizing a brand's ability to bring out unique, groundbreaking products (Rao & Kurien, 2009). Others see it as knowing a brand's constant effort to improve its products (Velagaleti et al., 2009).

Perceived innovation is a strong measure of how well a brand connects with consumers. Continuing to study this will help find the best ways to assess and share this perception, aiming to improve a brand's standing and influence consumer actions.

2.4.4 Perceived Popularity

Perceived popularity, closely related to brand awareness or recognition, measures how familiar and memorable a brand is to consumers. Seen as crucial in building and maintaining a brand's image and position, discussions around perceived popularity have grown, especially regarding its effects on

consumer behavior and brand value.

Early research in this area is often credited to Keller (1993), who introduced a brand value framework placing brand awareness as a key element. Keller suggested that brand awareness not only makes a brand stand out from competitors but also positively impacts factors like perceived quality, value, and overall brand equity. This view is supported by numerous studies highlighting the close connection between brand awareness and consumer behavior (Farquhar, 1989; Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

More recent research explores how perceived popularity shapes consumer attitudes towards a brand. Nafees et al. (2021) found that perceived popularity can lead to positive brand attitudes by providing social validation and raising the perceived quality of the brand. Similarly, Lee and Workman (2021) noted that high perceived popularity and word-of-mouth publicity can strengthen brand loyalty by increasing familiarity with the brand.

In terms of consumer choices, perceived popularity is a key factor (Kotler et al. 2002). Studies show that consumers tend to prefer brands that feel familiar (Keller, 1993; Ma et al., 2021). Moreover, a brand's popularity often links to consumer perceptions of its higher quality (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

Perceived popularity is recognized as a central element in developing brand image and reputation. Its significant impact on consumer mindset and actions highlights its vital role in shaping consumer choices and, ultimately, strengthening brand equity.

2.4.5 Reflection on Consumer Perceived Brand Elements

Exploring the broad realm of consumer perceived brand elements reveals a complex and interwoven landscape. Each element - perceived value, quality, innovation, and popularity - acts as a separate pillar, yet they're interconnected, often enhancing each other.

Perceived Value: Deeply embedded in consumer psychology, perceived value significantly influences consumer behavior and brand loyalty. It challenges brands to constantly fine-tune their strategies, making sure the value they offer aligns with the consumers' evolving sense of worth.

Perceived Quality: Quality acts as a benchmark for brands, encompassing both tangible and intangible aspects. The general perception of quality goes beyond product features; it includes the brand's promise and its fulfillment. A consistent commitment to quality can lead to increased trust and loyalty.

Perceived Innovation: In today's fast-paced world, perceived innovation is crucial. Consumers seek brands that are visionary, adaptable, and proactive in responding to market changes. Thus, brands need to not only innovate but also ensure that these innovations are seen as valuable by their consumers.

Perceived Popularity: As a marker of brand recognition, perceived popularity has a strong impact on consumer choices. A brand's familiarity and recall can act as both a driver and an indicator of its market position. The collective impact of a brand's efforts in other areas often reflects in its popularity.

It's clear that consumer perceptions are dynamic and evolve with market shifts, brand actions, and societal changes. While each element has its own importance, their collective interaction is where the true impact lies. Brands aiming for success and market dominance should take an integrated approach, skillfully blending these elements into their brand story, ensuring a strong and lasting connection with consumers.

2.5 International Status of Chinese Sports Merchandise Brands

Leading brands have a strong spot in the market and greatly impact what brands consumers like (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Jiang et al., 2006; Liang, 2009; Chang & Ko, 2014; Lu et al., 2015; Zeng, 2019; Zhang, 2020a; Miller & Mills, 2021). This part looks at the positions of different sports merchandise brands in China, using data for support.

In recent years, China's economy has grown impressively, with sports goods sales consistently rising. Despite this, Chinese sports merchandise brands face challenges in gaining international recognition. Their global competitiveness is limited, often due to reliance on traditional trading methods and lack of skilled international teams. An examination of industry data tells a clear story: the top 10 global sports goods brands are mainly based in developed countries like the United States, Europe, and Japan. Sadly, Chinese sports brands are missing from these lists.

Tables 2, 3, and 4 provide a snapshot of the global sports brand rankings in terms of sales, revenue, and wealth. In all these tables, brands from the USA,

Germany, Italy, and Japan dominate, leaving no presence for Chinese brands.

Table 3 : Global Sports Brand Sales Ranking (2021)

Global Sports Brand Sales Ranking in 2021 (in \$Billion)			
TOP	Brand	Country	Sales
1	NIKE	USA	44.5
2	ADIDAS	Germany	23.5
3	PUMA	Germany	6.2
4	UNDER ARMOUR	USA	4.5
5	NEW BALANCE	USA	4.1
6	LULULEMON ATHLETICA	Canada	3.3
7	ASICS	Japan	3.2
8	COLUMBLA SPORSWEAR	USA	2.5
9	FILA	Italy	2.5
10	REEBOK	USA	1.8

(Source: All Top Everything, 2022)

Table 4 : Top 10 Sports Brands in the World (2022)

Ranking of Sports Merchandise Brands by Revenue in 2022 (\$ Billion)			
Rank	Brand	Country	Revenue
1	Nike	USA	44.54
2	Adidas	Germany	25.7
3	DKS	USA	12.06
4	Puma	Germany	7.55
5	Skechers	USA	6.16
6	Under Armour	USA	5.5
7	New Balance	USA	~5
8	Asics	Japan	~3.6
9	Converse	USA	~2.5
10	North Face	USA	~1

(Source: MBA Skool, 2022)

Table 5 : Global Top 10 Sports Brands by Revenue (2022)

The Global Top 10 Richest Sports Merchandise Brands in 2022		
Top	Brand	Country
1	Nike	USA
2	Adidas	Germany
3	Reebok	USA
4	Under Armour	USA
5	Puma	Germany
6	Fila	Italy
7	ASICS	Japan
8	Columbia	USA
9	Lotto	Italy
10	Kappa	Italy

(Source: Sports Browser, 2022)

These tables highlight a stark reality: Chinese sports merchandise brands lag significantly behind their international counterparts in global brand leadership. For Chinese sports merchandise brands to rise and compete globally, they need a focused strategy and increased efforts.

Looking at the history of globally successful brands, there's a common path: they first conquer their local markets and then expand abroad. Brands like Coca-Cola, McDonald's, Nike, Adidas, Procter & Gamble, Microsoft, and Intel followed this approach. They broke down their overarching goals into smaller, achievable steps. It's almost a rule that if a brand hasn't achieved leadership in its home market, international success is unlikely. A brand can only think about going global after establishing strong brand leadership and market share at home. Only then can it aim for significant market share, brand leadership, and equity globally.

In this context, for Chinese sports merchandise brands to improve their global status and brand leadership, they must start at home. The first goal should be

to strengthen their brand leadership within China. This leads to an important question: What is the current situation of domestic sports merchandise brands in China?

2.5.1 Difference in Sportswear Use Between China and Other Countries

China's economy is growing fast and having a big impact on the world. This has helped many industries. But, the sports merchandise industry, even though it's growing, is still behind compared to developed countries. It can see this when researcher look at how much sports merchandise people use.

2.5.2 Difference in Use Rates

In countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany, more than 20% of people use sports merchandise. The United States stands out with an impressive rate of 31.8%. But in China, only 12.5% of people use sports merchandise. This shows an opportunity for the sports merchandise market in China to grow. Figure 3 shows the differences in sports merchandise use rates in different countries in 2022.

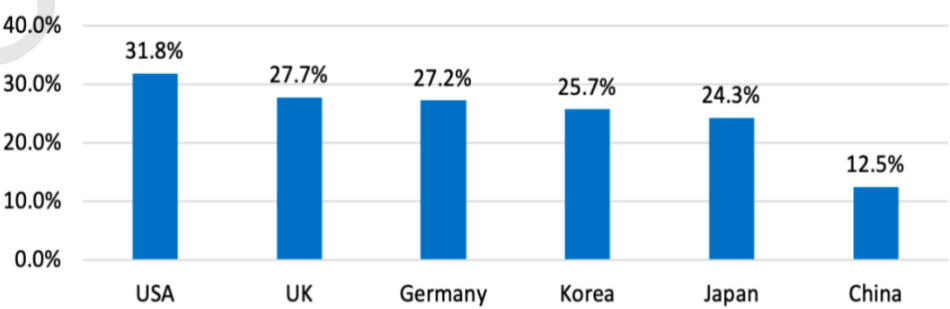


Figure 3 : Use Rate of Sports Apparel in Different Countries (2022)
(Source: Bili Bili, 2023)

2.5.3 Difference in Spending Per Person

The gap is even clearer when we look at how much money people spend on sports merchandise. In China, people spend about \$32 per person on sports merchandise. This is quite low compared to other countries – it's about one-third of what people spend in Japan and only one-tenth of what people spend in the United States. Figure 4 shows how much people in different countries spend on sports apparel on average in 2022.

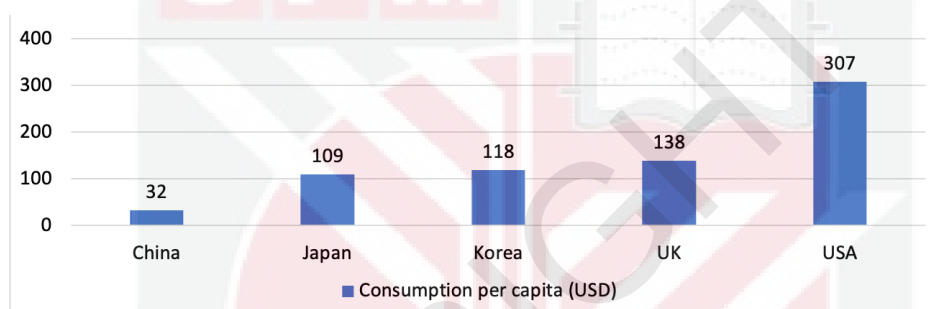


Figure 4 : Difference in Spending Per Person (2022)
(Source: Bili Bili, 2023)

2.5.4 China's Policies Supporting the Sports Industry

The story of China's sports industry features strong government support, recognizing its potential for growth and its importance for people's wellbeing (Figure 1.3). Over time, the policies have changed a lot, showing the government's aim to improve sports facilities and make sports a part of the nation's culture and daily life.

2.5.5 Policy Highlights

The Chinese government’s strong efforts to not only lift the sports industry but also make it part of people’s daily lives. The main idea is the government’s promise to support a "Healthy China", making sports a key part for this goal.

The following figure shows the policy changes over the years:

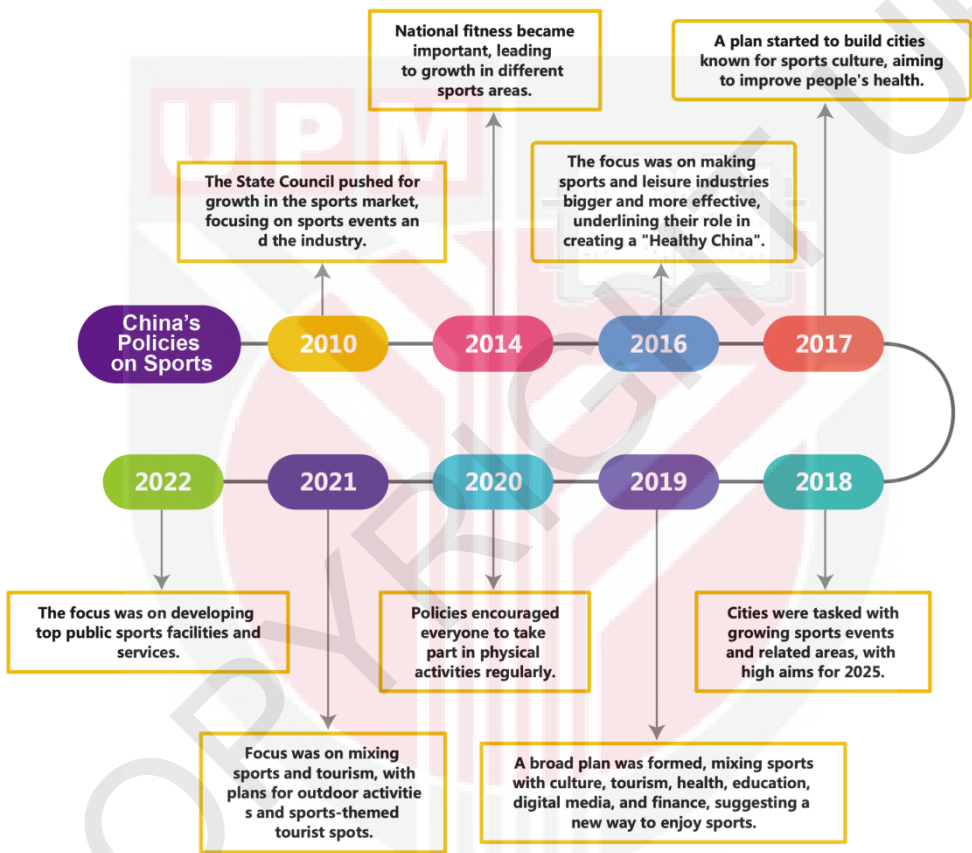


Figure 5 : China's Sports Policies
(Source: Author)

2.5.6 Enthusiasm for Physical Fitness in China

In the post-pandemic era, health and wellness have become even more important. The Chinese people are showing a new excitement for physical activities. International sports events, home workouts, and outdoor activities

have all become more popular, showing the nation's growing love for health through sports and exercise.

2.5.7 Age-wise Participation in Physical Activities

Looking at the data, we see a clear trend of different age groups getting involved in physical activities (Figure 6:

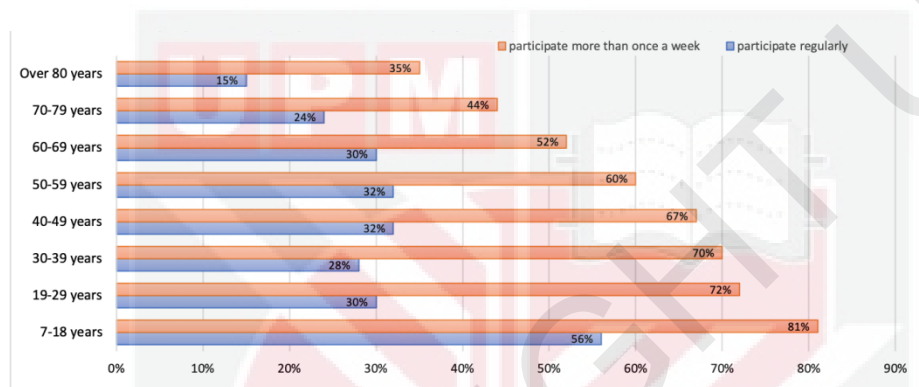


Figure 6 : Age Distribution of Individuals Participating in Physical Activities
(Source: Baidu, 2022)

Among the young age group of 7-18, a big 56% are regularly doing physical training. This is the highest percentage across all age groups, showing a positive trend for the future. People between 40-59 also show a lot of enthusiasm, with 32% of them taking part in regular physical activities. Even among older people, aged 60-69, there's an impressive 30% who are committed to regular exercise.

2.5.8 Public Perceptions of Health Management

The focus on health among Chinese residents has never been stronger (Figure 7):

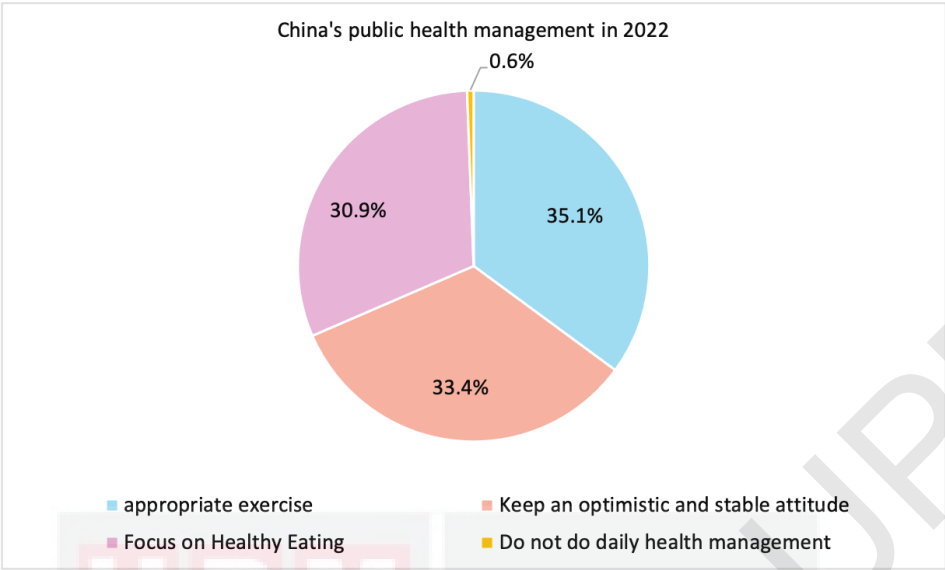


Figure 7 : China's Public Health Management (2022)
(Source: Baidu, 2022)

In 2022, 35.1% of people chose moderate exercise to keep and improve their health. Only a very small 0.6% didn't want to take part in any daily health management, showing the huge number of people who care about health and wellness.

2.5.9 Growth of Sports Venues

Supporting the public's growing interest in sports and physical activities, there has been a rise in sports venues (Figure 8):

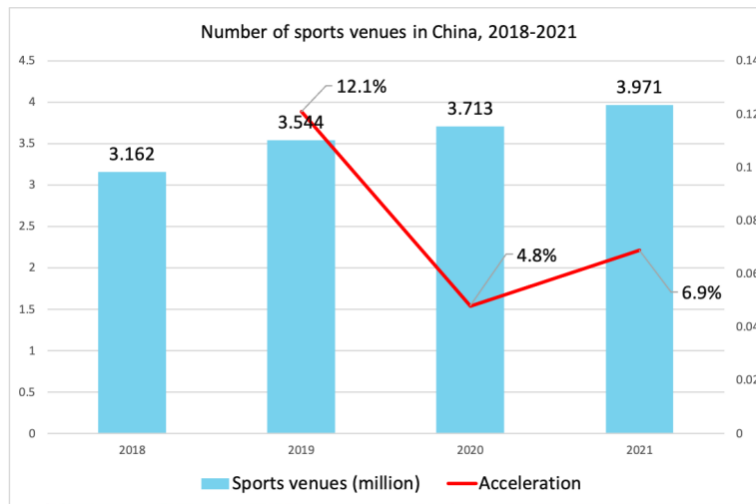


Figure 8 : Number of Sports Venues in China, 2018-2021
(Source: East Money, 2022)

The number of sports stadiums has been going up steadily from 3.1 million in 2018 to 3.9 million by the end of 2021. This strong enthusiasm, together with the government's active role in making sports facilities better, shows a bright future for the sports industry, including sports merchandise. The sports market in China, therefore, offers a big chance for businesses, ready for exploring.

2.6 Growth Potential of China's Sports Merchandise Market

China's increasing focus on health, along with a rise in sports participation and competitions, has greatly boosted its sports merchandise industry. This is not just a short-term fashion trend, but a sign of a changing lifestyle. Between 2017 and 2021, China's sports merchandise market saw steady growth, going from 221.5 billion yuan to a remarkable 387.1 billion yuan. During this period, the market had an average annual compound growth rate of 14.98%. Although there was a drop in 2020 due to the pandemic, the industry bounced

back strongly in 2021 (Figure 9).

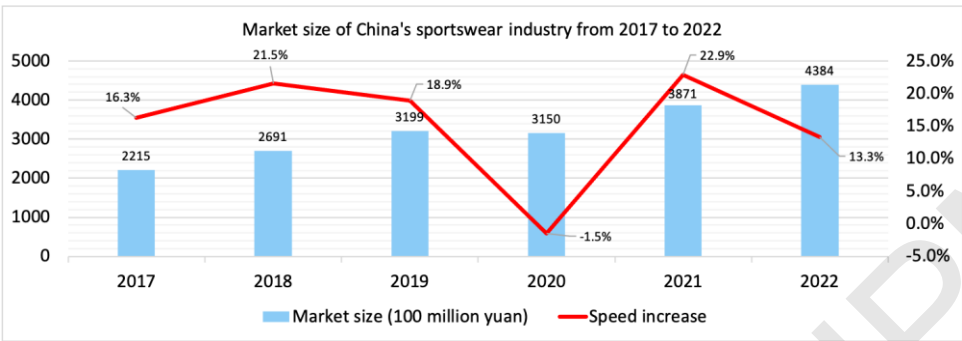


Figure 9 : Market Size of China's Sportswear Industry (2017-2022)
(Source: Bili Bili, 2023)

2.6.1 Sports Merchandise's Increasing Share in the Apparel Industry

With more people in China getting into sports, the demand for athletic clothing has gone up. From 2017 to 2021, sports merchandise's share in the whole clothing market in China grew by 3.8%. This shows a change in what consumers want and the growing importance of sports merchandise in everyday fashion (Figure 1.8).

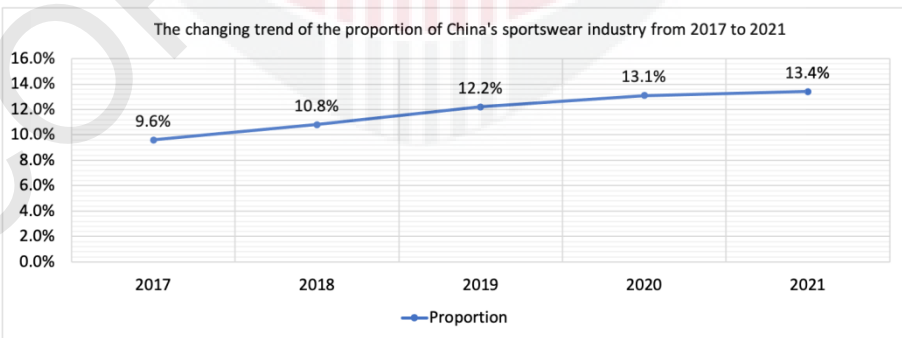


Figure 10 : Growth of China's Sportswear Industry (2017-2022)
(Source: Bili Bili, 2023)

2.7 Sports Brand Market Share in China

In 2020, Nike was the top sports merchandise brand in China with a market share of 25.2%. Other key brands were Adidas at 14.8%, Anta at 16.2%, and Li Ning at 8.2% (Figure 11). In 2021, the situation was similar. Nike stayed in the lead at 25.2%. Adidas kept its 14.8%, Anta remained at 16.2%, and Li Ning at 8.2% (Figure 12).

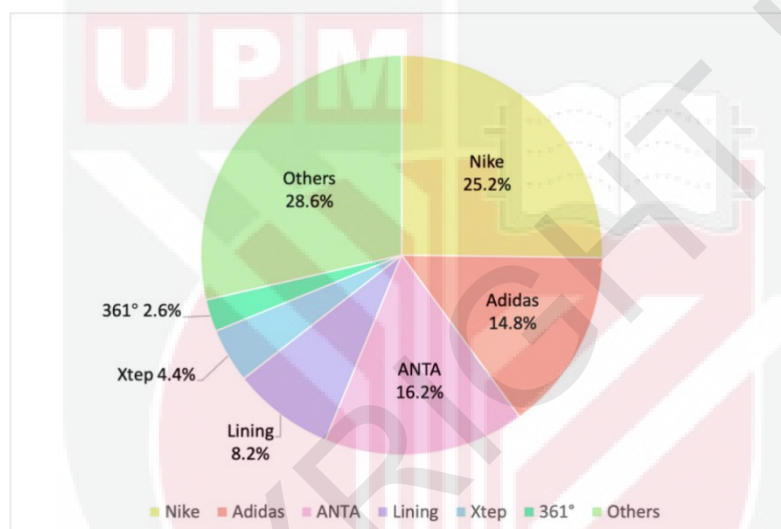


Figure 11 : Market Share of Sports Merchandise Brands in China (2020)
(Source: Sina, 2022)

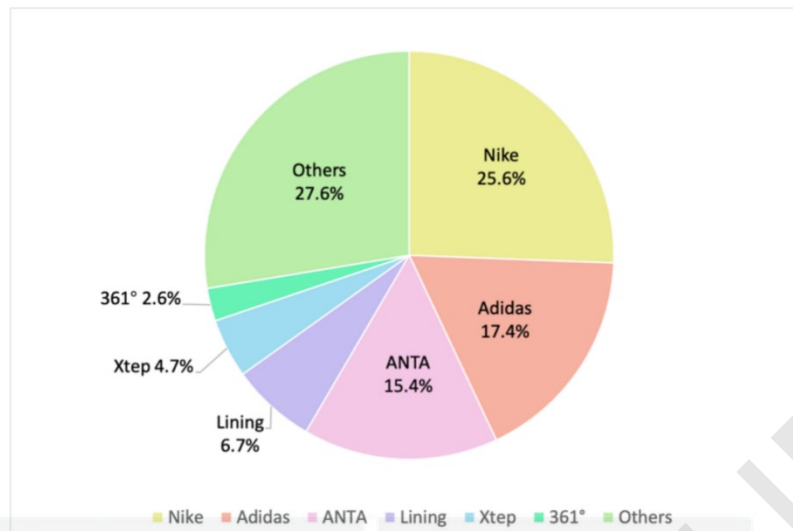


Figure 12 : Market Share of Sports Merchandise Brands in China (2021)
(Source: Sina, 2022)

The order of market share, from most to least, is Nike, Adidas, Anta, Li Ning, XTEP, and 361°.

2.7.1 Nike

Originally named "Blue Ribbon Sports," Nike was founded by Phil Knight. In 1972, the brand changed its name to "Nike". Its main office is in Portland, Oregon, USA.

2.7.2 Nike Logo

The Nike logo, known as the "Swoosh," represents speed, movement, and energy. It's inspired by the Greek victory goddess. The logo has changed five times to reach its current look (Figure 13).



Figure 13 : Nike Logo Evolution
(Source: Le Site De La Sneaker, 2024)

2.7.3 Nike Revenue

From 2016 to 2019, Nike's global revenue went up, from \$324 billion to \$391.22 billion (Table 6). It dropped a bit in 2020, to \$374.2 billion, but rose again by 2022, to \$467.92 billion.

Table 6 : Nike Revenue (2016-2022)

Nike's Revenue (2016-2022)							
Years	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Revenue in China	37.84	42.37	51.34	62.80	66.79	82.90	75.47
Total revenue	324	343.5	363.63	391.22	374.2	444.93	467.92

(Source: Nike Annual Report, 2022)

In China, from 2016 to 2021, Nike's revenue grew each year, from \$37.84 billion to \$82.9 billion. But in 2022, it fell to \$75.47 billion. Despite this, the overall trend in China from 2016 to 2022 was positive (Figure 14).

