

# Digital Marketing Strategies of Li-Ning in the Context of Guochao: A Case Study Based on the 4I Theory

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**Abstract:** Digital media are reshaping consumer decision pathways, pushing brand marketing from one-way communication toward relationship management and value co-creation. Drawing on the 4I framework, this study conducts a single-case analysis of Li-Ning's digital marketing strategy in the Guochao context, using multi-source secondary data. The findings reveal a 4I synergy system built on professional product strength as the trust cornerstone, which moves users along a five-stage evolution: potential audiences → potential users → consumers → participants → co-creators. Within this path, Interestingness captures attention, Interests drive first purchases, Interaction deepens brand relationships, and Individuality steers the transition toward co-creation. We distill three theoretical propositions: (1) the 4I dimensions operate with stage-specific dominance and synergize across the user evolution stages; (2) professional product strength provides the enduring credibility foundation for Guochao cultural narratives; (3) the absence of institutionalized mass co-creation channels is the core bottleneck preventing users from moving from participation to co-creation. By linking the 4I framework to user evolution stages and embedding it in the Guochao context, this study extends the framework's explanatory power and offers practical guidance for deepening brand–user relationships at the intersection of culture and digitalization.

**Keywords:** digital marketing; 4I theory; Guochao brand; user co-creation; Li-Ning

## 1. Introduction

Digital media are profoundly reshaping brand touchpoints and conversion paths. By December 2024, China had over 1.1 billion internet users and 974 million online shoppers, with online physical goods sales accounting for 26.8% of total retail sales, making digital platforms the core infrastructure for consumer attention and purchase conversion in the sportswear industry<sup>[1]</sup>.

Propelled by the “Guochao” cultural wave, domestic sportswear brands have encountered a strategic opportunity for differentiation. Li-Ning pioneered this trend through the “China Li-Ning” collection and appearances at international fashion weeks, with revenue growing from RMB 25.803 billion in 2022 to 28.676 billion in 2024. However, as Guochao narratives become generic, platform traffic costs rise, and user participation iterates rapidly, visibility alone is no longer sufficient. The core of digital marketing is shifting from “being seen” to “being engaged with” and further toward “being co-created.”

Although Li-Ning has achieved notable success in shaping its Guochao identity, the underlying logic of its digital marketing strategy, user conversion mechanisms, and potential bottlenecks still lack systematic theoretical analysis. The 4I theory—Interestingness, Interests, Interaction, and Individuality—offers a mature framework for deconstructing integrated digital marketing strategies, but has rarely been applied to sportswear cases in the Guochao context. Given that Guochao branding now permeates nearly every major domestic sportswear player, systematic analysis of effective digital marketing mechanisms is both timely and practically relevant. This study therefore addresses three questions: (1) How does Li-Ning construct its digital marketing strategy system? (2) How does this system facilitate the transformation of users from passive audiences into value co-creators? (3) What practical bottlenecks exist, and how can they be optimized? The research aims to extend the 4I theory's application and provide a reference for domestic sportswear brands' digital marketing practices.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundation

### 2.1. *The Connotations and Dimensions of the 4I Theory*

The 4I theory is an important analytical framework that emphasizes organizing digital marketing around four dimensions: Interestingness (creative, entertaining, emotionally appealing content), Interests (functional and psychological value for users), Interaction (two-way communication and participation mechanisms between brand and users), and Individuality (differentiated content delivery and experience design based on user data)<sup>[2-4]</sup>. It furnishes a structured framework for analyzing the deepening evolution of brand–user relationships<sup>[2,4]</sup>. Unlike traditional marketing frameworks such as the 4Ps or 4Cs, which are predominantly firm- or product-centric, the 4I theory shifts the analytical focus to user-centric relationship dynamics—a shift particularly suited to digital environments where consumers exercise active agency in content consumption, sharing, and creation. Each of the four dimensions maps onto a distinct relationship function: Interestingness addresses the question of why users choose to engage with brand content amid information overload; Interests addresses the value proposition that justifies purchase decisions; Interaction captures the reciprocity mechanisms that transform transactional encounters into ongoing relationships; and Individuality reflects the data-enabled customization that recognizes users as distinct entities with evolving preferences. Collectively, these four dimensions provide a vocabulary for describing how brand–user relationships progress from initial awareness to deep collaboration. Although the 4I theory has been widely applied in digital marketing research, its application to culturally embedded brands—particularly Guochao sportswear brands—remains limited, and its intersection with stage-based user evolution models has yet to be systematically explored.