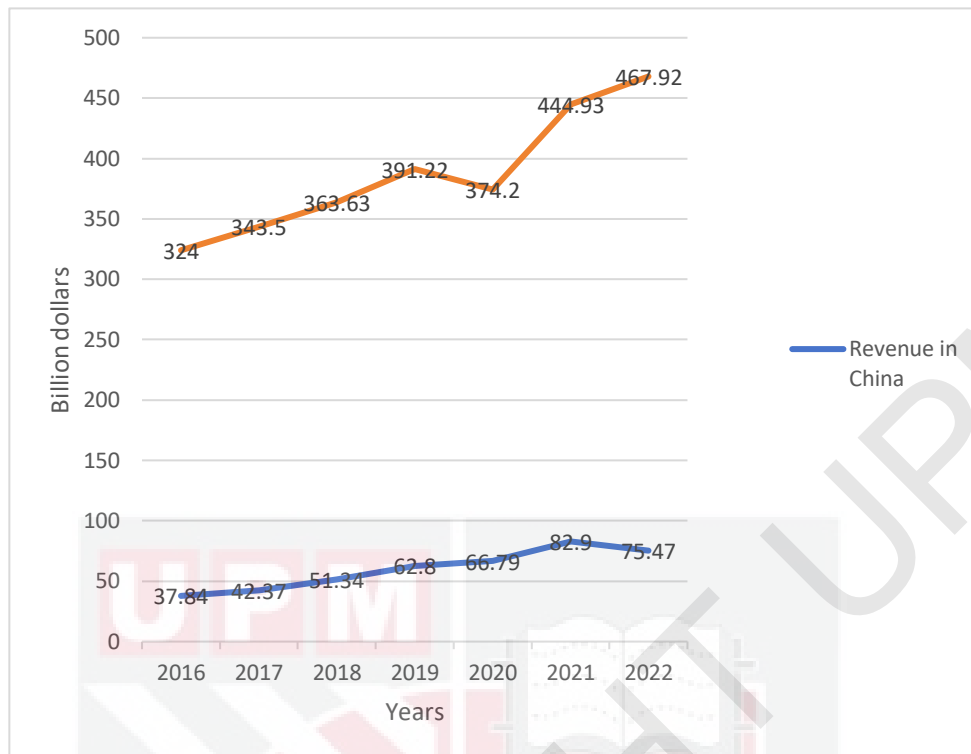


Figure 14 : Nike’s Annual Revenue Data Trends (2016-2022)
(Source: Author)

2.7.4 Adidas

Adidas, started by Adolf Adi Dassler in Germany in 1949, is a well-known sports merchandise brand. It uses three different logos for its various product lines: Adidas Athletics, Adidas Original, and Adidas Neo.

2.7.5 Adidas Logos

These famous logos have three parallel lines representing the goal of improving and achieving and resemble sneakers (Figure 15).

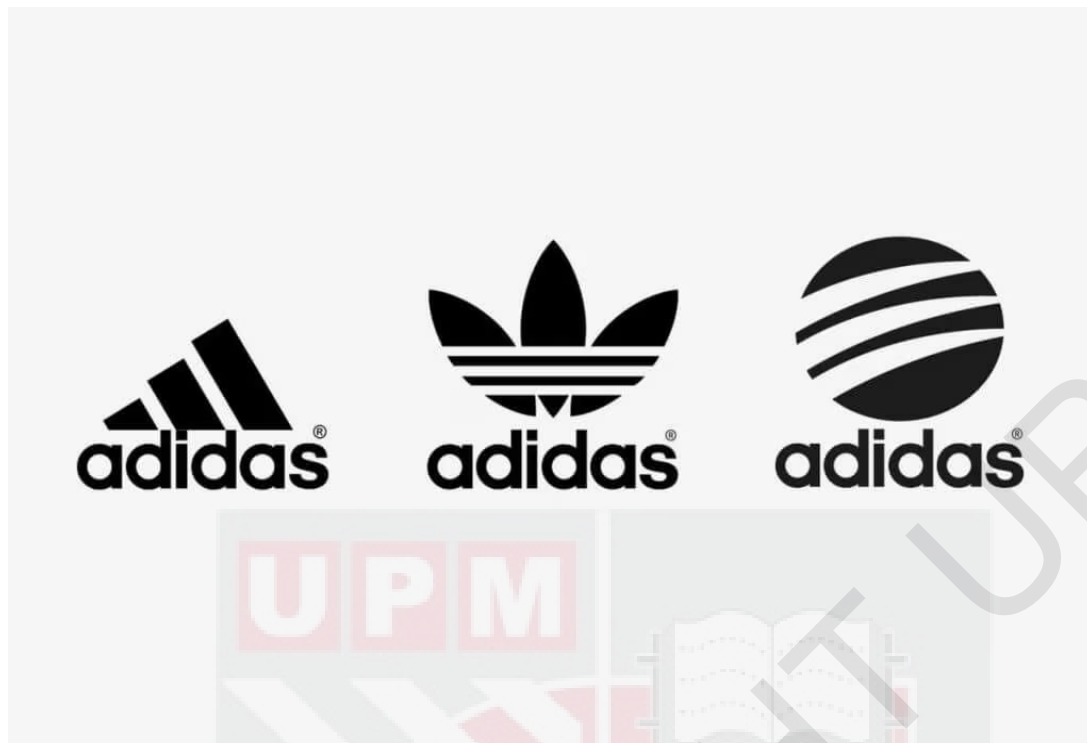


Figure 15 : Adidas Logos
(Source: Zen Business, 2012)

2.7.6 Adidas Revenue

Adidas' global revenue went up steadily from \$178.73 billion in 2015 to \$249.59 billion in 2019 (Table 7). It fell in 2020 to \$209.87 billion but rose again in 2021 to \$224.57 billion. In China, Adidas' revenue mostly increased from 2015 to 2021 (Figure 16).

Table 7 : Adidas Revenue (2015-2021)

Adidas's Revenue (2015-2021)							
Years	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Revenue in China	25.49	31.12	39.19	43.39	44.37	45.90	48.63
Total revenue	178.73	192.91	224.21	231.77	249.59	209.87	224.57

(Source : Adidas, 2021)

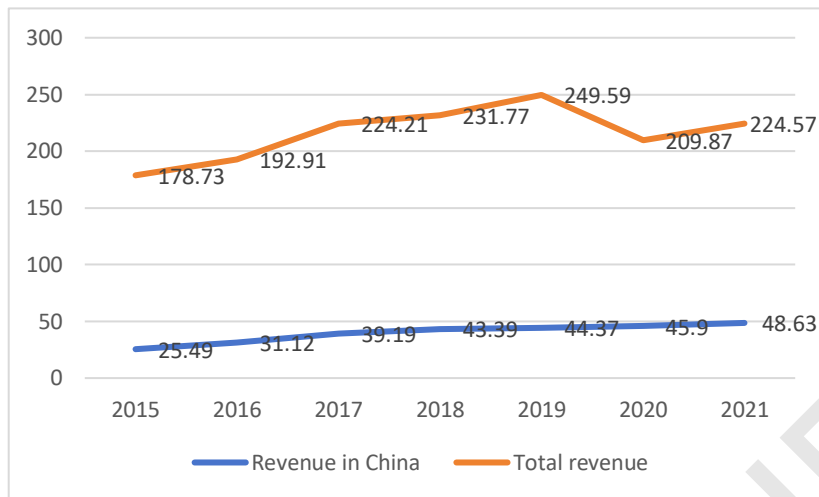


Figure 16 : Adidas Annual Revenue Data Trends (2015 -2021)
(Source: Author)

2.7.7 Li-Ning

Started in 1990 by famous Chinese gymnast Li Ning, the brand Li-Ning has made a name in sports merchandise (Yang, 2022). It became well-known globally after listing on the Hong Kong stock exchange in 2004 (Fan, 2022).

2.7.8 Li-Ning Logo

The original Li-Ning logo used Mr. Li Ning's last name and initials, "L" and "N". It looked like a red flag waving and a lit torch, showing the energy and passion of sports. The design is modern and shows the brand's spirit of moving forward. In 2008, the brand decided to change its image. By 2010, Li-Ning had a new logo and the slogan "Make the Change," instead of "Anything is possible". The new logo kept the idea of movement, energy, and the brand's focus on new ideas, growth, and strength (Figure 17).



Figure 17 : Li-Ning Logos
(Source: Campaign Asia, 2010)

2.7.9 Li-Ning Revenue

Looking at Li-Ning's revenue from 2016 to 2021 (Table 8), the brand grew a lot. From 2016 to 2020, revenue went from \$11.7 billion to \$21.1 billion. Then, between 2020 and 2021, it jumped to \$32.95 billion.

Table 8 : Li-Ning Revenue (2016-2021)

Li-Ning's Revenue (2016-2021) (\$ Billion)						
Years	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total revenue	11.7	12.95	15.34	20.25	21.1	32.95

(Source: Companies Market Cap)

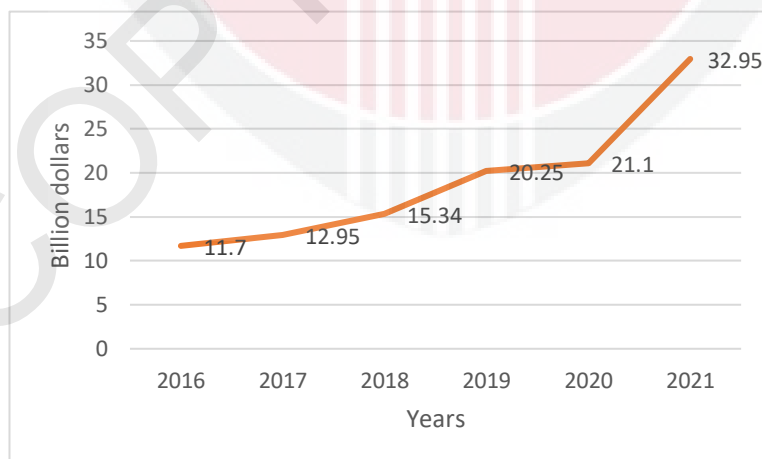


Figure 18 : Li-Ning Revenue (2016-2021)
(Source: Companies Market Cap)

2.7.10 Anta

Founded in 1991 by Mr. Ding Hemu, Anta sports Brand has become a big name in the sports goods market. It became more known after being listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange in 2007.

2.7.11 Anta Logo

The name "Anta" comes from Greek, meaning "Mother of the Earth." This shows a big view of the world and a promise to help global communities. Since Greece is known for starting the Olympic Games, the name "Anta" connects with the Olympic spirit and the energy of sports. This goes beyond just the name; it shapes the brand's values and modern sports spirit. The logo has an arc that looks like something moving upward (Figure 19). This design mixes strength, speed, and beauty, showing Anta's continuous search for excellence and self-improvement.



Figure 19 : Anta Logo
(Source: Companies Logo, 2024)

2.7.12 Anta Revenue

From 2016 to 2021, Anta's revenue increased significantly. From 2016 to 2019, it grew a lot, from \$19.48 billion to \$49.51 billion (Table 9). From 2019 to 2020, it went up a little, from \$49.51 billion to \$51.83 billion. Then, from 2020 to 2021, it jumped to \$72.08 billion (Figure 20).

Table 9 : Anta Revenue (2016-2021)

Anta's Revenue (2016-2021)						
Years	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total revenue	19.48	24.37	35.18	49.51	51.83	72.08

(Source: Anta, 2021)

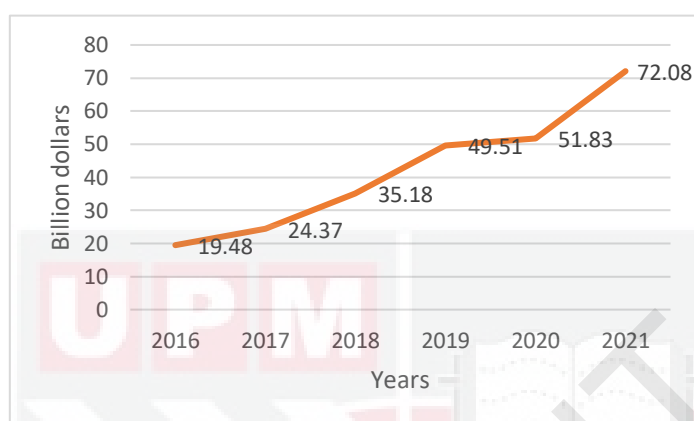


Figure 20 : Anta Revenue (2016-2021)

(Source: Anta, 2021)

2.7.13 Xtep

Xtep, a sports brand, was created in 2001 by Mr. Ding Shuibao. It gained more recognition after being listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange in 2008.

2.7.14 Xtep Logo

Xtep's logo features a slightly tilted X. This tilt stands for being different, challenging usual ways, and the strong will to be better than oneself and others. This logo has been a symbol of Xtep since it started (Figure 21).



Figure 21 : Xtep Logo
(Source: Logo Sansar, 2024)

2.7.15 Xtep Revenue

Looking at Xtep's earnings from 2016 to 2021, we see a general increase (Table 10). There was a small drop from \$7.88 billion in 2016 to \$7.46 billion in 2017. Then, earnings went up steadily to \$11.94 billion by 2019. Between 2019 and 2020, the earnings stayed around \$11.93 billion then rose to \$14.62 billion in 2021 (Figure 22).

Table 10 : Xtep Revenue (2016-2021)

Xtep's Revenue (2016-2021)						
Years	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total revenue	7.88	7.46	9.32	11.94	11.93	14.62

(Source: Xtep, 2021)

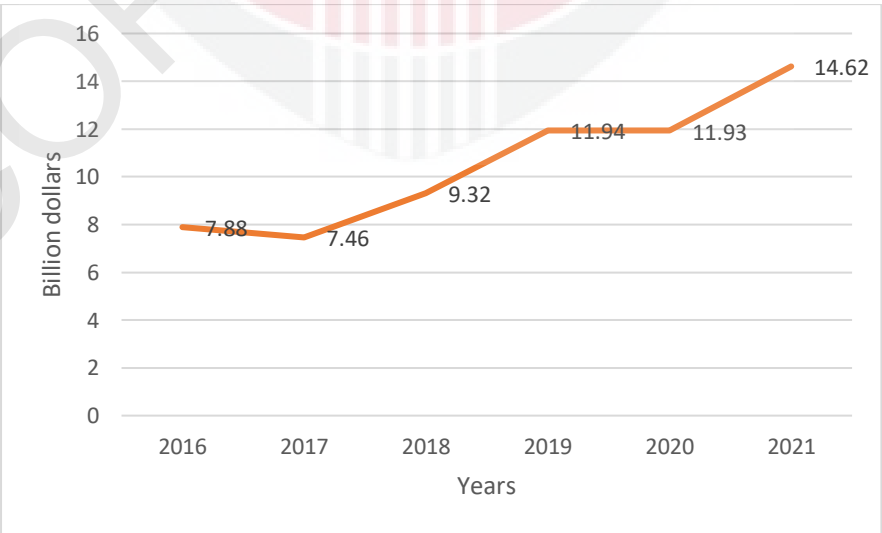


Figure 22 : Xtep Revenue (2016-2021)
(Source: Xtep, 2021)

2.7.16 361°

361° sports Brand was started by Mr. Ding Jiantong in 2003 and it successfully went public in Hong Kong in 2009.

2.7.17 361° Logo

361° is a sports brand inspired by the idea of going beyond a full circle. While 360 degrees means complete and whole, 361° stands for going past perfection. This matches their motto, “love for one more degree”, highlighting the extra step beyond 360°. This logo (Figure 23) has been key to the brand's identity from the start.



Figure 23 : 361° Logo
(Source: LibLogo, 2024)

2.7.18 361° Revenue

From 361°'s financial reports, earnings showed small growth from \$7.34 billion in 2016 to \$7.57 billion in 2018 (Table 11). From 2018 to 2019, there was a bigger increase to \$8.22 billion. However, earnings fell to \$7.48 billion from 2019 to 2020. In 2021, earnings went up again to \$8.66 billion.

Table 11 : 361° Revenue (2016-2021)

361°'s Revenue (2016-2021)						
Years	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Total revenue	7.34	7.53	7.57	8.22	7.48	8.66

(Source: DataMNC, 2021)



Figure 24 : 361° Revenue (2016-2021)
(Source: DataMNC, 2021)

2.8 Comparison of Annual Revenues of Sports Merchandise Brands

Table 12 below shows the yearly earnings from 2016 to 2021 of top Chinese sports merchandise brands and the biggest global sports merchandise companies.

Table 12 : Sportswear Brand Revenues in China (2016-2021)

Brands' Revenue in China (2016-2021) (\$ Billion)						
Years	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Nike	324.0	343.5	363.63	391.22	444.93	467.92
Adidas	179.73	192.91	231.77	249.59	209.87	224.57
Li-Ning	11.7	12.95	15.34	20.25	21.1	32.95
Anta	19.48	24.37	35.18	49.51	51.83	72.08
Xtep	7.88	7.46	9.32	11.94	11.93	14.62
361°	7.34	7.53	7.57	8.22	7.48	8.66

(Source: Author)

The big gap in earnings between Chinese brands and global giants is clear (Figure 25). Even with their presence, Chinese brands haven't captured a large part of the sports market yet. Being a market leader with a strong brand often means having a bigger market share, as shown in several studies (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Jiang et al., 2006; Liang, 2009; Miller & Mills, 2021; Chang & Ko, 2014; Lu et al., 2015; Zeng, 2019; Zhang, 2020a).

ALL SPORTSWEAR BRANDS REVENUE IN CHINA (2016-2021)

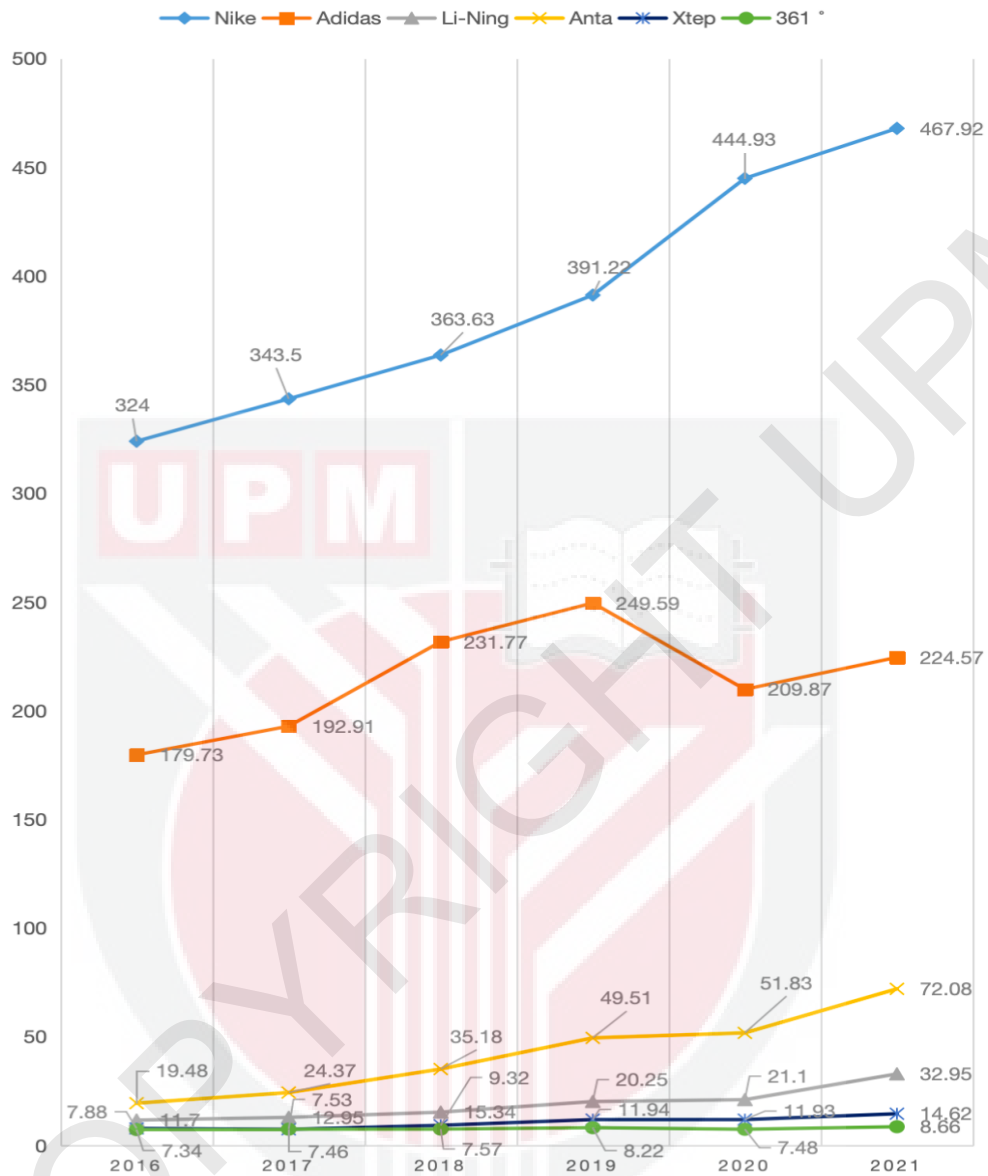


Figure 25 : Revenue of Each Brand (2016-2021)

(Source: Author)

2.9 The Issue of Chinese Sports Merchandise Brands

In the following parts of this research, the study will explore the challenges faced by Chinese sports merchandise brands from four different angles. These include Product Quality, Brand Marketing, Brand Technology, and Brand Image (Figure 26).



Figure 26 : Chinese Sports Merchandise Brand Leadership Gaps
(Source: Chang & Ko, 2014)

Upon reviewing the existing literature, this study has identified four primary issues that currently beset Chinese sports brands. These issues are Product Quality, Brand Marketing, Brand Technology, and Brand Image. As these areas represent significant challenges faced by these brands, they have been recognized as research gaps. Consequently, this study will focus on these identified gaps, aiming to delve deeper into their nature, impact on the market, and potential strategies for improvement.

2.9.1 Brand Marketing

In the highly competitive world of global sports merchandise, brand marketing is key for standing out. Chinese sports merchandise brands, which once mainly aimed for quick growth, are now focusing more on how they position themselves and are seen in the market. This part looks at different aspects of brand marketing, including online marketing, brand value, price, and building relationships with consumers.

2.9.1.1 Online Marketing

In the digital era, brands face both chances and challenges. The internet gives platforms for brand exposure but also increases fake products (Zhang,

2020b). Weak online rules have led to a rise in fake and low-quality sports goods, damaging both customers and the trust in real sports merchandise brands.

2.9.1.2 Brand Value

Brands like Li Ning, even with better designs and quality, often are compared to global giants like Nike and Adidas, which have many style options (Sun & Tian, 2018). This comparison makes Chinese products seem lower in value, with perceived flaws in design and quality (Fan, 2022). Also, some local sports merchandise brands are criticized for copying big international brands, gaining quick market share but also getting negative feedback (Zhang & Wang, 2021).

2.9.1.3 Price

How a brand is priced really shapes how it's seen. Many Chinese sports merchandise brands have aimed at the cheaper market. But with higher living standards in China, people now want both quality and style, not just low prices. This past focus on the cheaper market has unfortunately created a stereotype of local brands being both cheap and not stylish (Sun & Tian, 2018).

2.9.1.4 Consumer Relationship

How good a product is really affects the connection between customers and brands. Worries about quality have led some customers to choose

international sports merchandise brands, even if they cost more (Yang, 2016). The image of Chinese brands as lesser, plus the issue of fake products online, has made certain stereotypes stick in people's minds, making it hard for local brands to build trust and strong customer relationships.

2.9.2 Product Quality

In the global sports merchandise market, product quality is crucial for earning consumer trust and loyalty. Chinese sports merchandise brands, striving for international acclaim, face several challenges and opportunities. This section examines product quality specifically for Chinese sports merchandise brands, focusing on factors such as comfortability, lifespan, blind imitation, and homogenization.

2.9.2.1 Comfortability

Chinese brands, especially newer ones, focus heavily on how comfortable their products are in their marketing. However, the rush to offer low prices can sometimes overlook the true efforts to make products comfortable. This price-focused competition can sometimes send mixed signals about comfort, confusing customers (Li et al., 2010). This gap between what's marketed and the real product experience can make customers doubtful, questioning the brand's dedication to comfort.

2.9.2.2 Lifespan

For many Chinese sports merchandise brands, showing how long their products last is a challenge. Aggressive prices and frequent new releases can overshadow focus on product durability. As Luo (2012) notes, while initial pricing is key for sports merchandise makers, the commitment to keeping product value, including durability, often weakens after launch. This affects how consumers see the product's lastingness and its value.

2.9.2.3 Blind Imitation

There's a trend in local sports merchandise brands copying successful global strategies without adapting them for Chinese customers. From using Western design elements to copying global marketing campaigns, these efforts often lack originality (Sun & Tian, 2018). This approach doesn't align with Chinese cultural values and risks losing the unique identity of Chinese sports merchandise brands.

2.9.2.4 Homogenization

The Chinese sports merchandise market has seen a lot of homogenization, with brands offering similar products and marketing. This lack of uniqueness leads to brands not establishing a distinct identity for customers (Zhang, 2020b). The result is that sports merchandise becomes a commodity, where price is the main factor for customers. Brands, trying to stand out, often enter into price wars, hurting their brand value. For example, well-known Chinese sports merchandise brands like Anta and Li Ning have various products, but

their marketing strategies often copy what's popular in the market, not creating a unique space (Tan, 2017; Fan, 2022).

2.9.3 Brand Technology

In the modern sports merchandise industry, the integration of technology with brand strategies has become an essential factor for success. Chinese sports merchandise brands, when compared with their global counterparts, show noticeable differences in their use of technology and approaches to product innovation. This section aims to delve deeper into these aspects, examining how technology shapes product development and branding for Chinese sports merchandise companies.

2.9.3.1 Product Research and Development (R&D)

In contrast to foreign brands, which prioritize brand value and technological advancement, Chinese sports merchandise brands often focus more on product-centered strategies. Their emphasis on the lower-priced market segments limits their incentive and capability to create high-end products. Their main competitive approach, relying heavily on price competition, indicates a hesitation towards investing in independent brand research and development (R&D) and design efforts (Li et al., 2010). Using Anta as an example, the company expanded into its national marketing network in the 1990s and rapidly gained brand recognition. However, their quick expansion, similar to that of brands like Li Ning, stretched their resources and posed challenges to sustainable growth in the long term (Wu, 2011).

2.9.3.2 Core Technology

The technological strength of a brand plays a crucial role in its market presence and product effectiveness. Essential factors influencing this include brand popularity, the brand's age, its integrated technology, and the foundational values that guide the brand (Du & Zeng, 2014). However, many Chinese sports merchandise brands are trailing in this aspect. They often lack innovative technology and the ability to conduct advanced research (Li et al., 2022).

2.9.3.3 Professionalism

When it comes to product expertise, Chinese brands often fall short in comparison to international giants like Nike, Adidas, and Reebok (Zhang, 2011). Brands like Nike are at the forefront of research technology, while German brands like Adidas are known for their unmatched quality. In contrast, Chinese brands, even well-known ones like Li Ning, struggle to offer products that truly represent their brand identity, especially in specialized segments like athletic footwear (Fan, 2022). Consumer preferences for sports merchandise with advanced technological features highlight the advantage that foreign brands hold, utilizing cutting-edge materials to enhance product durability and comfort (Yang, 2016).

2.9.3.4 Own Unique Style

The rise of sneaker culture, especially among the youth, has reshaped the dynamics of the sports merchandise market. Leading sports merchandise

brands have solidified their brand identities and gained significant marketing traction by crafting their distinct "sneaker culture" (Wang et al., 2021). This cultural connection often reflects the brand's heritage, as seen in Nike's American-centric designs. However, Chinese brands rarely incorporate indigenous cultural elements into their designs, missing out on a valuable opportunity to establish a profound connection with consumers (Wang et al., 2021).

2.9.4 Brand Image

Brand image, especially in the context of sports merchandise brands, holds a crucial position in influencing consumer perceptions and choices. This section seeks to explore various aspects of brand image, with a particular emphasis on Chinese sports merchandise brands.

2.9.4.1 Brand Culture

Chinese sports merchandise brands often lack a robust brand culture, historical depth, and appeal when compared to foreign counterparts (Li et al., 2022). Due to their relatively shorter development history and insufficient cultural foundations, these brands face a disadvantage against international competitors (Yang, 2016). The Chinese sports merchandise industry, still in its early stages, has primarily focused on survival rather than nurturing a unique corporate culture, further highlighting this gap (Zhang, 2011).

2.9.4.2 Brand Personality

A brand's personality can distinguish its products from competitors. Unfortunately, many Chinese sports merchandise brands lack a distinct brand personality, resulting in an unclear brand image and significant product similarities (Yang, 2016). This leads to consumers being unable to differentiate product and brand features, which can dampen their intent to make a purchase (Du & Zeng, 2014). In contrast, international brands have well-defined brand personalities that cater to various market segments with tailored products.

2.9.4.3 Spokespeople

Chinese sports merchandise brands have sometimes struggled with effective brand image promotion, especially in the selection of brand spokespersons. In pursuit of quick popularity, brands occasionally choose popular figures who do not align with their identity. This can result in temporary spikes in brand awareness followed by rapid declines, jeopardizing long-term brand development (Zhang, 2020c). Additionally, relying solely on traditional advertising channels and event sponsorships means they miss opportunities to showcase their product's actual performance and features.

2.9.4.4 Consumer Brand Knowledge

Consumer brand awareness directly influences their purchase decisions. When consumers perceive a brand as reputable, it serves as a mental shortcut, potentially altering or even transforming their brand perception (Fan,

2022). Brand awareness is crucial for sports merchandise brands as it measures consumer recognition and their understanding of brand value connotations (Du & Zeng, 2014). Unfortunately, several Chinese brands struggle with limited consumer recognition, resulting in lower sales volumes (Li et al., 2022). Furthermore, prolonged low-price marketing strategies have tarnished the image of Chinese sports merchandise brands, further complicating their positioning in the minds of consumers (Zhu et al., 2014). The rapid evolution of internet technology has further complicated matters, with some brands undermining their image in pursuit of short-term gains through online marketing (Zhang, 2020b).

2.9.5 Reflection on Literature Review

Upon reflecting on the evolution and current status of Chinese sports merchandise brands, several challenges become evident, hindering their growth in comparison to international counterparts. Firstly, there is ambiguity in brand marketing objectives, coupled with outdated marketing philosophies, resulting in an over-reliance on singular marketing channels and strategies. Secondly, the promotion strategies of these brands are notably limited in scope, lacking the diversity often observed in successful global brands.

Additionally, there is a noticeable absence of product innovation. Consequently, many designs lag behind those of international brands, leading to a prevalent brand perception characterized by homogeneity, with products typically seen as lower-end and less reliable. Another significant challenge is the limited enterprise resources and research capabilities, often hindering

brand development and creating a technological gap when compared to leading international brands.

Furthermore, brand positioning often remains nebulous, lacking a distinctive brand culture and suffering from inconsistent product pricing strategies. Many Chinese sports merchandise brands frequently overlook the importance of direct consumer engagement and the vital process of relationship-building between brands and their consumers. This oversight becomes even more evident when considering the early entry of international brands into the Chinese market, which, having captured a considerable market share, has limited the growth potential of domestic brands.

Drawing from prior studies and theories, this research proposes categorizing the challenges facing Chinese sports merchandise brands into four distinct gaps: Product quality, Brand marketing, Brand Technology, and Brand image, as depicted in the following framework:



Figure 27 : Gaps and Elements of Brand Leadership for Chinese Sportswear Brands
(Source: Author)

2.9.6 Relationship between Product Quality and Perceived Quality

Product quality is a significant aspect of modern marketing that has received extensive attention in academic research. Consumer perception of quality plays a crucial role in determining whether consumers decide to buy a product (Li et al., 2019). It is influenced by various factors, including product characteristics, brand reputation, and marketing messages.

Perceived quality, as defined by Parasuraman et al. (1985), represents a consumer's judgment of a product's overall excellence or superiority. It holds great importance in influencing consumer behaviour, impacting their

preferences, purchase intentions, and brand loyalty. Higher perceived quality often leads to increased customer satisfaction and positive word-of-mouth marketing.

Product quality, on the other hand, is a fundamental driver of consumer perceived quality. Zeithaml et al. (1990) describe product quality as the overall level of excellence or superiority of a product. It depends on multiple factors, such as the quality of raw materials, manufacturing processes, design, and post-sale services.

Research has consistently shown that product quality significantly affects how consumers perceive overall quality. Studies have found that consumers tend to associate high-quality products with superior overall quality (Spreng & Mackenzie, 1996). Moreover, product quality has a direct impact on consumer satisfaction, which, in turn, influences their perception of quality (Diputra & Yasa, 2021).

Besides product quality, brand reputation and marketing communications can also shape consumer perceptions of quality. According to Keller (1993), a brand's image and associations can influence how consumers perceive quality, even without direct experience with the product. Similarly, marketing communications, such as advertising and promotional materials, can impact consumer perceptions by highlighting product features and benefits.

In summary, product quality plays a crucial role in shaping how consumers perceive quality. This perceived quality, in turn, has a significant impact on

consumer behaviour, affecting their preferences, purchase decisions, and loyalty to a brand. Product quality is influenced by various factors, including the quality of materials, manufacturing processes, and post-sale support. Additionally, brand reputation and marketing communications can shape consumer perceptions of quality, even when they haven't directly interacted with the product.

2.9.7 Relationship between Brand Marketing and Perceived Value

The connection between brand marketing and consumer perceived value is crucial for a company's success. Effective brand marketing not only introduces consumers to a brand but also establishes its unique value proposition and fosters an emotional connection. These efforts increase the perceived value of a brand, making it more appealing to consumers. The interplay between these two aspects has been thoroughly studied and explained in academic research.

For example, a study by Liu et al. (2016) explored how brand equity influences purchasing decisions in China's growing automobile sector. Their findings emphasized that strong brand equity enhances consumer perceived value. This heightened perception, in turn, leads to a greater inclination to make a purchase and choose one brand over its competitors. Essentially, when consumers see greater value in a brand, they are naturally drawn to it.

Another significant study by Park and Srinivasan (1994) used surveys to understand brand equity and its implications. They identified four critical

dimensions of brand equity: brand loyalty, perceived quality, brand awareness, and brand associations. Their results highlighted perceived quality and brand associations as the key factors shaping consumer perceived value. This insight suggests that companies should focus on delivering excellent quality and creating positive brand associations to enhance perceived value among consumers.

Expanding on this, Zeithaml (1988) introduced a comprehensive model that combines evidence to explain how consumers evaluate price, quality, and intrinsic value. Her research emphasized that consumers inherently assess products by comparing their perceived benefits to their financial investment. Effective brand marketing can enhance this perceived value by shaping a favourable brand image and highlighting its unique qualities.

This dynamic is not one-sided; it works both ways. A brand that consumers hold in high regard will receive positive endorsements, leading to organic word-of-mouth promotion (Keller, 2013). These positive endorsements can further increase brand recognition, strengthen brand loyalty, and drive revenue growth.

In summary, academic research provides ample evidence of the intricate relationship between brand marketing and consumer perceived value. Strategic brand marketing plays a crucial role in shaping and refining consumer perceptions of a brand, ultimately leading to an enhanced perceived value. Companies that effectively use brand marketing to elevate

how their brand is perceived can benefit from increased consumer loyalty and improved sales performance.

2.9.8 Relationship between Brand Technology and Perceived Innovation

Brand technology and consumer perceived innovation are two important factors that contribute to the success of a brand. The technological advancements and innovations introduced by a brand are crucial in determining how consumers perceive the brand in terms of its level of innovation. This statement can be supported by numerous studies that have investigated the relationship between brand technology and consumer perceived innovation.

According to Zhang and Kim (2013), technological innovation has a significant impact on consumer perceived innovation. Their study found that when consumers perceive a brand as technologically advanced, they are more likely to perceive the brand as innovative. Furthermore, the study found that consumers' perception of a brand's technological innovation positively influences their purchase intention. These findings suggest that brands that invest in technological innovation can not only enhance their image as innovative but also increase their sales.

Similarly, Han et al. (2010) found that consumers' perception of a brand's technological innovation can significantly affect their purchase behaviour. Their study showed that consumers are more likely to purchase products from brands that they perceive as technologically innovative. Furthermore,

their study found that consumers are willing to pay a premium for products from brands that they perceive as innovative, indicating that the perception of innovation has a significant impact on consumers' willingness to pay.

Additionally, a study by Raju and Unnithan (2017) examined the relationship between brand technology and consumer perceived innovation in the smartphone industry. Their study found that consumers' perception of a brand's technological innovation significantly influences their overall perception of the brand. Furthermore, their study found that consumers' perception of a brand's technological innovation positively influences their brand loyalty.

In conclusion, the relationship between brand technology and consumer perceived innovation has been well-established in the literature. Brands that invest in technological innovation are more likely to be perceived as innovative by consumers, which positively influences their purchase intention, willingness to pay, and brand loyalty. As such, brands should prioritize technological innovation as a key aspect of their marketing strategy to enhance their image as innovative and improve their overall performance.

2.9.9 Relationship between Brand Image and Perceived Popularity

Brand image, which encompasses consumer perceptions and associations with a brand, plays a crucial role in branding. One essential aspect of brand image is its popularity, which measures how recognizable and well-liked a brand is among consumers. The intricate connection between brand image

and its perceived popularity has been the subject of numerous academic studies.

Keller (1993) emphasized the significant impact of brand image on perceived popularity. His research revealed a positive link between brand image and brand equity, representing a brand's value in the marketplace. When dissecting brand equity, he identified two key components: brand awareness, indicating how familiar consumers are with a brand, and brand image, representing consumer associations and perceptions. Keller found that both of these aspects significantly contribute to brand equity, subsequently enhancing perceived consumer popularity.

Similarly, Kim and Hyun (2011) confirmed the influential role of brand image on perceived popularity. Their research highlighted the importance of brand familiarity and reputation in shaping perceptions of popularity. In essence, brands that consumers connect with positively are considered popular. They also explained that such perceptions impact purchasing decisions, underscoring the tangible influence of perceived popularity on consumer actions.

In the context of the hospitality industry, Wu and Chen (2014) explored the relationship between brand image and perceived popularity. Their research validated the profound impact of brand image on consumer perceptions, with brand awareness, quality, and loyalty emerging as key drivers. Furthermore, their study connected perceived popularity with increased consumer

satisfaction and loyalty to the hotel brand.

In summary, the literature provides a clear understanding of the interplay between brand image and perceived consumer popularity. Brands that invest in cultivating a positive brand image naturally enjoy the benefits of increased perceived popularity, influencing consumer purchasing behaviours, satisfaction, and loyalty. Therefore, prioritizing a strong brand image should be a central focus of marketing efforts, serving as a cornerstone for enhancing perceived popularity and overall brand performance.

2.10 Recap

While Chinese sports merchandise brands have made significant progress in the domestic market, they still lag behind global giants like Nike and Adidas in terms of brand influence, value, and adoption rates (Xu, 2021). However, the situation isn't entirely bleak. The Chinese government has consistently shown strong support for the development of the country's sports industry. This support is evident in the government's efforts to improve and expand the sports sector through various measures and initiatives. Additionally, there's a notable rise in health consciousness among the Chinese people, with an increasing number embracing regular physical activities to improve their well-being. The enthusiasm for sports in China is further fueled by numerous sports events and widespread live broadcasts, sparking a national sports craze.

This surge in health awareness and the omnipresence of sporting events

continue to drive promising growth in the sports merchandise industry in China. This momentum increases consumer demand for athletic products. Therefore, despite the gap between Chinese sports merchandise brands and their international counterparts, the current scenario highlights the vast untapped potential and growth opportunities within China's sports market.

2.11 Summary

The Literature Review provided a thorough exploration of various aspects related to branding and consumer perceptions. It commences by examining the dynamic relationship between product quality and perceived value, highlighting their potential impact on consumer decision-making. The chapter further delves into the specific challenges faced by Chinese sports merchandise brands in their marketing efforts, addressing themes like comfortability, lifespan, and homogenization, with examples from brands such as Anta and Li Ning. A significant section is dedicated to emphasizing the importance of brand value, exploring the roles of online marketing and pricing in shaping consumer perceptions. Additionally, the chapter establishes links between brand technology and how consumers perceive innovation, as well as between brand image and its perceived popularity. In conclusion, a conceptual framework, based on the reviewed literature, is presented as a guide for identifying areas within brand leadership that warrant further investigation. Essentially, this chapter carefully curates and presents existing scholarly research to lay the foundation for future research inquiries.

2.12 **Research Gap and Strategy**

The conceptual framework in Figure 28 provides guidance for this study, outlining the areas of brand leadership that need further exploration. In this case, the study’s independent variables are the consumer perceived value elements of brand leadership (i.e., brand image, brand quality, brand technology, product quality). The dependent variable is the importance of the consumer perceived value elements to respondents. No moderating variables were tested in this experiment.

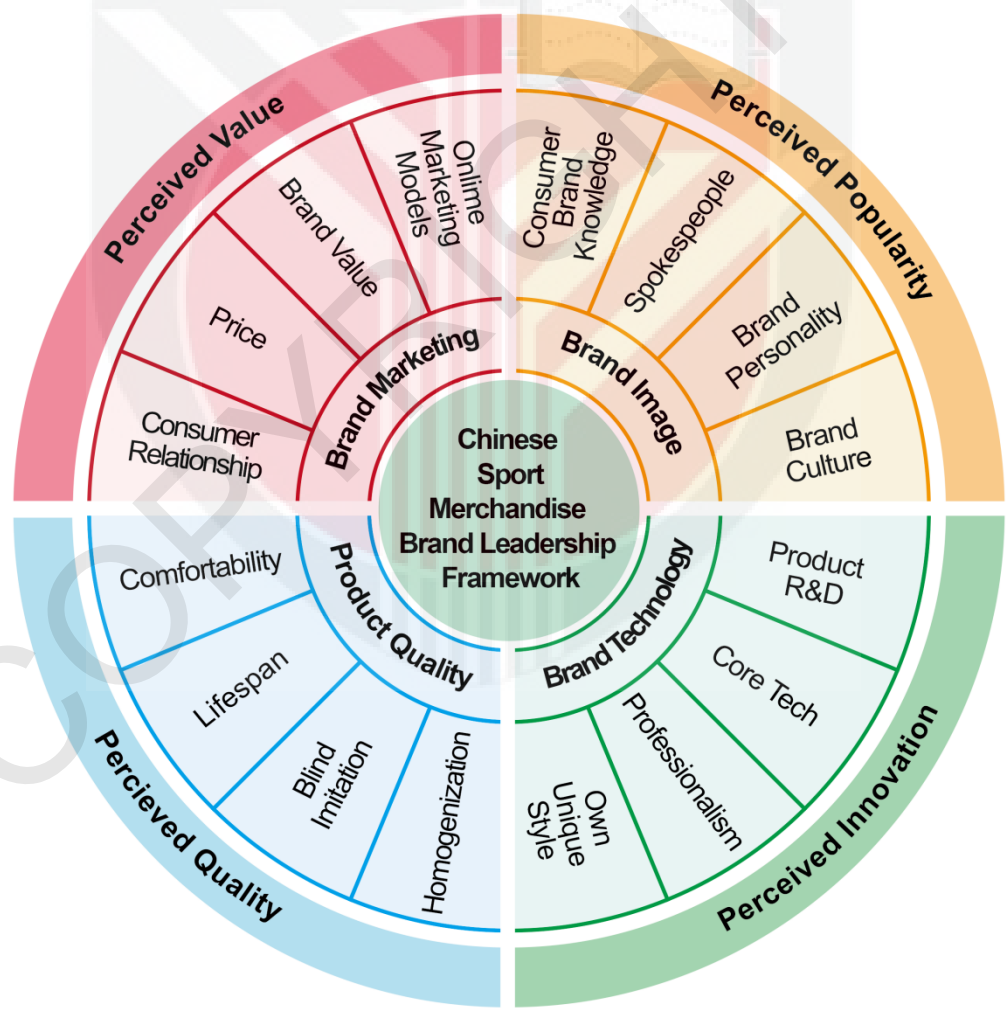


Figure 28 : Conceptual Framework of Brand Leadership for Chinese Sportswear Brands
(Source: Author)

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 3, the study's methodological approach combining brand leadership framework and mixed methods research are discussed. Rationales for using a mixed method questionnaire to collect data are presented, along with the study's three-phase research design that culminates in the development of a novel brand leadership framework. Details about the study's sample (industry experts in China and Chinese and Malaysian consumers) and research instrument are included in this chapter as well.

3.2 Overview of Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methods approach to comprehensively understand the brand leadership of sports brands in the eyes of consumers. The rationale for selecting a mixed-methods approach is rooted in its capability to provide a more complete understanding by integrating both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This approach is beneficial for exploring complex phenomena where both numerical data and expert insights are valuable for constructing a robust conceptual framework.

3.2.1 Quantitative Phase

Firstly, the research began with a survey that collected quantitative data via Likert scale responses. Quantitative data is best suited for objectively understanding relationships between variables and groups of participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), in this case various elements of brand leadership as evaluated by two groups of respondents. A set of questions was given to sports merchandise consumers in China and Malaysia. This survey collected numerical data related to how consumers evaluated a group of brands on different elements of brand leadership. After getting the responses, the author used statistical methods, namely confirmatory factor analysis, to identify the most important elements of brand leadership and cross-reference them with those found in earlier studies.

3.2.2 Qualitative Phase

In the second phase of data collection, qualitative interview data was gathered to give context to the numerical data collected in the first phase. Qualitative data collection is essential for accurately interpreting the beliefs and values that influence participants' numerical responses (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), often revealing insights that are not visible in quantitative data. Interview data provided a look into what industry experts, and the consumers shaping industry trends, think now. The inclusion of this data ensured that the ideas that emerged from the numerical data were relevant and had been properly interpreted in the context of larger industry trends. Instead of bringing experts together for a group panel, the researcher communicated

with each of the 15 experts individually by phone, email, or in person. The inclusion of phone and email communication options offered some experts greater flexibility and made it possible to gather advice and feedback from those who could not meet in person.

3.2.3 Integration

During the integration stage, the quantitative survey results and the qualitative advice gathered from experts via interviews were combined. Integration, as noted by Bryman (2006), offers researchers opportunities to triangulate their findings, identify complementary ideas, and expand their findings beyond a single approach, among other benefits. In this study, integration of both types of data primarily served the purpose of triangulation, by which the themes that emerged from the quantitative survey data could be corroborated, and thereby validated, by expert input before being applied to a framework. By using both numerical survey data and expert opinions, the researcher was additionally able to gain more nuanced insights into the respondents' perspectives on brand leadership. This feature of mixed methods research, especially when researching social phenomena, makes it a stronger approach than qualitative or quantitative data analysis alone (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The author's practical approach focuses on answering the research questions well and making sure the results are useful for real-world situations.

3.3 Research Design

Following the objectives described above, the research process was divided into three phases: 1) literature review and analysis, 2) data collection and analysis, and 3) developing a major brand leadership framework. The purpose of this thesis is to solve three research problems to produce a final framework for Chinese sports brand leadership. The research methods and design process related to this study are also discussed. The main content of this chapter is to explain the corresponding research process, including how the brand leadership measurement scale was determined, how data was collected, and how data analysis was conducted. Figure 29 below illustrates each stage in detail.

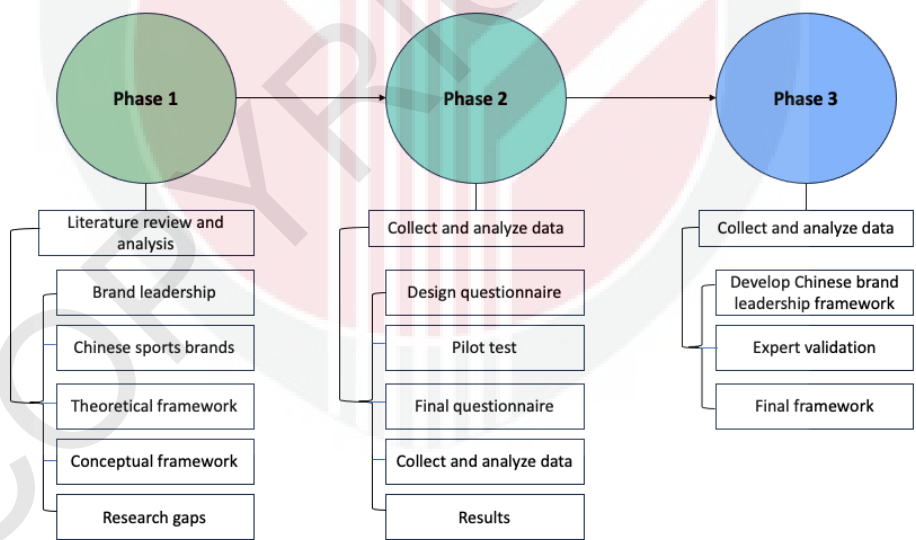


Figure 29 : Research Process
(Source: Author)

3.4 Phase 1

First, the first objective of this thesis is to define the elements and meaning of brand leadership. Through literature review, this thesis will understand the meaning of its brand leadership. The literature review consists of two sections: Chinese sports merchandise brands and brand leadership. First, the review of literature on Chinese sports merchandise brands is mainly to understand the history of Chinese sports merchandise brands. In the process of development, what were the problems faced by these brands? Understanding the background of Chinese brands is more conducive to further brand research and strategy development. Through the literature review of Chinese sports merchandise brands, we know that Chinese sports merchandise brands have been perceived as lagging behind leading international brands, lacking their own brand value and brand leadership. Secondly, in the literature review of brand leadership, the meaning and related elements of brand leadership are clearly defined. Using the literature review of brand leadership, this thesis takes the original definition and defines brand leadership as the brand's position and performance in the market, which reflects consumers' perception of a brand's relative uniqueness (Aaker, 1996). Finally, the relevant theoretical framework used in this study is based on Chang and Ko's (2014) brand leadership scale. Brand leadership is here measured through four perceptions, namely perceived quality, perceived value, perceived innovation, and perceived popularity.

3.5 Phase 2 (Research Instrument)

In the second stage, once the conceptual framework has been established, the main goal of this dissertation is to determine the cause of perceptions that Chinese sports merchandise brands have weak brand leadership. Phase 2 mainly addresses how the research tool (questionnaire) was designed and used to gather data for analysis. Specifically, this section describes how the questionnaire was designed to measure the brand leadership of Chinese sports merchandise brands. A questionnaire was selected as the study's data collection instrument for its ability to collect large amounts of data in a short period of time (the time it takes to fill out one questionnaire) and because it could be completed remotely. Moreover, questionnaires can collect both qualitative and quantitative data (Kelley-Quon, 2018), which together add important nuances to the research findings. These features made questionnaires the ideal data collection tool for this study, which seeks to understand the factors that most strongly influence perceptions of Chinese sports merchandise brands' brand leadership. Questionnaires were completed remotely and anonymously through an online form.

3.5.1 Questionnaire Structure

Questions were divided into three parts. The first part (four questions) collected respondents' background information: gender, age group, educational background, and years of work experience. This data provided insights into the relative educational and professional positions of the respondents, which impact their consumer behavior. The second part (seven

questions) collected data on basic attitudinal characteristics: favourite Western sports merchandise brand, favourite Chinese sports merchandise brand, type of sports merchandise bought most frequently, how often sports merchandise is bought, source of shopping decisions, most important factor when buying sports merchandise, and how sports merchandise is usually bought. The third part (20 questions) collected data on the five measurement items: perceptions of Chinese sports merchandise product quality, brand marketing, brand technology, brand image, and, as the control, brand leadership. These questions were based on Chang and Ko's (2014) brand leadership scale and included four items for each variable. This questionnaire design therefore measured factors that research has shown to influence the perceived brand leadership of Chinese sports merchandise brands in detail to address this study's research questions.

3.5.2 Item Design

3.5.2.1 Likert Scale

In Part 3 of the questionnaire, data were collected through Likert scales, which ideally have between 5 and 7 points of intensity for accuracy (Johns, 2010). Tanujaya and Prahmana (2024) indicated that the results of data collected on a scale would be most accurate if collected on a 5-point scale. Therefore, a 5-point Likert scale was used in this study to investigate respondents' perceptions about Chinese (and foreign) sports merchandise brands (1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neither agree or disagree, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree). The higher the score, the higher the degree of

agreement. As the questionnaire items were worded to describe Chinese sports merchandise brands negatively (e.g., 'Chinese sports merchandise products lack professionalism'), lower scores (e.g., 1= strongly disagree) indicated stronger perceptions of brand leadership and other measures in the minds of the respondents. Since all items were written negatively, no reverse coding was required during data analysis.