### 2.2. *Related Research Progress*

Recent digital marketing research has shifted from tool use to capability building and value co-creation. Wang et al.<sup>[2]</sup> pointed out crucial future topics such as the privacy paradox and algorithmic black box, while Meng et al.<sup>[3]</sup> proposed that digital marketing capability is a composite of digital resource accumulation and technology utilization. In the value co-creation domain, Kannan and Li<sup>[4]</sup> provided a broad framework linking digital technologies, customer interactions, and outcomes. These studies collectively demonstrate a close interrelationship between digital marketing capability and value co-creation, underpinning our 4I-based analysis<sup>[5]</sup>.

Guochao refers to the cultural consumption trend that fuses traditional Chinese cultural elements with modern fashion aesthetics, characterized by national identity, nostalgic narratives, and contemporary design language. Wei et al.<sup>[6]</sup> found that the typicality of Chinese cultural resources significantly influences consumer attitudes toward Guochao brands, highlighting the centrality of cultural factors. Thus, digital marketing for Guochao brands involves not only channel selection but also cultural expression, brand identity construction, and user attitude formation. However, existing research has mostly described the phenomenon at a macro level or examined consumer psychology, lacking systematic analysis of how digital marketing tactics—such as short-video storytelling and membership-based co-creation programs—evolve users from ordinary consumers to value co-creators<sup>[7]</sup>; therefore, understanding of which 4I dimensions drive user evolution in culturally branded settings, and at which stages, remains underdeveloped.

### 2.3. *Research Gaps*

Three gaps are apparent. First, the 4I theory has seldom been applied to Guochao brand case studies, despite their dual cultural–commercial nature. Second, existing studies mention user participation or value co-creation but lack a stage-based framework and empirical testing of the transformation from audiences to co-creators, and the specific roles of each 4I dimension remain unclear. Third, systematic academic case studies on Li-Ning’s digital marketing from an integrated 4I perspective are scarce.

### 2.4. *Integrated Analytical Framework: From Audience to Co-creator*

To address these gaps, we construct a five-stage user evolution framework: potential audiences → potential users → consumers → participants → co-creators. Drawing on consumer journey models, each stage corresponds to a dominant 4I dimension: Interestingness primarily captures attention, Interests drive first purchase, Interaction transforms consumers into active participants, and

Individuality guides participants toward co-creation through personalized experiences. These dimensions are not strictly separated but operate synergistically. This framework constitutes the core logic of our analysis (see Figure 1). Figure 1 maps these five stages to their corresponding 4I dimensions and the underlying support of professional product strength.

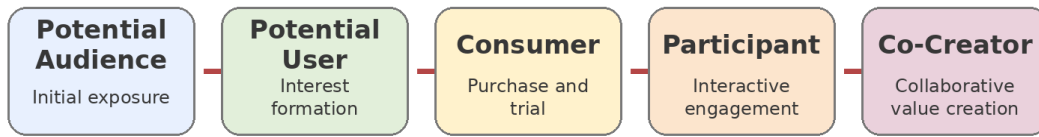


Figure 1 User Relationship Evolution from Audience to Co-Creator

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1. Research Method

This study adopts a single-case study method based on secondary data, an approach well-suited to explaining internal mechanisms in complex commercial contexts<sup>[8]</sup>. Rather than conducting causal testing through statistical models, we employ a theory-driven content analysis to interpret Li-Ning’s digital marketing logic, cross-referencing corporate disclosures (annual reports and earnings releases), official statistics (from CNNIC, the National Bureau of Statistics, and the Ministry of Commerce), and industry reports against the 4I dimensions. Representative case evidence used in the analysis is listed in Table 1, with full sources available upon request.

#### 3.2. Case Selection Rationale

Li-Ning was chosen for three reasons: it is highly representative, integrating Guochao expression, professional category development, and digital operations; its publicly available materials provide continuous, reliable data from its investor relations website, annual reports, and performance presentations<sup>[9-11]</sup>; and its digital marketing is tightly intertwined with brand repositioning, product portfolio optimization, and channel restructuring, providing rich material for systemic analysis.

#### 3.3. Data Sources and Analytical Boundaries

To ensure authenticity and reliability, we only use verifiable sources: Li-Ning’s 2022–2024 official annual reports and performance materials<sup>[9-11]</sup>; official reports from the National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Commerce, and CNNIC<sup>[1,12-14]</sup>; and academic references with complete verifiable information. Online reproductions, secondary citations, self-media articles, and materials lacking complete bibliographic information are excluded.

#### 3.4. Reliability Classification of Case Evidence

To enrich specificity, we also draw upon publicly available industry media coverage, official brand press releases, and third-party platform data reports, coded [E1] through [E23], and classified into three reliability tiers: high (corporate press releases, national-level news agencies), medium (vertical industry media, official platform reports), and referential (creative agency sites, self-media articles). Table 1 presents representative evidence sources selected from the full E1–E23 list, covering all three reliability tiers; the complete list is available from the corresponding author upon request.