3.5.2.2 Brand Leadership Scale

Reflecting the study's focus on brand leadership, the questionnaire was adapted from Chang and Ko's (2014) brand leadership scale. Chang and Ko (2014) carried out several scale development procedures to arrive at their final model, which was validated based on the authors' multi-step evaluation process. They first generated the initial project through an extensive literature review and in-depth interviews then refined the project using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Finally, they assessed the jurisprudential validity using simultaneous equations. Since Chang and Ko (2014) were the first to develop and validate a measurement scale for brand leadership, and many subsequent studies have utilised or expanded upon it, this study used the same brand leadership measurement items while adapting the questions to the context of Chinese sports merchandise brands. The following are the brand leadership scale questions included in the present study's questionnaire:

Table 13 : Brand Leadership Scales

Compared with Western brands:				
1. The quality of Chinese sports merchandise brands is lower.				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5
2. The product innovation of Chinese sports merchandise brands is insufficient.				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5
3. Chinese sports merchandise brands are not industry trendsetters.				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5
4. Chinese sports merchandise brands are less popular among athletes.				
Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

(Source: Author based on Chang & Ko, 2014)

3.5.3 Questionnaire Pilot Tests

Pilot testing was performed in both Malaysia and China to establish the reliability of the survey instrument. In Malaysia, a total of 97 valid responses were collected through an online questionnaire in August 2023. Similarly, in China, the pilot test yielded 98 valid responses, with the online survey conducted in March 2023. For both pilot tests, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the questionnaire was above the acceptable benchmark of 0.7, confirming the internal consistency and reliability of the instrument.

3.5.4 Sample Population

This research mainly targeted relatively young consumers because the main consumers of sports merchandise are young people, particularly those aged 17-25 (Ko et al., 2012; Kim & Chao, 2019). Using the questionnaire, the survey method aimed to gain participation from college students and young people who have just entered the workforce. This age group was also most accessible to the researcher, given their proximity to a university, and showed the highest degree of enthusiasm for participating in research surveys. Older populations were also included in the sample (e.g., ages 26-35 and 36-35). Although the older cohorts were minorities in the overall sample, they were included due to the study's snowball sampling method.

While there is no consensus on the minimum number of participants needed to perform a valid confirmatory factor analysis because of its exploratory nature, researchers have recommended a minimum sample size based on a ratio of 5:1 participants-to-variables (Kyriazos, 2018). Considering that the study's questionnaire tested for five variables, a minimum sample of 25 participants would have been sufficient. Both pilot samples (Malaysia, n=97; China, n=98) and the actual test sample (n=761) exceeded this threshold. As explained in detail in Chapter 4, the sample sizes were also found to be suitable for the number of variables as tested using Kaiser's (1974) Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity.

3.5.5 Reporting and Findings

Using the above questionnaire and proposed data collection and analysis methods, the findings of this research will be described in Chapter 4. As each survey sample produced unique results, each will be described separately with corresponding data and figures.

3.6 Phase 3

Phase 3 is dedicated to the systematic analysis of the collected data aimed at identifying new key terms within the concept of brand leadership and developing a new framework. This involves designing a validation questionnaire and distributing it to relevant experts for constructive feedback. The responses are then analyzed, and the insights are incorporated into the framework. This iterative process of revision ensures that the framework is refined based on expert opinions, addressing any gaps. The final outcome of this phase is a comprehensive and refined framework for brand leadership, specifically tailored to the context of Chinese sports merchandise brands, representing a significant advancement in the field.

3.6.1 Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher plans to engage in a systematic collection and analysis of survey data to investigate the potential shortcomings in the domains of Product Quality, Brand Marketing, Brand Technology, and Brand Culture of Chinese sports merchandise brands. The intention is to use statistical analyses to validate whether these areas reflect gaps in consumer

perceptions and brand performance. Following data analysis, should the results confirm deficiencies in the aforementioned areas, the researcher will acknowledge these gaps. This confirmation will guide the subsequent phase of the research which involves developing strategies to address these specific areas of concern.

The researcher intends to embark on a systematic analysis of collected data to inform the development of a comprehensive strategic framework. This will be executed through the utilization of descriptive statistics, which will serve as the primary analytical tool. The rationale for this approach is grounded in the exploratory nature of the study, with the objective of crafting a framework rather than testing predefined hypotheses.

The methodology will involve collecting quantitative data on consumer perceptions and behaviors regarding Chinese sports merchandise brands. Once gathered, the data will be subject to descriptive analysis, with the researcher employing measures such as mean scores, frequency distributions, and standard deviations to capture the central tendencies and dispersions within the data.

This approach will facilitate the identification of key patterns and insights, which are essential to understanding consumer dynamics and market conditions. The researcher will then synthesize these insights to formulate strategic recommendations, ensuring that they are not only empirically driven but also practically implementable.

3.6.2 Formation of the Action Process and New Framework

In translating the results of the descriptive analysis into strategic components of the framework, the researcher will integrate the findings with theoretical constructs identified in the literature review. This will result in a strategy framework that is both data-informed and theoretically sound, providing a robust foundation for enhancing brand management practices within the Chinese sports merchandise sector.

3.7 Respondents for Expert Validation

One way to validate the study's proposed Chinese sports brand leadership framework is through expert validation. This approach, also known as expert elicitation, is used when evaluating phenomena that have not previously been studied or those that lack substantial existing data (Colson & Cooke, 2018). To meet the needs of this study, the interview subjects were limited to current professionals in the sportswear industry, with priority on those who worked for a Chinese sports brand. Based on these criteria, brand designers, brand managers, retail professionals, and brand researchers were invited to evaluate the framework and provide feedback on its effectiveness, feasibility, and relevance. The feedback from these experts was used to refine and improve the framework.

3.7.1 Brand Designers

Brand designers are responsible for developing the visual identity and design elements that communicate a brand's values and personality to its target

audience. Their expertise can provide valuable insights into the visual and design aspects of sports brand leadership, such as logo design, packaging, and advertising visuals. In addition, brand designers often work closely with marketing and product development teams, which can give them a broad perspective on the overall brand strategy and consumer behavior. As such, their input can help ensure that the Chinese sports brand leadership framework considers the importance of design and visual elements in creating a strong brand image and enhancing consumer perception and loyalty.

3.7.2 Brand Managers

As the primary guardians of a brand's identity, brand managers are responsible for developing and implementing brand strategies that promote the brand's values and image, and for ensuring that these strategies align with the company's overall business objectives. Brand managers have a deep understanding of their brand's target audience, their behavior, and their preferences, which can provide valuable insights into consumer perception and behavior. They also have practical experience in developing and implementing marketing and advertising campaigns that promote brand awareness and loyalty. As such, brand managers can provide valuable feedback on the practicality and relevance of the Chinese sports brand leadership framework, and their input can help ensure that the framework is aligned with the practical needs of sports merchandise brands in China. They can also provide insights into the challenges and opportunities facing sports merchandise brands in China, and how the framework can address these

challenges and leverage these opportunities.

3.7.3 Brand Researchers

Brand researchers have expertise in conducting market research studies to better understand consumer behavior and preferences, and how these factors relate to brand perception and loyalty. Brand researchers can provide valuable insights into the validity and reliability of the framework, based on their experience in developing and testing brand-related research studies. They can also offer insights into the current trends and changes in consumer behavior and preferences in the sports industry in China, and how these trends can impact the relevance and effectiveness of the framework. Additionally, brand researchers can provide feedback on the methodology used to develop the Chinese sports brand leadership framework, and suggest any modifications or enhancements needed to ensure its effectiveness and practicality in the sports industry in China.

3.7.4 Clothing Industry Personnel

Clothing industry personnel have practical experience in designing, producing, and marketing sports clothing, which can provide valuable insights into consumer behavior and preferences related to sports merchandise brands in China. Clothing industry personnel can provide feedback on the practicality and relevance of the framework from the perspective of their industry, and how the framework can be applied in designing and producing sports clothing that meets the needs and preferences of Chinese consumers. They can also provide insights into the challenges and opportunities facing the sports

clothing industry in China, and how the framework can address these challenges and leverage these opportunities. Moreover, clothing industry personnel can provide feedback on the brand identity and image of sports clothing brands in China, which can contribute to the development of the framework. They can also suggest modifications or enhancements to the framework that will ensure its relevance and effectiveness in the clothing industry in China.

3.8 Summary

The goal of the whole study is to develop a strategy to strengthen the perceived brand leadership of Chinese sports merchandise brands. The whole research process is divided into three stages. The first stage is to identify the elements of brand leadership. Through the literature of Chinese sports brand, brand leadership concept and brand leadership related research, the theoretical framework, conceptual framework and research gap of brand leadership are determined. The second stage is to determine the lack of brand leadership of Chinese sports merchandise brands. Through the first stage to determine the theoretical framework and research gap design related to the questionnaire survey. The designed questionnaire was pre-tested and modified to determine the final formal questionnaire. The final questionnaire was sent to the respondents, and after the respondents completed the questionnaire, the questionnaire was collected, and the data was analysed. Finally, the data was summarized and reported. The third stage is the goal of this study. SWOT analysis, as used in previous studies (Han et al., 2022), is carried out to analyse Chinese sports merchandise

brands and develop an effective strategy for the construction of brand leadership of Chinese sports merchandise brands. Finally, a brand leadership framework is formed according to the strategies proposed by SWOT analysis. When a preliminary framework is obtained, the framework will be reviewed and revised by the corresponding experts. Finally, the framework will be modified according to the experts' suggestions to obtain an effective brand leadership framework. The whole research process is shown in Figure 30, 31, and 32.



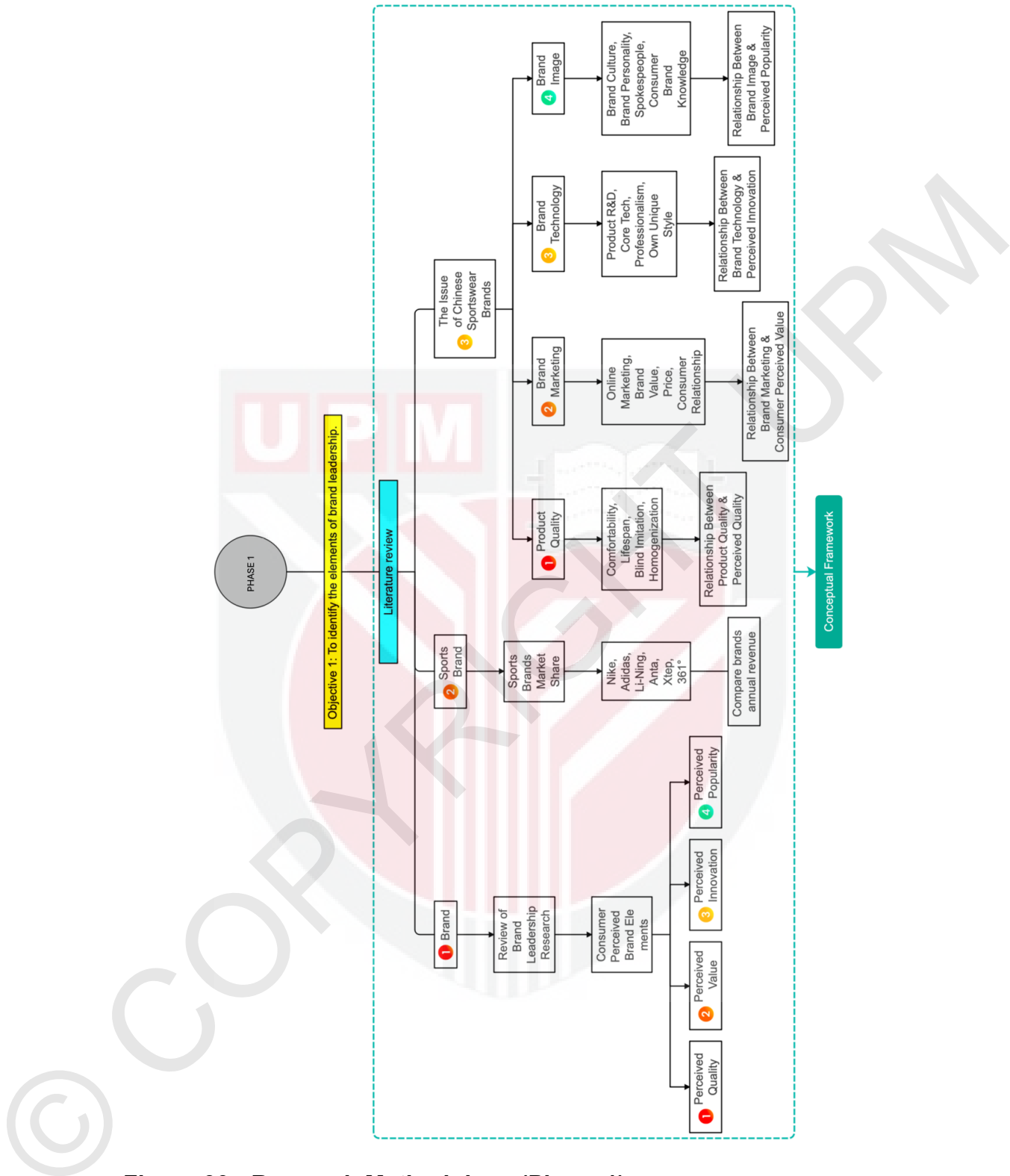


Figure 30 : Research Methodology (Phase 1)

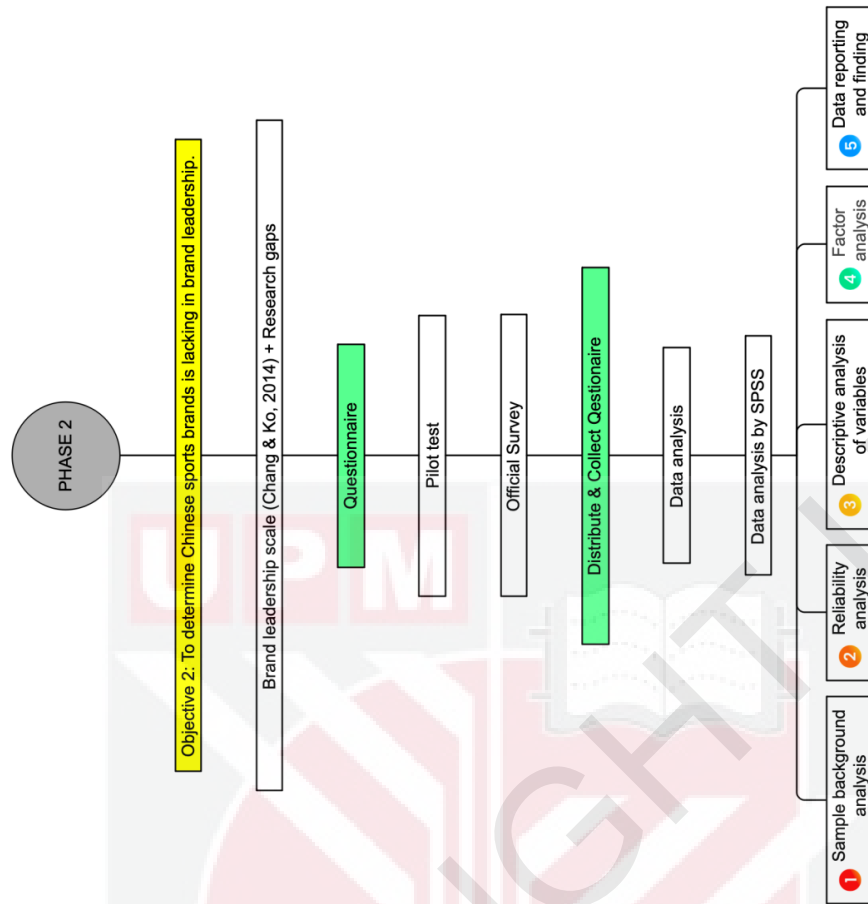


Figure 31 : Research Methodology (Phase 2)

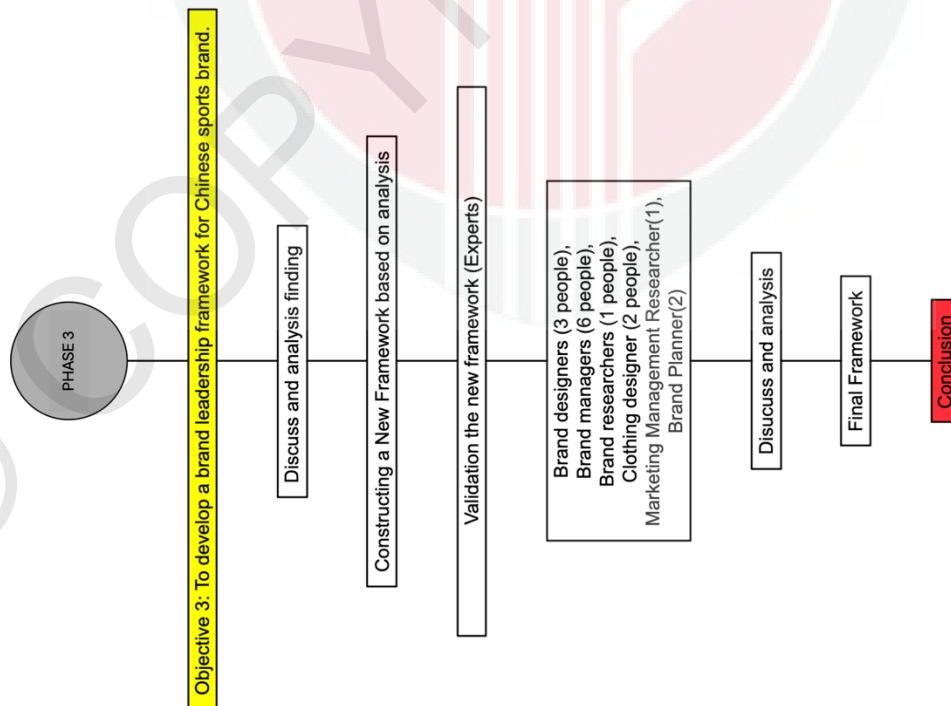


Figure 32 : Research Methodology (Phase 3)

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 presents the study's findings on how consumers in Malaysia and China perceive Chinese sportswear brands and discusses their relevance to the research questions and objectives of the thesis. First, descriptive statistics for the pilot samples and the actual test are shared with commentary. Then, the results of the brand leadership element factor analysis are provided and interpreted. The chapter ends with a summary of the differences in brand leadership perceptions and sportswear purchasing behaviours between consumers in Malaysia and in China.

4.2 Pilot Test in Malaysia

4.2.1 Mode of Survey

In August 2023, a pilot survey was conducted to assess the viability of the research instrument designed for this study. A total of 97 respondents from Malaysia successfully completed the survey through an online questionnaire distribution platform, ensuring ease of access and wider participation.

4.2.2 Participants and Procedure

The resulting sample comprised 52 female (53.6%) and 45 male (46.4%) respondents (Table 14). This gender distribution provides a balanced perspective for the pilot study. The online survey platform allowed for efficient

data collection and helped in maintaining a high level of engagement with the participants, which is reflected in the high completion rate of the pilot survey.

Table 14 : Malaysia Pilot Test Population

Male	45 (46.4%)
Female	52 (53.6%)
Total	97

(Source: Author)

4.2.3 Questionnaire

Data from the initial pilot testing was utilized to assess the questionnaire's validity and internal consistency. The internal consistency for each variable was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha in SPSS. The values obtained were all above the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory reliability. Specifically, Cronbach's alpha values were .855 for product quality, .907 for brand marketing, .780 for brand technology, .784 for brand image, and .800 for brand leadership. These results provide confidence in the reliability of the data collected (Table 15).

Table 15 : Reliability of Malaysia Pilot Sample

Dimensions	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Product quality	.855	4
Brand marketing	.907	4
Brand technology	.780	4
Brand image	.784	4
Brand leadership	.800	4

(Source: Author)

4.3 Pilot Test in China

4.3.1 Mode of Survey

In March 2023, a pilot survey was implemented to test the effectiveness of the research questionnaire in the Chinese context. A total of 98 individuals from China engaged with and completed the survey via an online questionnaire platform, chosen for its ease of access and potential to generate a broad range of participants.

4.3.2 Participants and Procedure

The breakdown of the demographic data revealed that the sample consisted of 51 male (52%) and 47 female (48%) respondents (Table 16). This balanced gender representation is beneficial for the pilot study as it offers a diverse set of perspectives. The use of an online distribution method for the survey facilitated a seamless and convenient participation process for the respondents. It contributed significantly to the high rate of fully completed questionnaires, underscoring the effectiveness of the online tool in capturing the participants' insights. The successful completion of the pilot survey by a balanced cohort of respondents is indicative of the research instrument's potential effectiveness and paves the way for subsequent phases of the study.

Table 16 : China Pilot Test Population

Male	51 (52%)
Female	47 (48%)
Total	98

(Source: Author)

4.3.3 Questionnaire

Upon analysing the responses from the second pilot group, the questionnaire's validity and internal consistency were evaluated. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was confirmed with Cronbach's alpha values consistently surpassing the accepted threshold of 0.70. Specifically, the values were .869 for product quality, .875 for brand marketing, .814 for brand technology, .798 for brand image, and .907 for brand leadership. These results emphasize the reliability and robustness of the questionnaire utilized in this study (Table 17).

Table 17 : Reliability of China Pilot Sample

Dimensions	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Product quality	.869	4
Brand marketing	.875	4
Brand technology	.814	4
Brand image	.798	4
Brand leadership	.907	4

(Source: Author)

4.4 Actual Test (China and Malaysia)

4.4.1 Mode of Survey

Building upon the successful online pilot studies, the actual test was launched in September 2023 across Malaysia and China. Utilizing online survey platforms ensured an efficient data collection process, while strict data validation checks guaranteed that only complete and well-considered responses were included.

4.4.2 Participants and Procedure

The Malaysian portion of the survey gathered 368 valid responses, whereas the Chinese survey accounted for 393 valid submissions, cumulating in a robust total of 761 valid samples for comprehensive analysis. This method of online data gathering not only expedited the process but also ensured consistency and reliability in comparison to the pilot studies. The synchronized execution of the online surveys across the two countries allowed for the accumulation of authentic and accurate insights from participants, mirroring current consumer perceptions and market conditions. The valuable dataset obtained from these valid surveys lays a strong foundation for the nuanced analysis that is central to this study.

4.4.3 Questionnaire

The actual test survey's reliability and efficacy were again methodically verified through the application of Cronbach's Alpha. Like the earlier pilots, the alpha scores of the actual test responses demonstrated that all surveyed dimensions reflected a high level of validity. More precisely, the dimension of "Product Quality" attained an alpha score of .865, reflecting a high degree of consistency among the 4 items it encompasses. "Brand Marketing" exhibited a slightly superior internal consistency with an alpha of .888, based on its 4 items. The dimension for "Brand Technology" recorded an alpha of .848, indicating reliable internal consistency, while "Brand Image" achieved a similar level of reliability with an alpha of .868. The dimension identified as "Brand Leadership" stood out with the highest alpha score of .881,

underpinning the strong alignment among its 4 items. These alpha scores affirm the survey's reliability, suggesting that the collected responses are both credible and valid for fulfilling the goals of the study (Table 18).

Table 18 : Reliability of Actual Test Sample

Dimensions	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Product quality	.865	4
Brand marketing	.888	4
Brand technology	.848	4
Brand image	.868	4
Brand leadership	.881	4

(Source: Author)

4.5 Demographic Results

4.5.1 Gender

The gender distribution of the respondents in Malaysia (n=368) was 52.4% male (n=193) and 47.6% female (n=175). Of the respondents in China (n=393), 49.4% (n=194) were male and 50.6% (n=199) were female (Table 19).

Table 19 : Gender Distribution

Q1Gender	Malaysia	China
Male	193(52.4%)	194(49.4%)
Female	175(47.6%)	199(50.6%)
Total	368	393

(Source: Author)

4.5.2 Age

By age, most participants in Malaysia (n=187, 50.8%) were young adults in the 20-25 age group. The second largest age group was aged 26-35 (n=132,

35.9%), followed by those aged 36-45 (n=33, 9%) and those under-age 20 (n=16, 4.3%). In contrast, the respondents in China were largely aged 20-25 (n=208, 52.9%), followed by those aged 26-35 (n=128, 32.6%). The smallest age groups were those under age 20 (n=32, 8.1%) and the 36-45 age bracket (n=25, 6.4%) (Table 20).

Table 20 : Age Distribution

Q2Age	Malaysia	China
Under 20	16(4.3%)	32(8.1%)
20-25	187(50.8%)	208(52.9%)
26-35	132(35.9%)	128(32.6%)
36-45	33(9%)	25(6.4%)
Total	368	393

(Source: Author)

4.5.3 Education Level

In terms of education, the Malaysia sample was primarily comprised of those with graduate degrees (n=142, 38.6%), followed by those with undergraduate degrees (n=126, 34.2%), postgraduate degree-holders (n=82, 22.3%), and those who had not completed university (n=18, 4.9%). Respondents from China included graduate degree-holders (n=138, 35.1%), undergraduate degree-holders (n=137, 34.9%), those who had not completed university (n=88, 22.4%), and those who held postgraduate qualifications (n=30, 7.6%) (Table 21).

Table 21 : Educational Level

Q3Educational_level	Malaysia	China
Below undergraduate	18(4.9%)	88(22.4%)
Undergraduate	126(34.2%)	137(34.9%)
Graduate	142(38.6%)	138(35.1%)
Postgraduate or above	82(22.3%)	30(7.6%)
Total	368	393

(Source: Author)

4.5.4 Work Experience

Finally, in terms of work experience, most of the respondents in Malaysia had 1-2 years of experience (n=142, 38.6%), followed by those with 3-4 years of work experience (n=127, 34.5%), suggesting that most were fairly recent graduates. 57 respondents (15.5%) had over five years of work experience and 42 respondents (11.4%) had less than one year of work experience. Most of the respondents in China, by contrast, had under one year of work experience (n=135, 34.3%). They were followed by those with 1-2 years of experience (n=112, 28.5%), those with more than five years of experience (n=106, 27%), and those with 3-4 years of experience (n=40, 10.2%) (Table 22).

Table 22 : Work Experience

Q4Work_experience	Malaysia	China
0 years	42(11.4%)	135(34.3)
1-2 years	142(38.6%)	112(28.5%)
3-4 years	127(34.5%)	40(10.2%)
5+ years	57(15.5%)	106(27%)
Total	368	393

(Source: Author)

4.5.5 Western Sports Brand Preference

In both Malaysia and China, Nike and Adidas are the top Western sports merchandise brands among consumers, with Nike being the most favoured. In Malaysia, Nike is preferred by 31.3% of respondents, while Adidas is chosen by 22.3%. Other brands such as Puma, New Balance, and Converse have a fair share of preference but are less popular than the leading two. Under Armour has the smallest percentage of preference in Malaysia at 6%. In China, Nike leads with a preference of 28.5%, closely followed by Adidas at 22.6%, and Puma at 18.1% (Table 23). The overall ranking for the six brands is shown in Table 24 below.

Table 23 : Favourite Western Sports Brand

Q5Favorite_Western_brand	Malaysia	China
Nike	115(31.3%)	112(28.5%)
Adidas	82(22.3%)	89(22.6%)
Puma	45(12.2%)	71(18.1%)
Under Armour	22(6%)	55(14%)
New Balance	49(13.3%)	43(10.9%)
Converse	55(14.9%)	23(5.9%)
Total	368	393

(Source: Author)

Table 24 : Western Brand Preference by Country

Rank	Malaysia	China
1	Nike(31.3%)	Nike(28.5%)
2	Adidas(22.3%)	Adidas(22.6%)
3	Converse(14.9)	Puma(18.1%)
4	New Balance(13.3%)	Under Armour(14%)
5	Puma(12.2%)	New Balance(10.9%)
6	Under Armour(6%)	Converse(5.9%)

(Source: Author)

4.5.6 Chinese Sports Brand Preference

The survey reveals distinct preferences for Chinese sports merchandise brands among respondents in Malaysia and China (Table 25).

Table 25 : Favourite Chinese Sports Brand

Q6Favorite Chinese brand	Malaysia	China
Anta	113(30.7%)	152(38.7%)
Li-Ning	137(37.2%)	99(25.2%)
Xtep	50(13.6%)	89(22.6%)
361°	68(18.5)	53(13.5%)
Total	368	393

(Source: Author)

In Malaysia, Li-Ning is the most popular brand, chosen by 37.2% of respondents, while Anta is the second choice at 30.7%. Conversely, in China, Anta tops the list with 38.7% of respondents' preference, followed by Li-Ning at 25.2%. Brands like Xtep and 361° show a varied level of support, with Xtep being more favoured in China than Malaysia. These differences underscore diverse brand perceptions and choices in the two countries. Table 26 shows the overall ranking for the four brands.

Table 26 : Chinese Brand Preference by Country

Rank	Malaysia	China
1	Li-Ning(37.2%)	Anta(38.7%)
2	Anta(30.7%)	Li-ning(25.2%)
3	361°(18.5)	Xtep(22.6%)
4	Xtep(13.6%)	361°(13.5%)

(Source: Author)

4.5.7 Sportswear Item Preference

The survey's findings regarding the types of sports merchandise products most frequently purchased by respondents in Malaysia and China reveal distinct consumer preferences in these markets (Table 27).

Table 27 : Sports Merchandise People Buy Most Often

Q7sports merchandise you most often buy	Malaysia	China
Sneakers	96(26.1%)	168(42.7%)
Shirts/Jacket	104(28.3%)	94(23.9%)
Pants	66(17.9%)	47(12.1%)
Backpack	31(8.4%)	37(9.4%)
Socks	56(15.2%)	28(7.1%)
Protective sports equipment	15(4.1%)	19(4.8%)
Total	368	393

(Source : Author)

Sneakers and shirts/jackets emerged as the top choices among consumers, indicating their prominent market appeal. In Malaysia, shirts/jackets are slightly more preferred, whereas in China, sneakers are the clear favourite. Other categories like pants, backpacks, and socks also register notable interest, though to a lesser extent. Protective sports equipment, while being the least popular category, still holds relevance for a specific consumer segment. This variation in product preferences underscores the importance of a diversified product strategy that addresses the needs and interests of different consumer groups within the sports merchandise market.

4.5.8 Sportswear Purchase Frequency

The data on how often consumers in Malaysia and China buy sports merchandise reveals insightful trends regarding purchasing habits (Table 28).

Table 28 : Sportswear Purchase Frequency

Q8How often you buy Merchandise	Malaysia	China
At least once a week	14(3.9%)	12(3.1%)
At least once a month	37(10.1%)	18(4.6%)
At least once every three months	171(46.4%)	195(49.6%)
Once every few years	146(39.6%)	168(42.7%)
Total	368	393

(Source: Author)

In both countries, the most common frequency is purchasing sports merchandise at least once every three months, with nearly half of the respondents in each country reporting this frequency. The next most common frequency is purchasing once every few years, indicating a segment of consumers who are less frequent purchasers. A smaller yet notable proportion of consumers make purchases at least once a month or more frequently. This range in purchase frequency demonstrates varied consumer engagement levels with sports merchandise and highlights the potential for driving more frequent purchases.

4.5.9 Purchase Decision Influences

The survey data indicates that social media is the predominant channel influencing sports merchandise purchase decisions, especially in China where a substantial 76.6% of respondents cite it as their main source. In Malaysia, while social media remains a key influencer (47.3%), friends also play a significant role (31.5%) in decision-making. Television and magazines have a lesser impact on purchase decisions in both countries, but they still contribute to the overall media mix (Table 29).

Table 29 : How Consumers Decide What to Buy

Q9How you usually decide what to buy	Malaysia	China
Television	49(13.3%)	9(2.3%)
Magazine	29(7.9%)	22(5.5%)
Social media	174(47.3%)	301(76.6%)
Friends	116(31.5%)	61(15.5%)
Total	368	393

(Source: Author)

4.5.10 Mode of Purchase

In Malaysia, more people (n=223, 60.6%) prefer to shop for sports merchandise in physical stores. Still, there's a notable number who like to shop online (n=145, 39.4%). Contrary to Malaysia, the majority in China (n=245, 62.3%) favour buying sports merchandise online. In-store shopping is less popular, with only 37.7% (n=148) preferring it (Table 30).

Table 30 : How Purchases are Made

Q11How these Merchandise are bought	Malaysia	China
In store	223(60.6%)	148(37.7%)
Online	145(39.4%)	39.4(62.3%)
Total	368	393

(Source: Author)

4.6 Data Analysis and Results I (RQ1)

Reflecting RQ1, the importance of the elements of consumer perceived value towards brand leadership were identified through confirmatory factor analysis of the 'factors affecting purchase willingness' (Q10). Responses about the four brand leadership scale elements of product quality (Q12-15), brand marketing (Q16-19), brand technology (Q20-23), and brand image (Q24-27) were likewise analysed. Brand leadership (Q28-31) was also evaluated as a

compound variable of the four elements in the analysis. Each item statement was answered by respondents from 1 to 5, with 1 denoting "Strongly Disagree" and 5 representing "Strongly Agree". A score of 5 suggests a more negative perception of the brand in that particular dimension, while a score closer to 1 indicates a more positive perception.

4.6.1 Factors Affecting Purchase Willingness

Consumers in Malaysia place the highest value on brand reputation when it comes to purchasing sports merchandise, with 31.5% (116 respondents) considering it the most important factor. Design and comfort are next in line, prioritized by 19% (70 respondents) and 20.4% (75 respondents) respectively. Price is a significant consideration for 16.3% (60 respondents), while quality and brand service attitude are less influential, cited by 8.7% (32 respondents) and 4.1% (15 respondents) respectively.

In China, on the other hand, brand reputation is the leading factor affecting the willingness to buy, highlighted by 37.9% (149 respondents). Comfort is important for 20.1% (79 respondents), and price for 12.7% (50 respondents). Design draws the attention of 17.3% (68 respondents), whereas quality and brand service attitude influence 10.2% (40 respondents) and 1.8% (7 respondents) respectively (Table 31).

Table 31 : Factors Affecting Willingness to Buy

Q10Factor affects willingness to buy	Malaysia	China
Price	60(16.3%)	50(12.7%)
Brand reputation	116(31.5%)	149(37.9%)
Design	70(19.5%)	68(17.3%)
Quality	32(8.2%)	40(10.2%)
Comfort	75(20.4%)	79(20.1%)
Brand service attitude	15(4.1%)	7(1.8%)
Total	368	393

(Source : Author)

4.6.2 Product Quality

The mean scores show that both Malaysian and Chinese customers think Chinese merchandise could be better in several ways (Figure 33). They are not very satisfied with the comfort, longevity, originality or variety of Chinese sportswear products. Customers in Malaysia are more unhappy about these points than customers in China, as shown by their higher mean scores. This suggests that these customers might be looking for merchandise that feels better to use, lasts longer, and is more original and diverse.



Figure 33 : Product Quality
(Source: Author)

4.6.3 Brand Marketing

The comparative analysis of the mean values from the survey reveals distinct attitudes towards Chinese merchandise between Malaysian and Chinese consumers (Figure 34). Malaysian respondents have expressed notably more negative views on all four aspects of the merchandise industry – from the lack of innovative online marketing to the insufficient promotion of brand value, the rationality of pricing, and the strength of consumer relationships. Specifically, the concern over online marketing models and consumer relationships with brands seems to be more pronounced among Malaysian consumers, highlighted by mean scores exceeding the midpoint of the scale. In contrast, Chinese consumers are relatively less critical, with their scores consistently lower, suggesting a more favourable or perhaps tolerant view of the domestic merchandise's market strategies and practices.



Figure 34 : Brand Marketing
(Source: Author)

4.6.4 Brand Technology

The numbers show that people in Malaysia and China both think Chinese products could do better in creating new things, having special technology, being professional, and having a style that is different from others (Figure 35). People in Malaysia seem more worried about these problems than people in China. This means that people buying things in these countries might not see Chinese products as very original or high-quality. This could be because buyers in Malaysia and China look for different things when they choose what to buy.

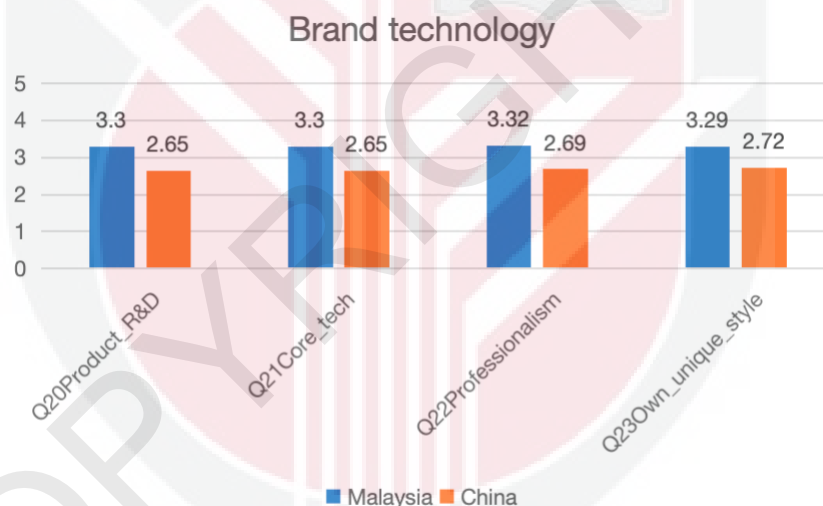


Figure 35 : Brand Technology
(Source: Author)

4.6.5 Brand Image

Both Malaysian and Chinese consumers agree, to varying extents, that these brands need to improve in areas such as consumer brand knowledge, spokesperson selection, brand personality, and brand culture (Figure 36). The scores from Malaysia tend to be higher, showing a more critical stance,

while scores from China are lower, reflecting a less negative but still cautious perception of their domestic brands. These insights underscore the need for Chinese merchandise brands to strengthen their branding strategies to enhance consumer knowledge and develop a unique brand personality and culture.

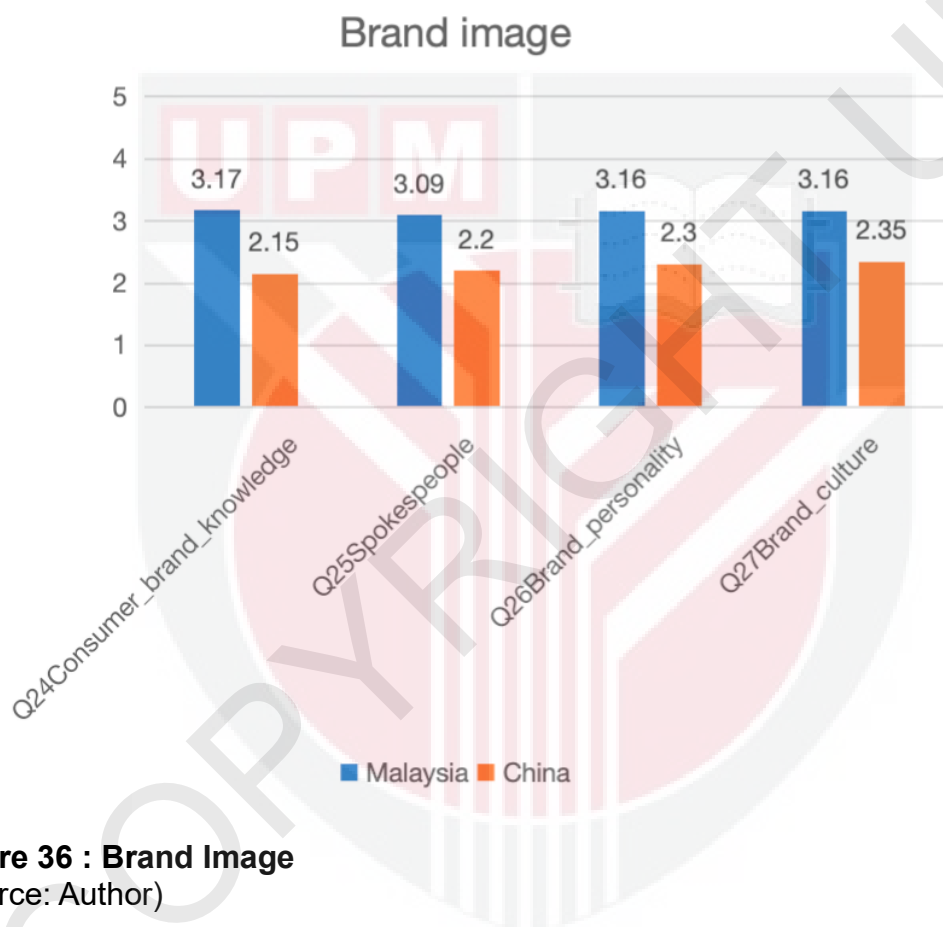


Figure 36 : Brand Image
(Source: Author)

4.6.6 Brand Leadership

The data on questions Q28 to Q31 shows that both Malaysian and Chinese customers think Chinese merchandise brands are not as good as Western brands in several ways. The scores suggest that these customers agree, to some extent, that Chinese brands have lower quality, less new ideas, are not

leading the industry, and are not as popular with athletes. Both groups of customers see these issues, but Malaysians gave lower ratings overall compared to Chinese customers (Figure 37).

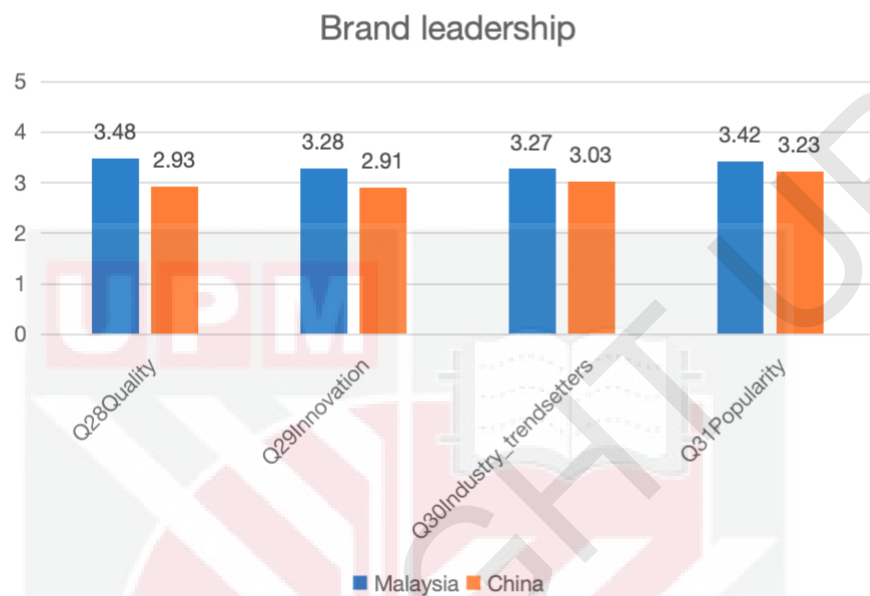


Figure 37 : Brand Leadership
(Source: Author)

4.7 Data Analysis and Result II (RQ2)

Related to RQ2, the elements of consumer perceived value towards brand leadership for Chinese sportswear brands were identified through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of all the survey items.

4.7.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

According to Hair et al. (2010), factor analysis is a powerful technique used in the social science to uncover relationships between observed variables. In addition to being the primary research method used in earlier brand leadership studies (Chang & Ko, 2014), confirmatory factor analysis is used in

the present study to empirically identify which elements of brand leadership are considered most valuable to consumers of Chinese sports merchandise.

Prior to conducting the CFA, the adequacy of the sample size and the appropriateness of the factor analysis for the data set were assessed using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The KMO measure, which gauges the sampling adequacy, resulted in a value of .885. This high value suggests that the sample size is suitable for the analysis and that the patterns of correlations are relatively compact, allowing for a reliable factor analysis. In conjunction with the KMO, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was conducted and returned an approximate Chi-Square value of 12714.903 with 120 degrees of freedom, which was significant at the .000 level. This significance indicates that the correlation matrix is not an identity matrix and that the factors are suitable for structure detection, justifying the use of confirmatory factor analysis on the dataset. These tests together demonstrate the data's suitability for structure detection through principal component analysis (Table 32).

Table 32 : KMO and Bartlett's Test Results

KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.885
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	12714.903
	df	120
	Sig.	.000

(Source: Author)

In conducting factor analysis, the initial component matrix often presents an unclear picture of the data structure due to the complex nature of the

interrelationships among variables. To enhance clarity and interpretability, a rotation is applied to the initial solution. The Varimax rotation, a form of orthogonal rotation, is commonly used for this purpose. It simplifies the loadings by making high loadings higher and low loadings lower, hence maximizing the variance of the squared loadings of a factor across all the variables. This process aids in achieving a more interpretable and meaningful factor solution by clearly differentiating which variables load onto which factors. The rotated component matrix, therefore, provides a refined view where the constructs are more distinct and the factor structure is easier to interpret. In this study, this matrix was utilized to draw more precise and valid conclusions about the underlying patterns within the data.

In the confirmatory factor analysis of brand-related variables (Q12 to Q27), four principal components were extracted (Table 33).

Table 33 : Rotated Component

Rotated Component Matrix^a

	Component		
	1	2	3
Q23Own_unique_style	.902		
Q21Core_tech	.900		
Q22Professionalism	.896		
Q20Product_RD	.873		
Q13Lifespan	.814		
Q12Comfortability	.784		
Q19Consumer_relations hip		.903	
Q17Brand_value		.894	
Q18Price		.872	
Q26Brand_personality		.814	
Q27Brand_culture		.807	
Q14Blind_imitation			.825
Q25Spokespeople			.820
Q15Homogenization			.804
Q24Consumer_brand_k nowledge			.799
Q16Online_marketing_ models			.700

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

(Source: Author)

In the rotated component matrix provided, most items exhibited loadings well above 0.7, signifying an extremely strong relationship with their corresponding factors.

4.7.2 Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Component 1 (Product Quality & Performance): 'Own Unique Style' (Q23) exhibits the highest loading of .902, indicating a significant consumer emphasis on the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the brand. 'Core Tech' (Q21) and 'Professionalism' (Q22), with loadings of .900 and .896 respectively, along with 'Product R&D' (Q20) at .873, underscore the importance attributed

to the brand's technological advancements and professional approach. 'Lifespan' (Q13) and 'Comfortability' (Q12) with loadings of .814 and .784, suggest that product durability and comfort are also integral to consumer perceptions of product quality.

Component 1 Finding: The high loadings for this component reveal that consumers perceive product quality in terms of technological innovation, professional execution, unique style, longevity, and comfort, all of which are critical for the brand's competitive edge in product performance.

Component 2 (Brand Intelligent): 'Consumer Relationships' (Q19) takes precedence with a loading of .903, emphasizing the significance of strong consumer-brand interactions. 'Brand Value' (Q17) closely follows at .894, denoting the importance of brand value in consumer consideration. The aspect of 'Price' (Q18) with a loading of .872, indicates that price positioning is closely tied to the perceived brand value and consumer-brand relationship dynamics.

Component 2 Finding: These findings highlight the interconnectedness of price, value, and consumer relationships in shaping the brand's market strategy, signifying that strategic pricing aligned with brand value and sustained customer relationships are vital to brand success.

Component 3 (Consumer & Marketing Strategy): 'Blind Imitation' (Q14) has a prominent loading of .825, suggesting consumer concern over brand originality. The loadings for 'Homogenization' (Q15) at .820, 'Spokespeople'

(Q25) at .804, and 'Online Marketing Models' (Q16) at .700, along with 'Consumer Brand Knowledge' (Q24) at .799, reflect the critical aspects of brand image as perceived by consumers, including the uniqueness of marketing approaches and the role of brand ambassadors.

Component 3 Finding: The analysis suggests that consumers place a high value on the distinctiveness of brand image and marketing strategies. It underlines the need for innovative marketing, informed spokesperson selection, and avoiding homogeneity to build a strong, recognizable brand in the competitive sports merchandise market.

4.7.3 Component Plot in Rotated Space

After conducting the factor analysis and interpreting the Rotated Component Matrix, a visual representation of the data can be further explored through the Component Plot in Rotated Space. This plot serves as a graphical elucidation of the factors, illustrating how each variable aligns with the identified components and providing a clearer understanding of their contributions to brand leadership (Figure 38).

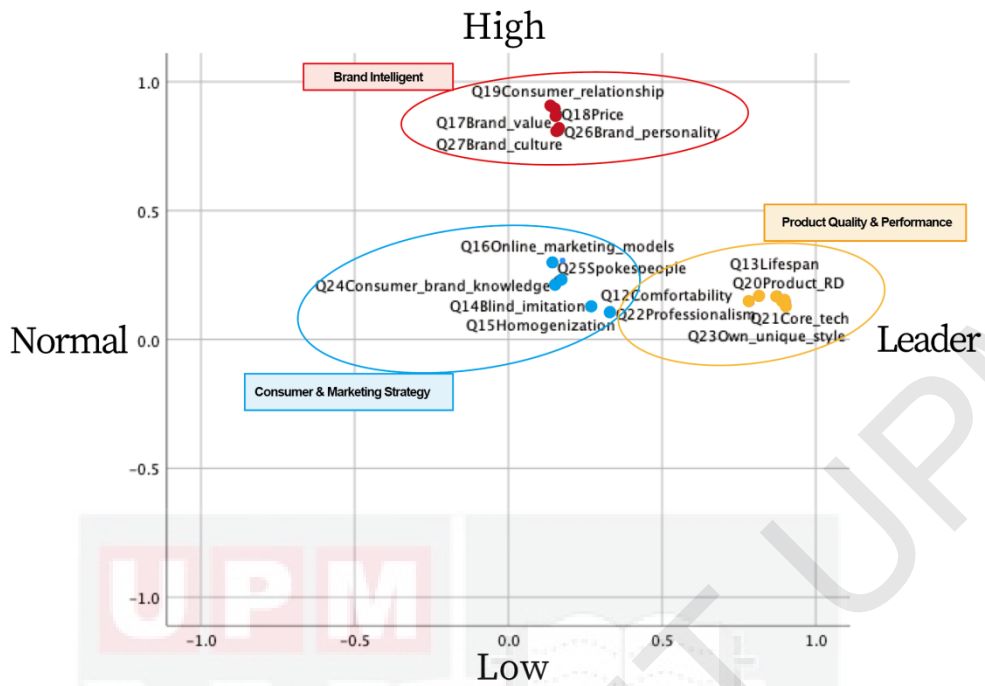


Figure 38 : Component Plot in Rotated Space from Factor Analysis
(Source: Author)

4.7.4 Factor Analysis of Brand Attributes

The factor analysis, conducted to identify underlying dimensions of consumer perceptions regarding Chinese sports merchandise brands, yielded a three-component solution. The components were interpreted based on the pattern of loadings from the Rotated Component Matrix and visually corroborated by the Component Plot in Rotated Space.

Component 1: Product Quality and Performance

The first component is characterized by attributes that define the functional and technical aspects of the brand's offerings. High loadings on 'Own Unique Style' (Q23), 'Core Tech' (Q21), and 'Professionalism' (Q22) reflect the consumers' emphasis on distinctive product design and innovative technological application. Similarly, 'Product R&D' (Q20) and 'Lifespan' (Q13)

align with this component, emphasizing the importance of sustained product development and durability in consumer evaluation. The inclusion of 'Comfortability' (Q12) within this component further indicates that comfort is integral to the perceived quality of the products. Collectively, this component underscores the market's expectation for high-quality, innovative, and reliable products as a marker of brand leadership.

Component 2: Brand Intelligence

The second component encompasses attributes related to the brand's value proposition and its relationship with consumers. Dominant loadings on 'Consumer Relationship' (Q19) and 'Brand Value' (Q17) suggest that the cultivation of strong consumer-brand connections and the communication of intrinsic brand value are paramount. The significant representation of 'Price' (Q18) alongside 'Brand Personality' (Q26) and 'Brand Culture' (Q27) within this space implies a consumer-perceived interdependence between pricing strategies, brand identity, and cultural values. This interplay highlights the strategic importance of harmonizing price with perceived value and the cultivation of a unique brand culture to foster a loyal consumer base.

Component 3: Consumer & Marketing Strategy

The third component is indicative of the brand's market presence and engagement strategies. Attributes such as 'Online Marketing Models' (Q16), 'Spokespeople' (Q25), and 'Consumer Brand Knowledge' (Q24) are prominent, reflecting the necessity of a robust online presence and the careful selection of brand representatives to enhance consumer knowledge and

engagement. Additionally, the component's association with 'Blind Imitation' (Q14) and 'Homogenization' (Q15) underscores the challenges brands face in maintaining originality and distinctiveness in a competitive landscape. The centrality of these attributes in the component plot denotes the critical role of innovative marketing and brand differentiation in establishing and maintaining brand leadership.