Table 1 Representative Case Evidence Sources (Selected from E1 – E23)

Code	Evidence Description	Source Type	Reliability	Source Link
E1	"Tracing the East" Theme Show	China News Service	High	<a href="https://i.ifeng.com/c/8d6rilbfQdF">https://i.ifeng.com/c/8d6rilbfQdF</a>
E2	"Own World" Theme at Paris Fashion Week	Trade Media	Medium	<a href="http://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202306/21/WS6492b905a310ba94e5612fb5.html">http://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202306/21/WS6492b905a310ba94e5612fb5.html</a>
E4	ADFIVE (Anti-Wu) Streetball Tournament Viewership/Participation Data	Event Website/Statement	Reference	<a href="https://news.zhibo8.com/nba/2024-07-08/668bf45a038denative.htm">https://news.zhibo8.com/nba/2024-07-08/668bf45a038denative.htm</a>
E5	Li-Ning R&D Investment Data	Trade Media	Medium	<a href="https://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/2025-04-15/doc-inetfxpw1053876.shtml">https://finance.sina.com.cn/roll/2025-04-15/doc-inetfxpw1053876.shtml</a>
E7	"Named After Me" Brand Film	Trade Media	Medium	<a href="https://socialbeta.com/campaign/21334">https://socialbeta.com/campaign/21334</a>
E9	Douyin Double 11 GMV Growth Rate	E-commerce Report	Medium	<a href="http://www.100ec.cn/detail--6653968.html">http://www.100ec.cn/detail--6653968.html</a>

E11	Douyin Sports Category Sales Growth	Platform Research Report	Medium	<a href="http://m.toutiao.com/group/7393321580221055515/">http://m.toutiao.com/group/7393321580221055515/</a>
E12	"Square Seal Inaugurates New Chapter" Event	Trade Media	Medium	<a href="https://nowre.com/fashion/987864/zhongguolini ngfangyinqixinzhangxieshouwangchuqintuposhi shangyundongxinxiangxian/?x=fengyi%2F%2A %3Fivk_sa=1024320u">https://nowre.com/fashion/987864/zhongguolini ngfangyinqixinzhangxieshouwangchuqintuposhi shangyundongxinxiangxian/?x=fengyi%2F%2A %3Fivk_sa=1024320u</a>
E14	WeChat Private Domain Operation Case	Tencent Ad Case Study	Medium	<a href="https://retail.tencent.com/article/detail/AP0197512608">https://retail.tencent.com/article/detail/AP0197512608</a>
E16	Continuous Operation of "Chuàng" Platform	China News Service	High	<a href="https://www.sh.chinanews.com.cn/shishang/2024-07-12/126477.shtml">https://www.sh.chinanews.com.cn/shishang/2024-07-12/126477.shtml</a>
E23	R&D Expense Ratio & 10-Year Accumulation	Annual Report + Trade Media	High/Med	<a href="https://data.eastmoney.com/bbsj/2025/yywew.html">https://data.eastmoney.com/bbsj/2025/yywew.html</a>

#### 4. Analysis of Li-Ning’s Digital Marketing Strategies in the Guochao Context Based on the 4I Theory

##### 4.1. Brand Transformation Background: From Professional Sports to Guochao Expression

Unlike many domestic brands that treat Guochao as a mere stylistic overlay, Li-Ning has embedded Guochao within its brand DNA by connecting traditional Chinese aesthetics with authentic sports performance heritage. This dual positioning means that Li-Ning's Guochao appeal is reinforced by products that perform credibly in athletic settings—a combination that generates a distinctive brand authenticity difficult for competitors to replicate through surface-level cultural borrowing. Li-Ning’s digital marketing strategy is rooted in brand repositioning. Facing international competition and young consumers’ aesthetic shifts, the brand integrated professional sports attributes with cultural fashion through the “China Li-Ning” narrative, while continuing to emphasize core categories such as running, basketball, fitness, and sports lifestyle<sup>[9-10]</sup>. Strategically, Li-Ning advances a “single brand, multi-category, multi-channel” approach; in 2024, e-commerce revenue grew 10.3% year-on-year, accounting for nearly 31% of total channel revenue<sup>[9]</sup>. In 2025, a renewed partnership with the Chinese Olympic Committee shifted the brand communication logic from “participation matters” to “being understood matters”, marking a transition toward relationship orientation. This shift reflects a deeper move from brand-centric messaging to user-centric relationship building, aligning with the co-creation logic that underpins Li-Ning's digital ecosystem. The following sections analyze how the four 4I dimensions propel users through the five evolution stages. Figure 2 depicts the closed-loop mechanism of 4I-driven user evolution, supported by professional product strength.