4.7.5 Hierarchical Cluster Analysis

The hierarchical cluster analysis conducted in this study illuminated distinct groupings that reveal key dimensions of brand leadership within the Chinese sports merchandise industry. The analysis yielded three primary clusters, each suggesting a coherent theme within the brand leadership construct (Figure 39).

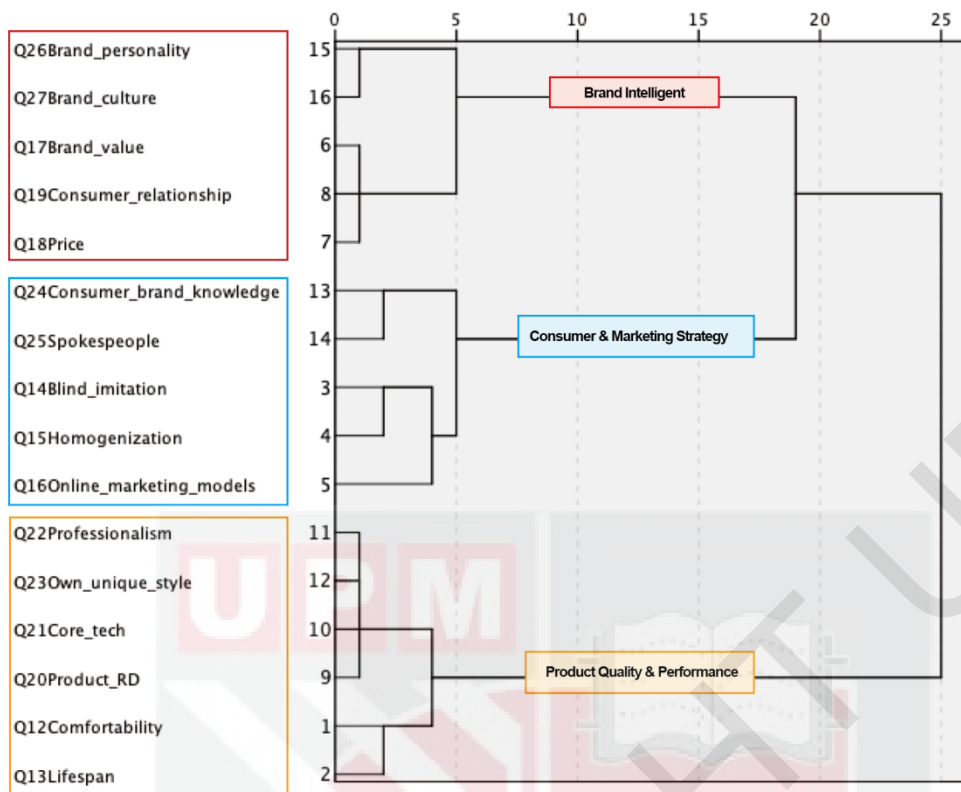


Figure 39 : Hierarchical Clustering Analysis (Ward Method)
(Source: Author)

The first cluster, represented at the apex of the dendrogram, includes 'Brand Personality' (Q26), 'Brand Culture' (Q27), 'Brand Value' (Q17), and 'Consumer Relationship' (Q19). This grouping, termed "Brand Intelligence," underscores the significance of cultivating a strong brand identity and consumer rapport as integral to perceived value and pricing strategy. It suggests that the brands' leadership is profoundly influenced by their ability to articulate a compelling brand narrative and foster meaningful connections with the consumer base.

The second cluster, found in the middle of the dendrogram, encompasses 'Consumer Brand Knowledge' (Q24), 'Spokespeople' (Q25), 'Blind Imitation' (Q14), and 'Homogenization' (Q15), along with 'Online Marketing Models' (Q16).

(Q16). These attributes are subsumed under "Consumer & Marketing Strategy." This cluster reflects the operational aspects of brand management, highlighting the importance of informed and distinctive marketing practices, the strategic selection of brand representatives, and the avoidance of market saturation through differentiation.

The third cluster, positioned at the base, incorporates 'Professionalism' (Q22), 'Own Unique Style' (Q23), 'Core Tech' (Q21), 'Product R&D' (Q20), 'Comfortability' (Q12), and 'Lifespan' (Q13). It is labeled "Product Quality & Performance." This cluster accentuates the product-centric dimensions that consumers associate with technical prowess and experiential quality. It is indicative of a consumer-centric view where product longevity, comfort, and the brand's commitment to innovation and technology are essential for maintaining a competitive advantage and achieving brand leadership.

4.8 Summary

Chapter 4 presented the findings of the analysis, including descriptive statistics for the two sampled populations in China and Malaysia. Statistical analysis results for each group's survey responses were shared for RQ1 and RQ2, along with the findings of the confirmatory factor analysis. Three components of brand leadership were identified within the variables as relevant for discussions of the challenges faced by Chinese sportswear brands.

CHAPTER 5

DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW FRAMEWORK

5.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 brings together the findings from the previous chapter and proposes a new brand leadership framework for Chinese sports merchandise brands. First, the separate macro- and micro-level components of the draft original framework are presented. Then, the draft framework is synthesized with feedback from industry experts to produce the final framework and its associated actionable items.

5.2 Discussion of Findings

5.3 Importance of Consumer Perceived Value Elements Toward Brand Leadership (RQ1)

The strategic formation synthesized from the study's findings across various consumer demographics and perceptions culminates into a robust set of recommendations for Chinese sports merchandise brands. To resonate with the balanced gender distribution, gender-inclusive marketing and product development are emphasized. Youth-centric marketing, digital engagement, and trend-driven product innovation align with the younger consumer demographics, while strategies for educated consumers advocate for sophisticated marketing messages and content marketing that educates and adds value.

Diverse work experiences across the surveyed markets inform strategies that engage consumers at different career stages with appropriate product offerings and marketing tactics. Preferences for Western brands like Nike and Adidas inspire strategies to benchmark and differentiate, while preferences for Chinese brands inform localized marketing and understanding consumer choices to inform product and marketing strategies. The product categories most frequently purchased—sneakers and shirts/jackets—direct strategies towards focusing on these items with innovations and quality enhancements. Varied purchase frequencies lead to strategies encouraging regular purchases through loyalty programs and personalized marketing.

The influences on purchase decisions pivot strategies towards leveraging dominant channels like social media, with a multi-channel approach for a comprehensive market reach. Factors affecting purchase willingness direct strategies to enhance brand reputation, balance price and value, and focus on quality and customer service.

The preference for online shopping in China versus in-store in Malaysia guides strategies towards optimizing respective shopping experiences and developing an integrated omnichannel strategy for a seamless consumer journey. The insights into product quality and brand marketing inform strategies for quality initiatives, online marketing revamps, and consumer relationship enhancements.

Finally, the need for stronger brand image development and brand leadership qualities shapes strategies focusing on consumer brand knowledge expansion, strategic spokesperson selection, brand personality clarification, and sustainability initiatives. The follow are tailored suggestions to address each of the four elements, or challenge areas, of consumer perceived value toward brand leadership.

5.3.1 Brand Image

In response to the findings indicating a need for stronger brand image development, the researcher proposes a strategy aimed at deepening brand knowledge, carefully selecting spokespeople, clarifying brand personality, and cultivating a unique brand culture.

Expanding Consumer Brand Knowledge: The significant gap in consumer brand knowledge, particularly in Malaysia, suggests the need for an educational marketing approach. Strategies should include informational campaigns that highlight the brand's history, values, and product details, alongside efforts to increase visibility and accessibility of this information through various marketing channels.

Strategically Choosing Spokespeople: To address the concern about spokespeople, Chinese sports brands should be more strategic in their selection process. This could involve choosing ambassadors who embody the brand's values and have a strong connection with the target audience. These figures should be relatable and have a positive influence that aligns

with the brand's image.

Clarifying Brand Personality: With moderate agreement on the lack of clear brand personality, a concerted effort should be made to define and communicate the brand's character and values. This may involve storytelling through marketing materials, aligning the product design and user experience with the brand's personality, and ensuring consistency across all consumer touchpoints.

Establishing a Distinct Brand Culture: The perception of a lack of brand culture can be improved by creating and promoting a unique brand narrative that reflects the brand's ethos and heritage. Engaging with consumers through cultural initiatives, sponsoring culturally relevant events, and celebrating local traditions can help reinforce a distinct brand culture.

5.3.2 Brand Technology

Considering the survey's indication of opportunities for enhancement in product innovation and brand differentiation, the researcher has outlined the following strategic initiatives aimed at fortifying the technological sophistication and design uniqueness of Chinese sports merchandise brands.

Bolstering Product R&D: The moderate agreement on the need for more product R&D in Malaysia suggests that Chinese sports brands should invest in their research and development capabilities. Enhancing R&D efforts could lead to innovative products that better meet consumer needs and differentiate

the brand in the market. Showcasing these R&D initiatives can also help improve public perception.

Developing Core Technologies: With both markets recognizing the lack of unique core technology, a strategy to develop proprietary technologies can provide Chinese sports brands with a competitive edge. This may include patented materials, design innovations, or new manufacturing processes that lead to superior product performance.

Elevating Professionalism: The perception of lacking professionalism points towards the need for improved quality standards and customer service. Professional training for staff, adherence to high product quality standards, and a commitment to customer satisfaction should be communicated clearly to consumers through branding efforts.

Creating a Distinct Brand Style: To address the perception that Chinese sports brands lack a unique style, a clear strategy would be to create distinctive design languages that resonate with consumers. This could involve collaborating with designers, utilizing cultural elements unique to China, or fostering a specific aesthetic that can become synonymous with the brand.

5.3.3 Brand Marketing

In light of the survey insights on the perceived shortcomings in online marketing, brand value promotion, and customer relations, the researcher proposes the following strategies to enhance the brand's market engagement

and consumer satisfaction

Revamping Online Marketing Models: Given the moderate concern over online marketing models in Malaysia, a strategy to revamp and differentiate these models is essential. This could involve leveraging digital analytics to create more targeted and personalized marketing campaigns, utilizing emerging social media platforms, and experimenting with interactive formats such as augmented reality showcases.

Strengthening Brand Value Communication: The perception that Chinese sports merchandise brands do not sufficiently promote their brand value can be addressed by launching campaigns that focus on the unique attributes of the brand, such as heritage, quality, and commitment to customer satisfaction. These campaigns should aim to tell a compelling brand story that resonates with both Malaysian and Chinese audiences.

Adjusting Pricing Strategies: The concern over pricing strategies, particularly in Malaysia, suggests that consumers may perceive prices as lacking justification. Brands can implement a transparent pricing strategy that clearly communicates the value provided at each price point. Special attention should be given to the Chinese market to maintain the perception of favorable pricing.

Enhancing Consumer Relationship Management: To address the moderate agreement on the lack of strong consumer relationships, brands should invest in customer relationship management systems that allow for more effective

communication and engagement with consumers. Personalized after-sales service, loyalty programs, and active engagement on social media platforms can foster stronger relationships with consumers.

5.3.4 Product Quality

From these insights into consumer perceptions of product quality, the following strategies have been formulated to address the identified areas for improvement and to enhance the overall value proposition of Chinese sports merchandise.

Elevating Comfort and Design: Malaysian consumers' moderate agreement on the lack of comfort in Chinese sports merchandise calls for a strategic focus on enhancing product comfort. This can involve using advanced materials, ergonomic designs, and consumer feedback to improve the comfort level of sports apparel and equipment. Meanwhile, the lower scores from Chinese consumers suggest the need for targeted communication that highlights any existing comfort features or improvements.

Increasing Durability: The moderate agreement on the short lifespan of these products from both Malaysian and Chinese consumers indicates a strategic opportunity to emphasize durability. This can be addressed by investing in quality materials, enhancing manufacturing processes, and rigorous testing.

Marketing strategies should then communicate the improvements in product longevity and reliability.

Fostering Originality and Innovation: The perception of blind imitation and homogenization suggests that consumers are seeking more original and innovative products. Chinese brands can focus on developing unique product features, proprietary technologies, and distinctive designs to differentiate from Western competitors. It's crucial to spotlight these elements in branding and advertising campaigns to shift consumer perceptions towards recognizing the innovation within Chinese sports merchandise.

Cultivating Brand Distinctiveness: To combat the perception of homogenization, it's important to cultivate a distinct brand identity for Chinese sports merchandise. This can be achieved by creating and promoting a strong brand narrative that reflects the unique values and characteristics of the brand, as well as engaging marketing campaigns that tell a compelling brand story.

5.3.5 Brand Leadership

In response to the perceptual gaps identified in brand leadership qualities, the researcher proposes a comprehensive strategy to elevate the standing of Chinese sports merchandise brands in terms of quality, innovation, industry leadership, and popularity.

Quality Enhancement Initiatives: Implement a 'Quality First' initiative, emphasizing the use of premium materials and advanced manufacturing techniques. Establish collaborations with material science experts to introduce products with enhanced durability and performance features.

Publicize these quality enhancements through a 'Behind the Scenes' marketing campaign that educates consumers on the rigorous process each product undergoes before hitting the shelves.

Innovation Incubation Programs: Create an 'Innovation Lab' dedicated to sports merchandise, where new technologies and design methodologies can be explored. Partner with universities, tech startups, and design think tanks to co-develop the next generation of sports merchandise. Showcase these innovative products through interactive online platforms and pop-up experiences in major cities.

Trendsetting Through Sustainability: Launch a sustainability challenge, inviting consumers and the community to participate in creating eco-friendly sports products. Use this platform to introduce products made from recycled materials or designed with a lower environmental impact. Celebrate these initiatives through storytelling in social media campaigns, focusing on the brand's commitment to setting new industry standards.

Boosting Brand Presence with Athlete Endorsements: Strategically partner with up-and-coming athletes who resonate with the brand's ethos and have a strong social media presence. Develop a series of documentary-style videos that showcase these athletes' journey and their choice of the brand's merchandise, reinforcing the brand's popularity and aspirational value.

Community Engagement and Experience: Organize and sponsor local sports events that align with the brand's identity, encouraging community participation and engagement. Use these events to provide immersive brand experiences, where consumers can test products in a real-world sports setting, thus fostering a stronger connection between the consumer and the brand.

5.3.6 Elements of Consumer Perceived Value toward Brand Leadership (RQ2)

Confirmatory factor analysis identified three distinct groups of factors that influenced consumer perceptions of brand leadership for Chinese sportswear brands: "Product Quality & Performance," "Brand Image & Marketing Strategy," and "Pricing Positioning & Consumer Relationship." Each of these main dimensions includes specific brand elements:

Perceived Quality: This aspect is marked by elements such as comfort, lifespan, consumer feedback, and product safety.

Perceived Value: In this area, the elements are digital presence, brand equity, pricing strategy, and consumer engagement.

Perceived Innovation: This aspect is described by elements like product R&D, core technology, professionalism, and distinctive features.

Perceived Popularity: This includes elements like consumer brand knowledge, celebrity collaborations, brand personality, and organizational values.

Moreover, three categories of variables associated with these four elements were identified through factor analysis, namely brand intelligence, consumer and marketing strategy, and product quality and performance. Together, the four elements and three categories contributed to the development of the framework presented later in this chapter.

5.3.7 Summary (RQ1 and RQ2)

The study's confirmatory factor analysis and hierarchical cluster analysis affirmed the relevance of the 4Ps of brand leadership that were earlier identified by Chang and Ko (2014). Interestingly, in response to RQ1, context does seem to matter since Malaysian consumers of sportswear indicated that all four elements of brand leadership were more important to them than their Chinese counterparts. Statistical analysis showed, in response to RQ2, that the 4Ps are the primary elements of consumer perceived value towards brand leadership in the context of Chinese sportswear brands, but that the variables associated with brand leadership could also be further categorized into three brand attitude components.

5.4 New Framework Development (RQ3)

The "Chinese Sports Merchandise Brand Leadership Framework" is a blend of ideas from past studies, unique features of Chinese sports brands found through data analysis, and a strategic action plan framework.

5.4.1 The Development Process

The process of establishing a new brand leadership framework took place in two stages. First, the 'macro-view' framework was conceptualized based on the four elements of perceived value, perceived popularity, perceived quality, and perceived innovation that are recognized as vital components of brand leadership. Second, a 'micro-view' framework with actionable steps that correspond to each of the four elements was developed.

5.4.1.1 Macro-View Framework

The macro-view framework can also be considered an overarching structure that encapsulates the broader strategic elements identified in the research. This framework serves as a comprehensive blueprint, guiding the synthesis of macro-level components that are crucial for the delineation of strategic direction and policy formulation within the industry. The researcher conceptualizes the interconnection of strategic initiatives as a cohesive circle, where each component not only stands on its own merit but also complements and enhances the others, forming a unified model of brand development. This model is envisioned as a circular flow where "Value Boosting," "Merchandise Quality Building," "Crafting Innovation," and "Brand Image Shaping" are positioned as contiguous segments that collectively form a loop, symbolizing a continuous, dynamic process of improvement and brand evolution. The inner circle represents the core strategic initiatives, while the outer circle indicates the key relationships between these strategies (Figure 40).

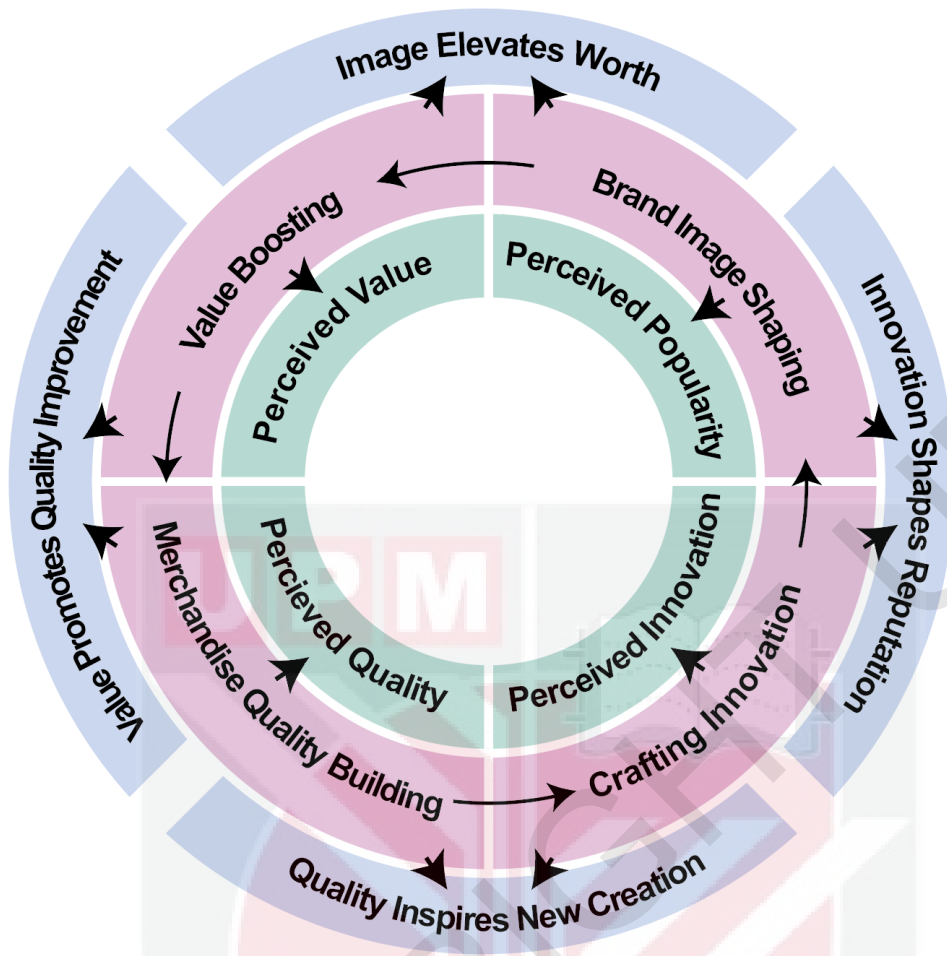


Figure 40 : Macro-view Framework
(Source: Author)

In this model, the entry point into the circle is not fixed, as the circular nature of the framework allows for the process to begin at any strategic point, depending on the brand's current focus or need. However, for the purpose of explanation, one might begin with "Value Boosting," where the emphasis is on enhancing the value proposition of the brand to the consumer. This leads seamlessly into "Merchandise Quality Building," where the focus on value translates into concerted efforts to improve product quality.

The enhancement of product quality naturally progresses to "Crafting Innovation," where the established high standards of quality inspire and necessitate ongoing innovation, ensuring the brand remains at the cutting-edge of its industry. This innovation then significantly contributes to "Brand Image Shaping," where the brand's reputation for quality and innovation elevates its overall image in the marketplace.

Finally, a strong brand image circles back to "Value Boosting," as the enhanced perception reinforces the brand's value in the eyes of consumers, creating a self-sustaining cycle of growth and brand strength. The interplay of these strategies creates a holistic framework where each element is both a destination and a starting point, reflecting the iterative nature of brand building.

"Value Promotes Quality Improvement": This phrase encapsulates the dynamic where the enhancement of value directly influences and encourages the elevation of product quality.

"Quality Inspires New Creation": Reflects the notion that a solid foundation in product quality fuels the drive for innovation and the development of new, cutting-edge products.

"Innovation Shapes Reputation": Signifies that innovative products and practices are instrumental in shaping and enhancing the brand's reputation in the market.

"Image Elevates Worth": Suggests that a well-crafted brand image elevates the perceived value of the brand's offerings, reinforcing the value proposition in the eyes of consumers.

The outer circle simultaneously influences four elements of perceived brand leadership: Perceived Value, Perceived Popularity, Perceived Quality, and Perceived Innovation.

5.4.1.2 Micro-View Framework

The formulation of brand leadership within the Chinese sports merchandise sector can be envisioned as a strategic journey beginning at the entrance of 'Product Quality & Performance,' advancing through 'Consumer & Marketing Strategy,' and culminating in 'Brand Intelligence'. This progression is visually depicted in the circular framework, with the most inner green circle representing the ultimate formation of brand leadership. These factors have been integrated as new keywords into the framework presented below, which, in the context of this study, is referred to as the detailed micro-component of specific actions, namely the micro-view framework (Figure 41).

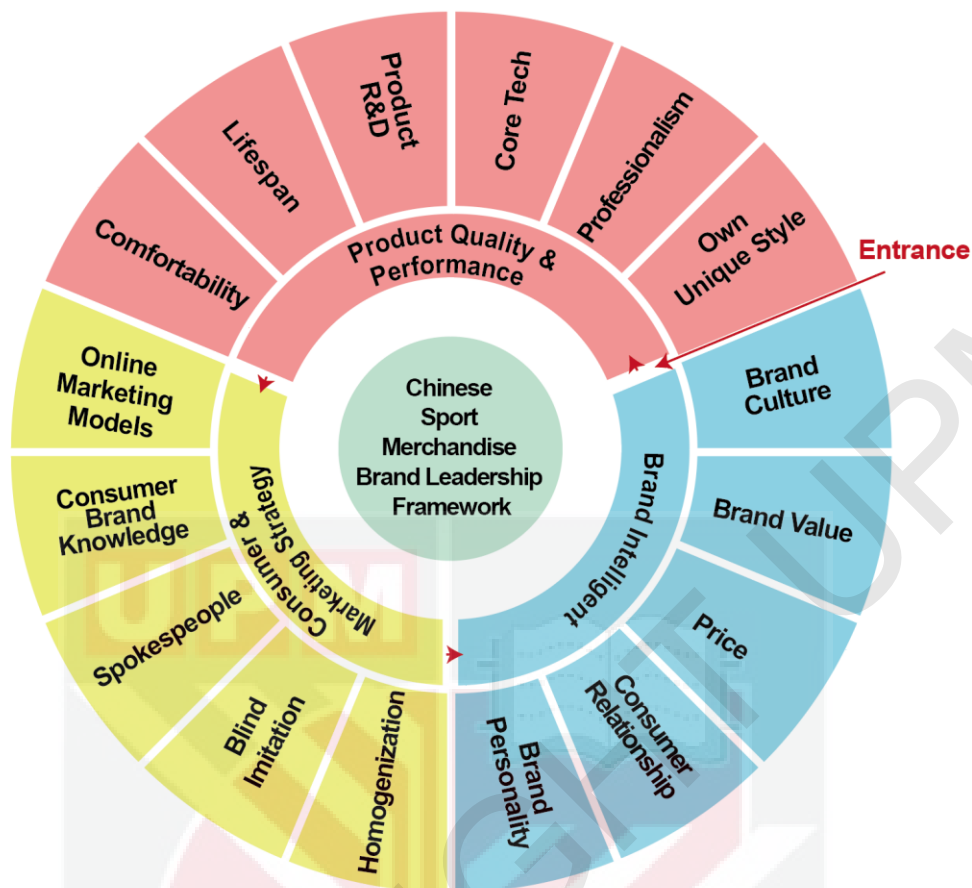


Figure 41 : Micro-View Framework
(Source: Author)

Product Quality & Performance is the entry point of the journey, where foundational attributes such as 'Comfortability', 'Lifespan', 'Product R&D', 'Core Tech', 'Professionalism', and 'Own Unique Style' are paramount. These elements signify the brand's commitment to excellence, innovation, and distinctiveness in product offerings, laying the groundwork for competitive advantage and market entry.

As the journey progresses to the Consumer & Marketing Strategy, the focus shifts to 'Online Marketing Models', 'Consumer Brand Knowledge', 'Spokespeople', 'Blind Imitation', and 'Homogenization'. This segment reflects

the brand's endeavors to craft a resonant identity and coherent marketing narrative, which are vital for connecting with consumers and establishing a memorable market presence. It is in this phase that the brand actively shapes its public persona and crafts the narrative that will resonate with consumers.

Transitioning to Brand Intelligent, the brand solidifies its market strategy by aligning 'Brand Value', 'Price', 'Consumer Relationship', 'Brand Personality', and 'Brand Culture'. Here, the emphasis is on strategically pricing products to reflect their inherent value while nurturing strong, enduring relationships with consumers. This area underscores the importance of transparent communication and value proposition refinement to forge a robust bond with the market and secure brand loyalty.

The outermost circle details the specific aspects of each central component, illuminating the multifaceted approach required for effective brand leadership. At the core of this model is the ultimate goal of the Chinese Sports Merchandise Brand Leadership Framework, where all these strategic elements converge. This comprehensive framework not only guides the brand towards leadership but also ensures that each step of the journey is interlinked, reinforcing the brand's position and propelling it towards market leadership.

5.4.1.3 Full Framework Prototype

When the micro-view and macro-view frameworks are combined into a full framework, the relationships between theoretical concepts and actionable

steps can be seen. The layers can be read from the inner circle, where the main conceptual goals exist, outward to the layers that describe detailed strategies and relationships (Figure 42).

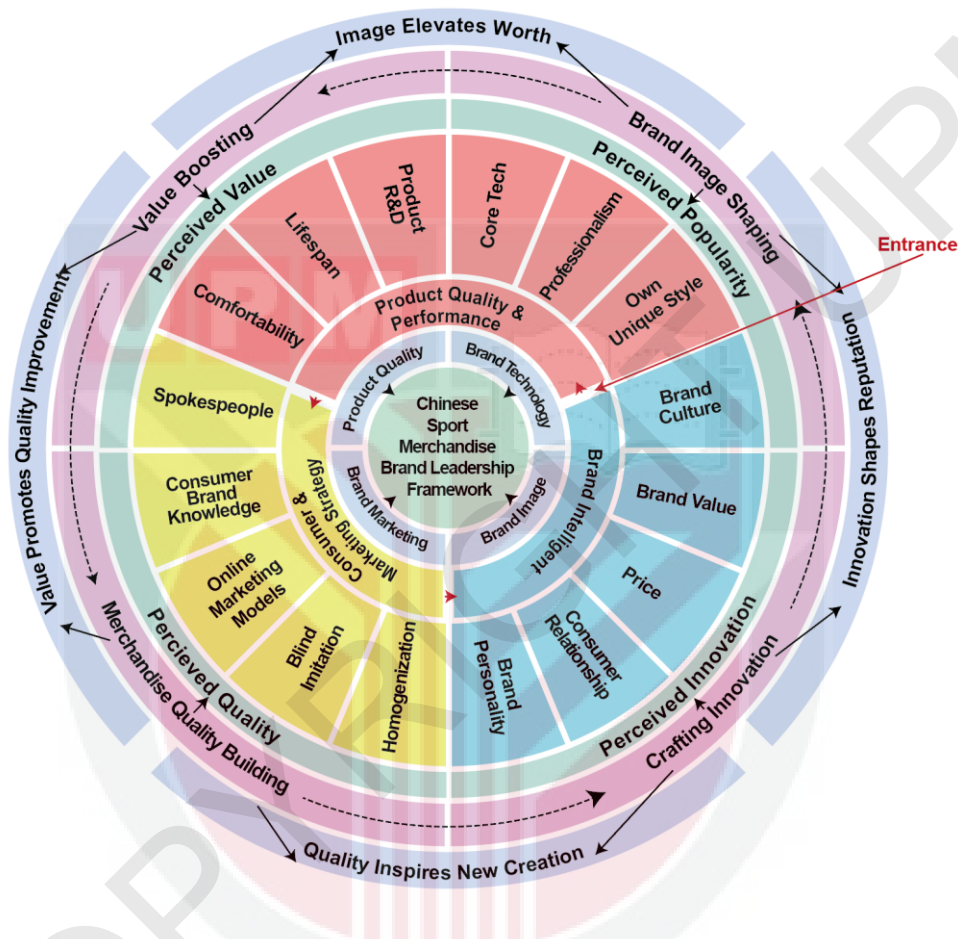


Figure 42 : New Brand Leadership Framework for Chinese Sports Merchandise Brands
(Source: Author)

5.4.2 Executing the Framework

Confirmatory factor analysis of the collected data supported the formulation of targeted strategies aimed at enhancing the leadership of Chinese sports merchandise brands. The key words and associated actionable strategies distilled from the analysis are presented in Table 34 below:

Table 34 : Strategy

Action	Strategy
Value Boosting	Assessment Transparent Communication Fulfilling Commitments Value Proposition Refinement Digital Engagement Consumer Interaction
Merchandise Quality Building	Feedback Mechanism Consistent Message Delivery Quality Control Processes Durability Testing Warranty and Guarantees
Crafting Innovation	Innovation Audit Intellectual Property Protection Market Communication Continuous R&D
Brand Image Shaping	Brand Identity Workshop Campaign Creation Consistent Message Delivery Visual Identity Consistency Influencer Partnerships

(Source: Author)

Building upon the strategies identified in the previous chapter, this research further categorizes these strategies into four key strategic pillars, each corresponding to different perceived brand elements. These pillars are pivotal in understanding and shaping the brand leadership framework and are enumerated as follows:

Value Boosting: This strategic pillar is aligned with the perceived value element of the brand. It encompasses initiatives that enhance the customers' perceived worth of the brand's products, such as competitive pricing, value communication, and customer rewards programs.

Merchandise Quality Building: Corresponding to the perceived quality element, this facet focuses on ensuring the excellence of the product in terms

of durability, comfort, and overall performance. It includes quality control systems, material innovation, and customer feedback integration to elevate the standard of the merchandise.

Crafting Innovation: Directly linked to the perceived innovation element, this pillar involves the continuous development of new and unique product features, adoption of advanced technologies, and fostering a culture of creativity within the brand.

Brand Image Shaping: This pillar corresponds to the perceived popularity element of brand leadership. Brand image shaping includes actions that support a strong and consistent brand image that resonates with consumers and increases brand recognition, such as strategic marketing efforts, brand storytelling, and visual consistency to build a memorable and appealing brand identity. By shaping a positive brand image, companies can enhance perceived popularity, making their brand more familiar, liked, and trusted by consumers, which in turn drives loyalty and purchase intent.

5.5 Validation of the New Framework

To ensure the solidity and relevance of the "Chinese Sports Merchandise Brand Leadership Framework," a detailed validation process was conducted. A group of experts was gathered, each possessing a minimum of five years of experience in their respective areas. This group comprised store managers from prominent brands such as Li Ning (2 individuals), Anta (2 individuals), and JD (2 individuals), in addition to brand visual designers (3 individuals),

apparel designers (2 individuals), brand strategists (2 individuals), a renowned brand research academic, and a marketing management expert. A specialized questionnaire was administered to elicit their detailed insights on the framework. Subsequently, their valuable feedback was collected and meticulously examined. Following multiple reviews of their suggestions, the final version of the "Chinese Sports Brand Leadership Framework" was refined to align with both industry best practices and academic standards.

In this stage of the study, the experts were furnished with a comprehensive description of the study's original "Chinese Sports Merchandise Brand Leadership Framework," accompanied by illustrative diagrams and the underlying theoretical foundations of the research. Respondents then answered a detailed questionnaire that fielded responses about various dimensions of the framework. This included inquiries about its completeness, logical coherence, practicality, and potential areas of improvement or omissions they might identify.

Feedback was meticulously gathered through a multi-modal approach, encompassing face-to-face offline visits, online email surveys, and telephonic interviews. This diversified method ensured a holistic collection of insights from the experts.

5.5.1 Data Analysis and Results

The experts' feedback underwent rigorous content analysis to discern commonly agreed-upon viewpoints among the experts. Additionally, critical

observations and recommendations they proposed concerning the framework were thoroughly examined and integrated.

5.5.2 Results of Expert Elicitation

The experts from diverse professional backgrounds largely validate the framework's holistic approach to building brand leadership. While the feedback is positive, they also offer constructive suggestions. The consensus indicates that the framework successfully captures the multifaceted nature of brand building and provides actionable strategies, which could effectively lead to enhanced brand leadership in the Chinese sports merchandise market. The table below represents a consolidated summary of expert feedback on the Chinese Sports Merchandise Brand Leadership Framework:

Table 35 : Expert Feedback

Experts	Feedback
Li-Ning Store Manager 1	"The framework's focus on consumer perception resonates with our store's approach. Specifically, the 'Value Boosting' strategy could directly influence our sales techniques."
Li-Ning Store Manager 2	"I appreciate the actionable strategies, especially 'Merchandise Quality Building,' which we can implement to enhance in-store customer experience."
Anta Store Manager 1	"The inclusion of 'Crafting Innovation' within the framework aligns with Anta's direction towards technological sportswear."
Anta Store Manager 2	Consumer feedback is vital and should be reflected within the framework to underscore its role in continuous improvement and alignment with customer expectations."
JD Store Manager 1	"Digital engagement strategies from the framework could be pivotal for our e-commerce platform's growth and customer retention."
JD Store Manager 2	"Highlighting 'Employee Training' is necessary to showcase its importance in empowering staff and ensuring consistent delivery of the brand promise."
Brand Visual Designer 1	"Consistency in visual identity is key, and the framework's 'Brand Image Shaping' process could guide our branding campaigns."
Brand Visual Designer 2	"Integrating this framework with current digital trends could enhance our brand's appeal, especially among younger consumers."
Brand Visual Designer 3	"From a brand visual design perspective, there's a desire to see this aspect being significantly represented in the strategy to ensure visual coherence and brand recognition."
Apparel Designer 1	"Integrating 'Innovation Audit' into the strategy is crucial as it will facilitate regular assessment and refinement of the innovation process, keeping the brand at the forefront of market trends."
Apparel Designer 2	"Protecting intellectual property is a critical element that should be emphasized within the framework to safeguard innovation and maintain competitive advantage."
Brand Strategist 1	"It is advised that the specific actions of each stage in the process be displayed within the framework as keywords to enhance clarity and focus."
Brand Strategist 2	"This framework could aid in our long-term brand positioning and help establish a clearer brand narrative in the market."
Brand Research Scholar 1	"The strategy should incorporate 'Cross-Departmental Collaboration' to leverage diverse expertise within the organization and foster a more integrated approach to brand leadership."
Marketing Management Expert 1	"Incorporating a segmentation strategy within the 'Value Boosting' and 'Brand Image Shaping' processes could yield even more nuanced results. The inclusion of 'Risk Response' and 'Crisis Management' in the strategic layer is recommended to address potential challenges proactively and maintain brand integrity."

(Source: Author)

5.5.3 Finalized Framework

Drawing on the insightful evaluations provided by the panel of experts from diverse professional backgrounds, the framework has undergone a series of refinements. These adjustments were meticulously incorporated to ensure that the framework not only aligns with industry standards but also embraces a forward-thinking approach to brand leadership. The recommendations have been instrumental in enhancing the framework's robustness, making it more comprehensive and practical for implementation. As a result of this collaborative expertise, the final framework embodies a strategic blueprint that is poised to elevate Chinese sports merchandise brands to new heights of market leadership and consumer recognition (Figure 43).

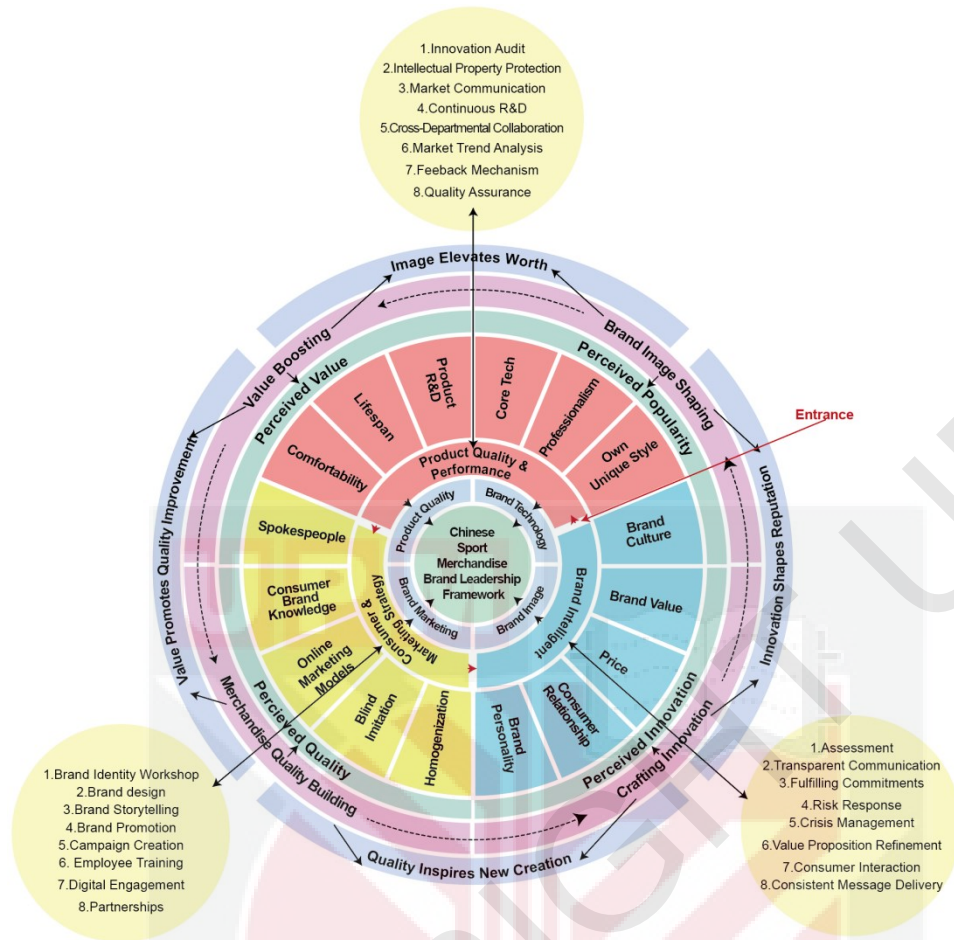


Figure 43 : The Finalized Framework
(Source: Author)

The finalized framework encapsulates a more holistic view of the action processes, integrating risk management, crisis response, cross-departmental collaboration, and other key elements that were highlighted by experts. Additional actionable steps based on expert input include:

Product Quality and Performance:

1. *Innovation Audit: Routinely evaluate and refine product development processes to foster continuous innovation.*
2. *Intellectual Property Protection: Secure proprietary technologies and designs to maintain competitive advantage.*

3. *Market Communication: Effectively communicate the superior quality and innovation of products to the market.*
4. *Continuous R&D: Invest in ongoing research and development to ensure products meet high standards of performance and design.*
5. *Cross-Departmental Collaboration: Encourage synergy between departments to enhance product quality through varied expertise.*
6. *Market Trend Analysis: Analyze market trends to adapt and predict changes, aligning product development with consumer expectations.*
7. *Feedback Mechanism: Establish channels for customer feedback to directly inform quality improvements.*
8. *Quality Assurance: Implement rigorous quality control measures to ensure product reliability and customer satisfaction.*

Consumer and Marketing Strategy:

1. *Brand Identity Workshop: Conduct workshops to define and refine the brand's identity in line with market positioning.*
2. *Brand Design: Develop visually compelling design elements that resonate with the brand's identity and values.*
3. *Brand Storytelling: Craft narratives that articulate the brand's heritage, values, and vision to engage consumers emotionally.*
4. *Brand Promotion: Execute targeted promotion campaigns to enhance brand visibility and image.*
5. *Campaign Creation: Design marketing campaigns that effectively communicate the brand's message and value proposition.*
6. *Employee Training: Train employees to be brand ambassadors who consistently represent the brand's image and message.*

7. *Digital Engagement: Leverage digital platforms to engage with customers and build a strong online brand presence.*
8. *Partnerships: Form strategic partnerships that amplify the brand's reach and bolster its image.*

Brand Intelligence:

1. *Assessment: Continuously evaluate pricing strategies to ensure they reflect the brand's value and market position.*
2. *Transparent Communication: Maintain open communication with consumers regarding pricing policies and brand value.*
3. *Fulfilling Commitments: Honor promises to consumers, enhancing trust and loyalty.*
4. *Risk Response: Develop strategies to quickly respond to market risks that may affect pricing and consumer perception.*
5. *Crisis Management: Implement effective crisis management protocols to protect brand reputation in pricing disputes.*
6. *Value Proposition Refinement: Regularly refine the brand's value proposition to ensure it aligns with consumer expectations and pricing.*
7. *Consumer Interaction: Engage with consumers to understand their perceptions of value and respond to their needs.*
8. *Consistent Message Delivery: Ensure that all communications reinforce the brand's value proposition and pricing strategy.*

Each of these actions is tailored to address specific aspects of the overarching domains, working in concert to drive improvements that lead to the holistic enhancement of the Chinese sports merchandise brand's leadership. By focusing on these critical operational areas, the brand not only solves immediate challenges but also positions itself for long-term success

and market leadership.

5.6 Summary

Chapter 5 discussed the relevance of the study's findings to RQ1 and RQ2, as well as presented the study's new brand leadership framework that was developed in relation to RQ3. This section also discussed feedback that was collected from a group of 15 industry experts, and explained how the resulting finalized framework and its actionable steps could be used by brand managers. The most significant modification to the original draft framework was the addition of action items based on the experts' identified areas of concern: brand intelligence, consumer and marketing strategy, and product quality and performance.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 summarizes the study's objectives and main findings for each of the three research questions and states the study's expected contributions to the literature. Recommendations for managers of Chinese sportswear brands are provided in this chapter alongside the study's novel brand leadership framework. Finally, potential future research directions are presented.

6.2 Conclusion

The study affirmed the importance of the brand leadership elements identified in previous studies while drawing new observations about consumer perceptions of brand leadership in Chinese sportswear companies.

The first objective, evaluating the importance of consumer perceived value elements for Chinese sports merchandise products toward brand leadership, was addressed by surveying sportswear consumers in China and Malaysia.

Survey results could be summarized into four distinct challenge areas:

1. Despite improvements in product quality, Chinese sports merchandise brands are often viewed as falling short in aspects like lifespan, safety, and responsiveness to consumer feedback. This view may stem from past product recalls or unfavourable comparisons to global brands.

2. Chinese brands typically struggle to establish a robust digital presence and build brand equity that matches international rivals. Even though they might offer competitive pricing, the perceived value is often diminished by concerns about quality or the absence of distinct selling points.
3. Although there have been advances in product R&D and the use of core technologies, Chinese sports merchandise brands are sometimes seen as imitators rather than innovators. This perception is partly due to a focus on imitation rather than innovation in certain market segments.
4. While many Chinese sports merchandise brands have engaged in successful collaborations with celebrities and influencers, they still need to cultivate a unique brand personality and reinforce organizational values that truly resonate with their target audience.

The second objective, identifying the elements of consumer perceived value for Chinese sports merchandise products toward brand leadership, produced four overarching elements and three brand attitude components. Consistent with Chang and Ko's (2014) brand leadership scale, this study found perceived quality, perceived value, perceived innovation, and perceived popularity to be equally relevant to the present context. Within these four areas, brand intelligence, consumer and marketing strategy, and product quality and performance were also found to be important concepts in the evaluation of Chinese sports merchandise brand leadership.

The third objective of developing a new framework that integrates the elements of consumer perceived value for Chinese sports merchandise

products toward brand leadership was satisfied by the Finalized Framework. Combining the macro-view framework elements with micro-view actionable items and the input from experts who reviewed a draft framework resulted in a fully detailed roadmap that is ready for sportswear brand managers to apply to their product development processes.

6.3 Contribution to the Body of Knowledge

The study's significance lies in its contributions to sports brand management and branding research. Key elements affecting consumer perceptions of sports brands in China were explored, offering a framework for brand leadership in the sports industry. This framework can influence marketing strategies for Chinese companies aiming to expand in the sports merchandise market, both domestically and internationally, and aid policymakers and stakeholders in supporting the sports industry's growth in China.

This research offers insights and practical recommendations for sports brands aiming to bolster their brand leadership in China. Through an in-depth analysis of consumer-perceived brand elements, it provides a clear understanding of factors driving brand perceptions and customer loyalty among Chinese sports consumers. This knowledge can help brands develop targeted marketing and branding strategies for increased brand awareness, loyalty, and sales.

Beyond sports branding, the study's findings and methodology can be applied to other industries and markets. The examination of consumer-perceived brand elements and their impact on brand leadership can offer valuable insights for marketers and branding professionals across various sectors. Academically, it also deepens researchers' understanding of brand leadership in China's sports sector, filling knowledge gaps and bringing new ideas about brand tactics in rising markets. The methods used can help future studies in related fields, supporting reliable and repeatable research. It shows the critical roles of trust, innovation, and identity in developing a brand and sets Chinese sports brands on a path to global recognition and success.

Additionally, the focus on Chinese sports brands adds to the discussion of branding across cultures, highlighting the unique aspects of the Chinese market. Practically, brands can apply the study's findings to improve their branding efforts. This aligns them with their audience and helps them stand out in a crowded market. The study gives practical tips on building consumer trust, key for long-lasting brand success.

It stresses the need for innovation driven by value, helping brands match their products and marketing with what customers want, ensuring ongoing growth and relevance in the market. Also, the insights on creating a unique identity offer brands ways to build a strong market presence, boosting loyalty and support.

On a larger scale, as Chinese sports brands strengthen their market position through effective brand leadership, they can drive economic growth. This comes from creating jobs, increasing exports, and attracting foreign investments. Moreover, well-known Chinese brands can promote Chinese culture worldwide, encouraging exchanges between cultures.

6.3.1 Research Novelty

The study on brand leadership for Chinese sports brands brings together several new elements that set it apart from other works in this area. First, while many studies have looked at brand leadership in different areas, this one is one of the first to focus on the Chinese sports merchandise market. This focus gives a special look at this rapidly growing market with its own cultural features. Second, the study mixes strategies for branding across cultures. It looks at how global branding ideas work with the unique thoughts and feelings of Chinese consumers. This mix gives a deeper understanding of how global brands can adapt and succeed in the Chinese market, and the other way around.

Another new thing is the detailed brand leadership framework the study introduces. Instead of just looking at separate branding parts, it gives a full strategy for building a brand. This strategy covers many parts of branding, from building trust to coming up with new ideas. Lastly, the study adds a lot to the knowledge about branding in markets that are just starting to grow. By focusing on China, one of the fastest growing and evolving markets in the world, the study gives insights that can be used in other new markets. This

adds to the worldwide conversation on branding.

Most importantly, the new brand leadership framework proposed here (Figure 44) can be used as a reference or guideline for product developers and designers to encourage more consistency in the design and development of new products.

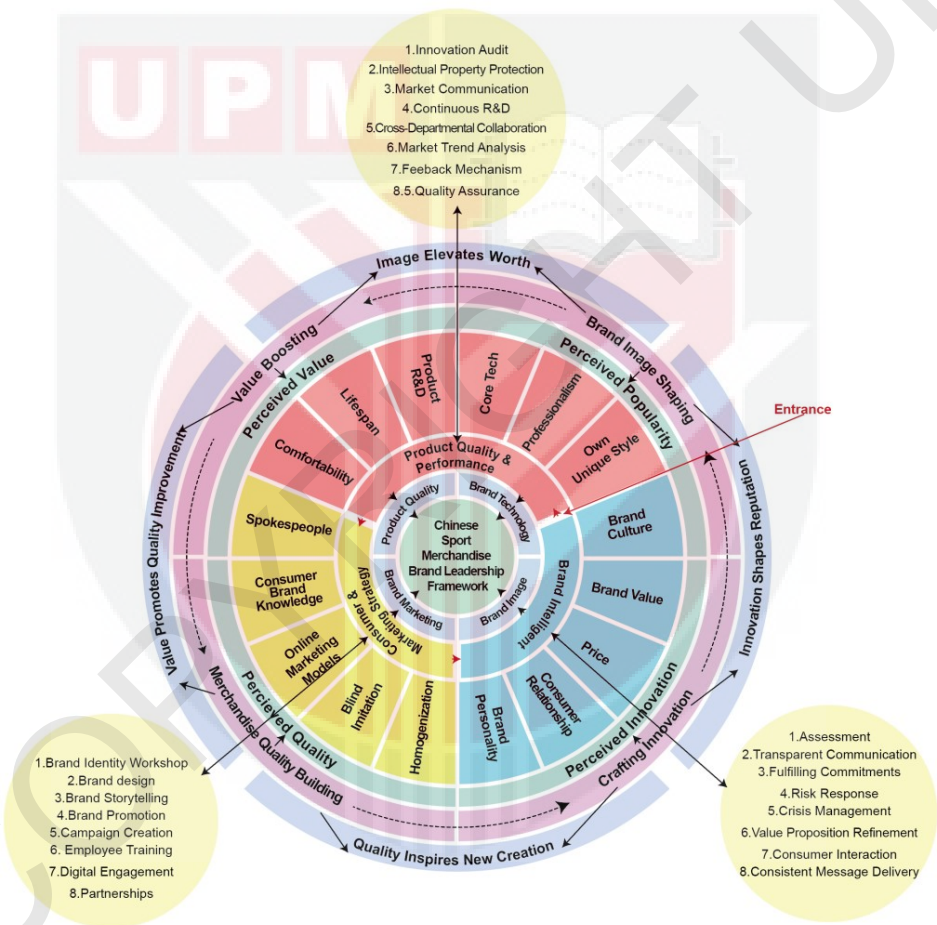


Figure 44 : The Finalized Framework (Conclusion)
(Source: Author)

The integration of the macro and micro elements forms the final brand leadership framework, capable of driving significant improvements in Chinese sports merchandise brands. The macro framework sets the strategic direction,

while the micro framework provides the actionable steps required to achieve these strategic goals. This comprehensive approach ensures that improvements in product quality, brand marketing, and technology are not isolated efforts but part of a cohesive strategy to enhance overall brand leadership.

The resultant improvement is multifaceted. It encompasses enhanced product quality, a more resonant brand image, a robust marketing strategy, and a stronger consumer relationship, all of which coalesce to establish and reinforce brand leadership. By addressing both the perceived and operational aspects of branding, Chinese sports merchandise brands can navigate the complexities of the global market, achieving sustainable growth and a formidable brand presence.

6.4 Research Limitations

Every research project has its limits, and this study on brand leadership for Chinese sports brands is no exception. First off, the focus of this study was mainly on the Chinese sports clothing industry, meaning that the findings might not easily apply to other industries or national contexts. Furthermore, the selected research methods were influenced by the data and tools that were available to the researcher. While steps were taken to minimize errors related to the research design, it is possible that some details were missed during the data collection and analysis stages or that inadvertent bias in the sampling method could make the results of the study less universally applicable.

Moreover, the constantly changing world of branding, especially in a fast-moving market like China, brings its own challenges. The strategies for brand leadership that work today might need to be changed because of shifts in what consumers want, new technologies, or changes in the world economy. So, while this study gives a snapshot of the current situation, it's important to see its findings as a starting point that needs ongoing checking and updating.

6.5 Recommendations for Future Research

The study of brand leadership for Chinese sports brands opens many possibilities for future research. First, while the study gives a detailed framework for the Chinese sports clothing market, it's important to check if this framework works in other industries in China too. By looking at how this framework changes in different industries, we can learn more about brand leadership in China as a whole.

Second, comparing Chinese sports clothing brands with brands from other countries can give ideas about brand leadership in different cultures. These comparisons can show what's special about Chinese branding and what strategies work across cultures. Also, with the digital world changing fast, it's important to look at how new technologies, like virtual reality or artificial intelligence, affect brand leadership.

Lastly, looking more into what consumers think can give a fuller picture of branding. By focusing on how consumers see and react to brand leadership, we can better understand how brand strategies and what consumers want

work together. Also, long studies that watch how brand leadership strategies change over time can show trends and changes. This can help brands stay leaders in a market that keeps changing.



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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Questionnaire Review



PEJABAT TIMBALAN NAIB CANSOLOR (PENYELIDIKAN DAN INOVASI)

OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY VICE CHANCELLOR (RESEARCH AND INNOVATION)

Rujukan kami : UPM/TNCPI/RMC/1.4.18.2 (JKEUPM)

Tarikh : 27 March 2023

Prof. Dr. Khairul Aidil Azlin Abd Rahman
Department of Industrial Design
Faculty of Design and Architecture
Universiti Putra Malaysia
Serdang, Selangor

Dear Madam/Sir,

RESEARCH PROJECT: BRAND LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK FOR CHINESE SPORT MERCHANDISE BRAND THROUGH CONSUMER PERCEIVED BRAND ELEMENTS IN MALAYSIA AND CHINA.

REFERENCE NO: JKEUPM-2023-147

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR : PROF. DR. KHAIRUL AIDIL AZLIN ABD RAHMAN
CO-INVESTIGATOR : DR. MOHD SALLEHUDDIN BIN MAT NOOR, HE
ZHIHAN (STUDENT)

The Ethics Committee for Research involving Human Subjects of University Putra Malaysia (JKEUPM) has studied the proposal for the above project and found that there were no objectionable ethical issues involved in the proposed study.

Please find the list of documents received and reviewed with reference to the study and committee members who reviewed the documents (as attached).

Notwithstanding above, we will not be responsible for any misconduct on the part of researcher in the course of carrying out the research.

Ethical approval is required in the case of amendments/ changes to the study documents/ study sites/ study team.

Thank you.

"WITH KNOWLEDGE WE SERVE"

Sincerely yours,

PROF. DR. ZAMBERI SEKAWI

Chair

Ethics Committee for Research involving Human Subjects
Universiti Putra Malaysia

**ETHICS COMMITTEE FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS
(JKEUPM)
UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

Research title	: Brand Leadership Framework For Chinese Sport Merchandise Brand Through Consumer Perceived Brand Elements In Malaysia And China
Study Site	: Malaysia, China
JKEUPM Ref No.	: JKEUPM-2023-147
Principal Investigator	: Prof. Dr. Khairul Aidil Azlin Abd Rahman
Co-investigator	: Dr. Mohd Sallehuddin Mat Noor, He Zhihan (Student)

Documents received and reviewed with reference to the above study:

1. Ethics Application Form, Version 1 dated 13/02/2023
2. Respondent's Information Sheet / Consent (English), Version 3 dated 24/03/2023
3. Proposal (English), Version 2 dated 06/03/2023
4. Questionnaire / Interviews (English), Version 1 dated 13/02/2023
5. Curriculum Vitae of:
 - a. Prof. Dr. Khairul Aidil Azlin Abd Rahman
 - b. Dr. Mohd Sallehuddin Mat Noor
 - c. He Zhihan

The University Research Ethics Committee, Universiti Putra Malaysia (JKEUPM) operates in accordance to the ICH-GCP Guidelines.

Decision by JKEUPM:

- ☒ Approved
- ☒ **Permission MUST BE OBTAINED from the respective hospitals/ institutions before conducting the research**
- ☐ Disapproved

Please note that the approval is **VALID UNTIL 27 MARCH 2024**

Researchers should comply with the following:

- I. Complete a Study Final Report upon study completion (Form 3.2).
- II. Ethical approval is required in the case of amendments/ changes to the study documents/ study sites/ study team.
- III. Applicable for Clinical Trial Studies and Clinical interventional Studies only: Progress Report has to be submitted to JKEUPM at every 6 months from the date of approval (Form 3.1). Report occurrences of all Serious Adverse Events (SAEs), Suspected Unexpected Serious Adverse Reaction (SUSARs) and Protocol Deviation/ Violation at all JKEUPM approved sites to JKEUPM. All serious adverse events (SAEs) detected or being notified should be reported

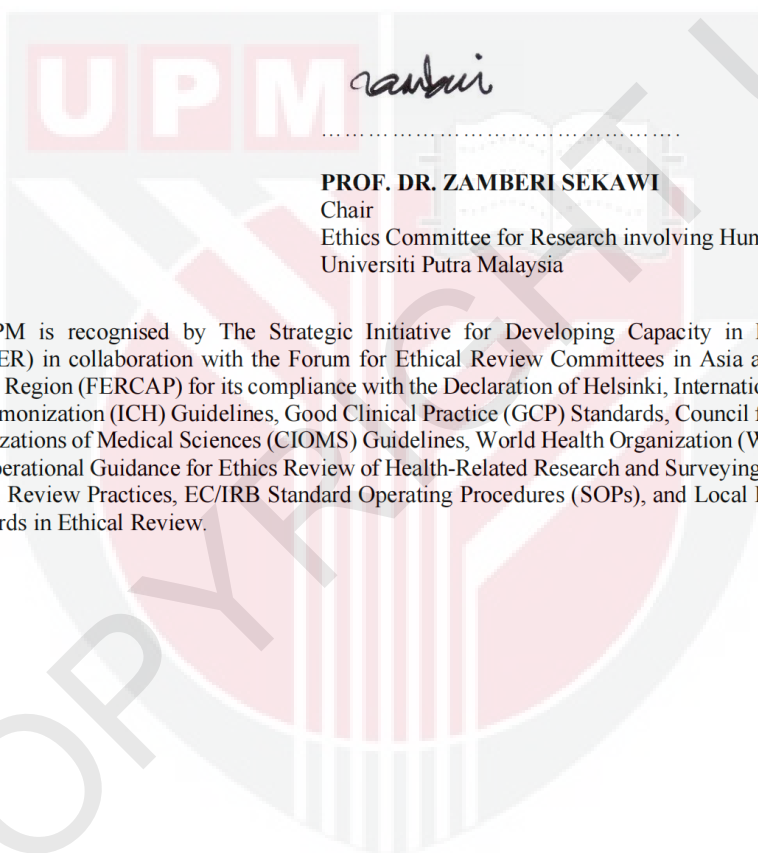
immediately to the sponsor except for those SAEs that the protocol or other document (e.g., Investigator's Brochure) identifies as not needing immediate reporting. The immediate reports should be followed promptly by detailed, written reports.

The required forms can be obtained from the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (JKEUPM) website (<http://www.tncpi.upm.edu.my/faildokumen>).

Date of Approval: 27 March 2023

Members of the JKEUPM who reviewed the documents:

- i. Primary Reviewer: Dr. Siow May Ling
- ii. Informed Consent Reviewer: Prof. Dr. Barakatun Nisak Mohd Yusof/Assoc. Prof Dr. Rosliza Abdul Manaf



PROF. DR. ZAMBERI SEKAWI

Chair

Ethics Committee for Research involving Human Subjects

Universiti Putra Malaysia

JKEUPM is recognised by The Strategic Initiative for Developing Capacity in Ethical Review (SIDCER) in collaboration with the Forum for Ethical Review Committees in Asia and the Western Pacific Region (FERCAP) for its compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki, International Conference on Harmonization (ICH) Guidelines, Good Clinical Practice (GCP) Standards, Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) Guidelines, World Health Organization (WHO) Standards and Operational Guidance for Ethics Review of Health-Related Research and Surveying and Evaluating Ethical Review Practices, EC/IRB Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and Local Regulations and Standards in Ethical Review.

Appendix B

Questionnaire for Consumer: Chinese Sports Merchandise Brand Research

1. Your gender:
A. Male. B. Female
2. Your age:
A. Under 20. B. 20-25. C. 26-35 D. 36-45
3. Your educational qualifications:
A. Below undergraduate B. Undergraduate C. Graduate D. Postgraduate or above
4. Your work experience:
A. 0 years B. 1-2 years C. 3-4 years D. 5+ years
5. Which Western sports merchandise brand do you like most?
A. Nike B. Adidas C. Puma D. Under Armour. E. New Balance F. Converse
6. Which is your favorite Chinese sports merchandise brand?
A. Anta B. Li-Ning C. Xtep D. 361°
7. Which sports merchandise product do you most often buy?
A. Sneakers B. Shirts/Jackets C. Pants D. Backpack E. Socks F. Protective sports equipment
8. How often do you buy sports merchandise?
A. At least once a week. B. At least once a month C. At least once every three months
D. Once every few years
9. How do you usually decide what to buy?
A. Television B. Magazine C. Social media D. Friends
10. Which of the following factors most affects your willingness to buy these products?
A. Price B. Brand reputation C. Design D. Quality
E. Comfort F. Brand service attitude
11. How do you usually buy these products?
A. In stores B. Online C. Friends

Product Quality:

12. (comfort-ability) Chinese sports merchandise products lack comfort.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

13. (Lifespan) Chinese sports merchandise products do not last long.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

14. (Blind imitation) Chinese sports merchandise brands blindly imitate Western brands.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

15. (Homogenization) The homogenization of Chinese sports merchandise brands is a serious problem.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

Brand Marketing:

16. (Online marketing models) Chinese sports merchandise brands lack unique online marketing models.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

17. (Brand value) Chinese sports merchandise brands ignore the promotion of brand value.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

18. (Price) Chinese sports merchandise products are priced irrationally.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

19. (Consumer relationship) Chinese sports merchandise brands do not maintain strong interactive relationships with consumers.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

Brand Technology:

20. (Product R&D) Chinese sports merchandise brands do not carry out product research and development.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

21. (Core tech) Chinese sports merchandise brands lack unique core technology.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

22. (Professionalism) Chinese sports merchandise products lack professionalism.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

23. (Own unique style) Chinese sports merchandise brands do not have their own unique style.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

Brand Image:

24. (Consumer brand knowledge) Consumers don't know enough about Chinese sports merchandise brands.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

25. (Spokespeople) Chinese sports merchandise brand spokespeople are poorly chosen.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

26. (Brand personality) The brand personality of Chinese sports merchandise brands is not obvious.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

27. (Brand culture) Chinese sports merchandise brands lack their own brand culture.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

Brand Leadership:

28. (Quality) Compared with Western brands, the quality of Chinese sports merchandise brands is lower.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

29. (Innovation) Compared with Western brands, the product innovation of Chinese sports merchandise brands is insufficient.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

30. (Industry trendsetters) Compared with Western brands, Chinese sports merchandise brands are not industry trendsetters.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

31. (Popularity) Compared with Western brands, Chinese sports merchandise brands are less popular among athletes.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5



Appendix C

Expert Feedback Questionnaire on the Chinese Sports Brand Leadership Framework

Introduction:

The researcher has developed a new framework titled "Chinese sports Brand Leadership Framework" and seeks your valuable insights to refine it. Your expertise and feedback are greatly appreciated.

1. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being not relevant and 5 being highly relevant), how would you rate the framework's relevance to Chinese sports brands? ()
1 2 3 4 5

1. Layer 1: Framework Name

Does the name "Chinese sports Brand Leadership Framework" sound clear to you? ()

Yes No

Any thoughts for this layer?

2. Layer 2: Four Brand Leadership Aspects

How would you rate each aspect's importance?

Perceived Quality: [] 1-5

Perceived Value: [] 1-5

Perceived Innovation: [] 1-5

Perceived Popularity: [] 1-5

Any thoughts for this layer?

3. Layer 3: Key Features

Do the features listed under each aspect seem appropriate? ()

Yes No

Any thoughts for this layer?

4. Layer 4: Grouped Categories

Do the categories seem to capture the features well? ()

Yes No

Any thoughts for this layer?

5. Layer 5(Steps to Take)

Is the action plan clear and doable? ()

Yes No

Any thoughts for this layer?

6. Layer 6: Connections Between Layers

Do the connections between layers make sense to you? ()

Yes No

Any thoughts for this layer?

8. Any other comments or suggestions?

Appendix D

Transcript of Some Consumer Feedback

Consumers	Answers
Questions	
1.Can you tell me about your preferences when it comes to sports merchandise brands?	
2.What factors influence your choice of sports merchandise products?	
3.How often do you purchase sports merchandise, and where do you usually buy them?	
4.Do you think Chinese sports merchandise brands like Li-Ning and Anta can compete with international brands on a global scale?	
1	I support Li-Ning, a Chinese brand, because I believe in their products. Belief in the brand and a desire to support local products drive my choice. I buy Li-Ning sports merchandise about once a year, mostly from their stores. Chinese brands like Li-Ning have made great strides and can compete globally with continued quality and innovation.
2	Nike's consistent quality and design are why I prefer their sports merchandise. Quality and design play a significant role in my choices. I typically purchase Nike products every six months, often from their online store. Chinese brands like Li-Ning and Anta have potential, but Nike's reputation is hard to beat.
3	Nike's reputation for quality and style makes it my top choice. Quality and stylish designs are the most important factors for me. I buy Nike sports merchandise approximately every eight months, primarily from Nike outlets. While Chinese brands have potential, Nike's consistent quality and style keep me coming back.
4	I'm a dedicated Nike fan because of their continuous innovation. Nike's innovation and advanced technology are crucial factors in my choice. I typically make a Nike purchase every six months, mainly from their official online store. Chinese brands like Li-Ning and Anta have potential, but they need to focus on innovation to compete on a global scale.
5	Adidas' classic designs and comfort have kept me loyal. Comfort and timeless style are what I look for in sports merchandise. I buy sports merchandise approximately once a year, primarily from Adidas stores. While Chinese brands have potential, they should prioritize technological advancements to compete globally.

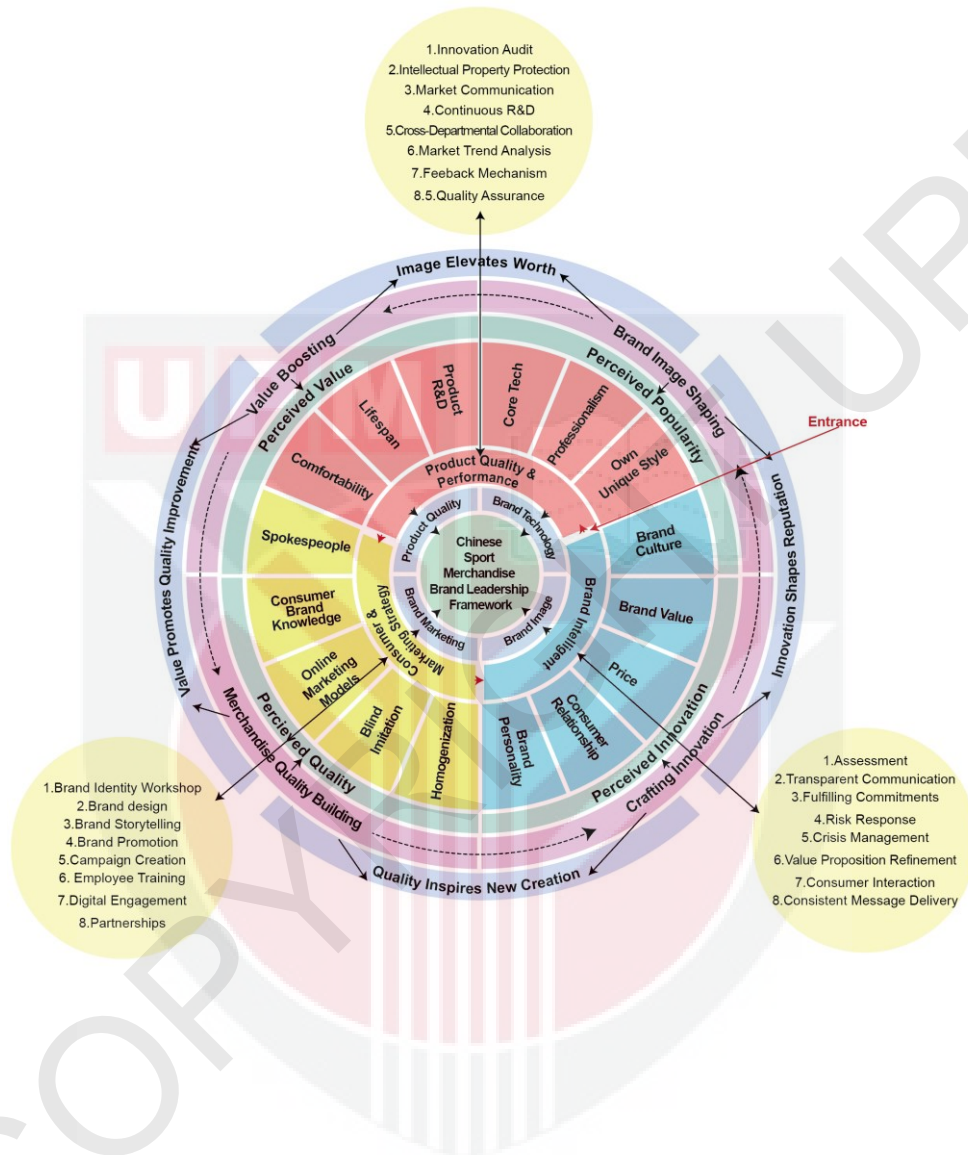
6	Puma's edgy and youthful style aligns with my preferences. Style and fashion-forward choices are my main considerations. I buy sports merchandise every six months, primarily from Puma's online store. Chinese brands like Li-Ning and Anta might need to diversify their styles to compete globally.
7	Converse's classic and timeless style suits my taste. Timeless style and versatility are what I look for in sports merchandise. I buy Converse products approximately once a year, mainly from their official website. Chinese brands have potential, but they need to develop their unique style further.
8	I'm a fan of New Balance for their commitment to comfort. Comfort is my top priority when choosing sports merchandise. I purchase New Balance products every eight months, primarily from their online store. Chinese sports merchandise brands like Li-Ning and Anta have potential, especially in comfort-focused products.
9	Under Armour's focus on performance and quality appeals to me. Performance and quality are my top considerations when choosing sports merchandise. I purchase Under Armour products every five months, primarily from their stores. Chinese sports merchandise brands like Li-Ning and Anta have potential, especially in performance-oriented products.
10	I'm a loyal Nike customer because they set the bar for sports merchandise. Nike's quality and innovative designs are what I value most. I purchase Nike sports merchandise every four months, mostly from their official website. While Chinese brands like Li-Ning and Anta have potential, they need to focus on innovation to compete globally.
11	I'm a loyal Nike customer due to their unmatched reputation for quality. Quality, durability, and reputation are the key factors in my choice. I buy Nike sports merchandise every few weeks, primarily online from Nike's official website. While Chinese brands have potential, Nike's reputation and product consistency are impressive.
12	Adidas' reputation for quality and style keeps me coming back. Quality and style are crucial factors when choosing sports merchandise. I typically buy Adidas products every six months, primarily from their physical stores. Chinese sports merchandise brands can compete globally with a strong emphasis on quality and design.

Appendix E

Transcript of Expert Feedback

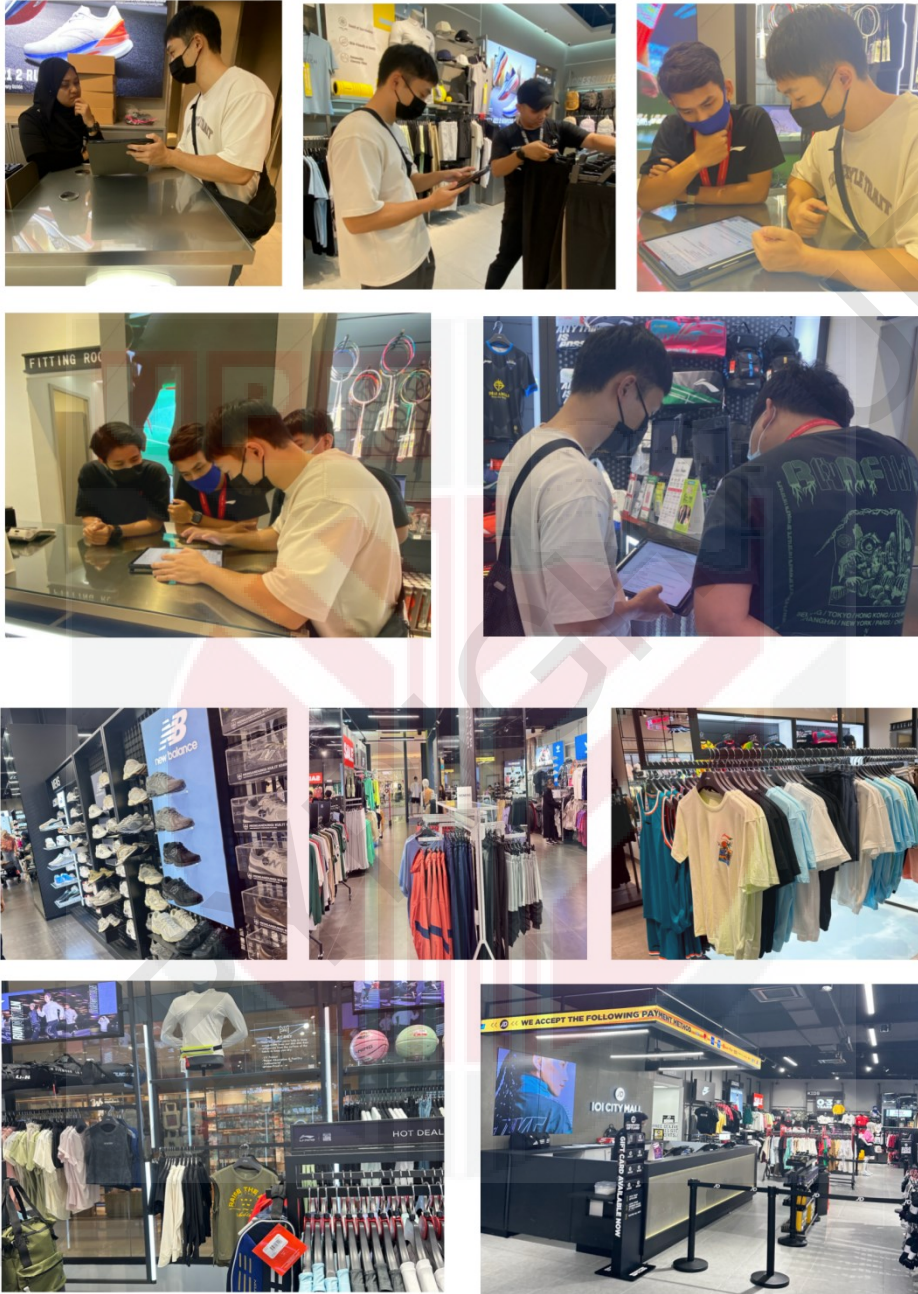
Experts	Transcript
Li-Ning Store Manager 1	"The framework's focus on consumer perception resonates with our store's approach. Specifically, the 'Value Boosting' strategy could directly influence our sales techniques."
Li-Ning Store Manager 2	"I appreciate the actionable strategies, especially 'Merchandise Quality Building,' which we can implement to enhance in-store customer experience."
Anta Store Manager 1	"The inclusion of 'Crafting Innovation' within the framework aligns with Anta's direction towards technological sportswear."
Anta Store Manager 2	Consumer feedback is vital and should be reflected within the framework to underscore its role in continuous improvement and alignment with customer expectations."
JD Store Manager 1	"Digital engagement strategies from the framework could be pivotal for our e-commerce platform's growth and customer retention."
JD Store Manager 2	"Highlighting 'Employee Training' is necessary to showcase its importance in empowering staff and ensuring consistent delivery of the brand promise."
Brand Visual Designer 1	"Consistency in visual identity is key, and the framework's 'Brand Image Shaping' process could guide our branding campaigns."
Brand Visual Designer 2	"Integrating this framework with current digital trends could enhance our brand's appeal, especially among younger consumers."
Brand Visual Designer 3	"From a brand visual design perspective, there's a desire to see this aspect being significantly represented in the strategy to ensure visual coherence and brand recognition."
Apparel Designer 1	"Integrating 'Innovation Audit' into the strategy is crucial as it will facilitate regular assessment and refinement of the innovation process, keeping the brand at the forefront of market trends."
Apparel Designer 2	"Protecting intellectual property is a critical element that should be emphasized within the framework to safeguard innovation and maintain competitive advantage."
Brand Strategist 1	"It is advised that the specific actions of each stage in the process be displayed within the framework as keywords to enhance clarity and focus."
Brand Strategist 2	"This framework could aid in our long-term brand positioning and help establish a clearer brand narrative in the market."
Brand Research Scholar 1	"The strategy should incorporate 'Cross-Departmental Collaboration' to leverage diverse expertise within the organization and foster a more integrated approach to brand leadership."
Marketing Management Expert 1	"Incorporating a segmentation strategy within the 'Value Boosting' and 'Brand Image Shaping' processes could yield even more nuanced results. The inclusion of 'Risk Response' and 'Crisis Management' in the strategic layer is recommended to address potential challenges proactively and maintain brand integrity."

Final Framework



Appendix F

Validation Survey Recording



BIODATA OF STUDENT

He Zhihan embarked on his academic journey in 2017, graduating from a Chinese university with a degree in Visual Communication Design. Following this, he pursued a foundation course in Art and Design at the University of Brighton for pre-master in the UK in 2018. In 2019, He Zhihan successfully gained admission to Coventry University in the UK for a master's program in Illustration and Animation, culminating in his graduation in 2020.

Upon his return to China, He Zhihan applied his skills and knowledge at a prominent branding design company, where he gained experience in creating logos, packaging, illustrations, and various graphic designs. In 2021, he was accepted into Universiti Putra Malaysia, specifically the Faculty of Design and Architecture, marking the latest chapter in his academic journey.

He Zhihan's experiences and educational background have uniquely equipped him to be an artist and designer with a distinctive perspective, showcasing his dedication to creativity and design.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

Zhihan, H., Rahman, K.A.A.A., Noor, M.S.M. (2023). Research on the Construction of Agricultural Product Brand Leadership Based on Consumers' Education Level. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 29(2), 150–167.

Zhihan, H., Rahman, K.A.A.A., Noor, M.S.M. (2022). The Interrelationship between Brand Personality, Brand Trust and Consumers' Purchase Intention: A Structural Equation Modelling Approach. *International Journal of Operations and Quantitative Management*, 28(3), 32–42.