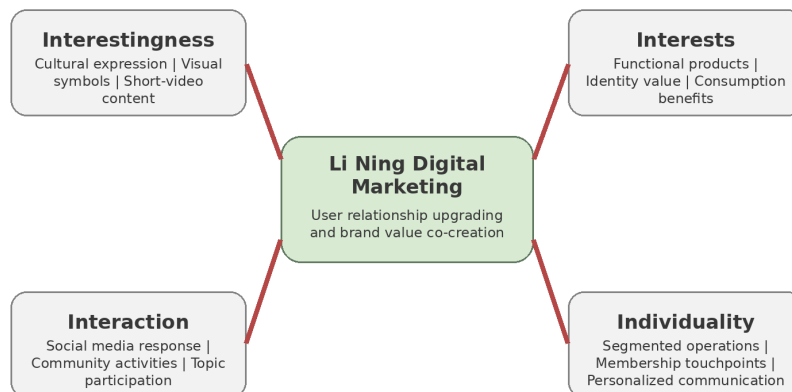


Figure 2 The Closed Loop of User Evolution Driven by the 4I Theory

##### 4.2. From “Potential Audiences” to “Potential Users”: Interestingness-Driven Attention Capture

With 1.04 billion short-video users and severe information overload<sup>[1]</sup>, the primary challenge is low-cost attention capture. Interestingness generates "social currency" through creative content that users voluntarily stay on and share. In the Guochao context, indigenous cultural symbols like Chinese characters, calligraphy, and traditional colors lower cognitive barriers and enhance attention efficiency.

Li-Ning has demonstrated this mechanism through multiple high-profile events. In September 2024, the “Tracing the East” porcelain-themed fashion show at Jingdezhen’s Bingding Chai Kiln sparked

extensive spontaneous sharing across Xiaohongshu and Weibo [E1]. By situating a contemporary fashion event within a historic kiln site—a living symbol of Chinese craftsmanship—the brand transformed a product showcase into a cultural moment that audiences willingly amplified. This exemplifies how Guochao-themed Interestingness generates organic reach without relying on paid media. The BADFIVE Streetball Tournament’s “Ci Tou Dang Chu Tou” content generated 600 million views and attracted 10,000 participants across 54 cities, earning the official account over 50,000 new followers in a month [E4]. Li-Ning’s consecutive Paris Fashion Week appearances reinterpreted Eastern philosophy under the theme “A World of Its Own” [E2]. Through such content, passive audiences like, comment, share, or follow, thereby transitioning into potential users with initial brand awareness and emotional connection. The 50,000-follower increase serves as an observable indicator of this transition.

#### ***4.3. From “Potential Users” to “Consumers”: Interests-Driven Value Perception and Conversion***

The distinction between potential users and consumers hinges on first purchase, requiring the brand to answer both “Is it worth buying?” (functional cost-effectiveness) and “Why this brand?” (emotional identity). Li-Ning addresses this through a triangular value system. Functionally, R&D expenditure reached RMB 676 million in 2024 (2.4% of revenue), with a ten-year cumulative investment of RMB 3.8 billion [E5, E23]; running shoe sales reached 10.6 million pairs, and technologies like BOOM and carbon plates are applied across professional and fashion lines<sup>[9-10]</sup>. This sustained R&D commitment serves a dual function: it ensures professional-grade performance that meets the demands of serious athletes, while providing a credible foundation for the Guochao narrative—consumers are not merely buying into cultural symbols, but into products whose functionality has been verified in competitive settings. The transfer of elite technologies like BOOM midsoles from performance running shoes to lifestyle footwear further bridges the gap between professional credibility and everyday desirability. Emotionally, the Guochao narrative and the “In My Name” Olympic brand film reinforce cultural identity [E7]. In terms of platform conversion, Li-Ning’s efficient e-commerce operation turned perception into purchase: during the 2024 Douyin Double 11 festival, first-day transaction volume surged by 622% year-on-year [E9]. This Interests mechanism drove massive first-time purchases, aided by a reported 82% increase in Douyin sports goods sales for the full year 2024 [E11]. Notably, this Interests mechanism differs from conventional price-driven promotion: the cultural identity embedded in Guochao products allows Li-Ning to convert users at a higher perceived value, reducing reliance on deep discounting and fostering a purchase motivation rooted in identity expression rather than transactional incentives alone.

#### ***4.4. From “Consumers” to “Participants”: Interaction-Driven Relational Deepening***

Single-purchase consumers may still churn; sustained interaction turns a transactional relationship into a relational one. Li-Ning has built a multi-tiered cross-platform interaction system. Weibo facilitates topic diffusion, Douyin hosts challenges, Xiaohongshu enables lifestyle sharing, and the WeChat ecosystem handles membership operations and private domain consolidation [E14]. UGC has become a pivotal link: the BADFIVE tournament’s topic #Ci Tou Dang Chu Tou# saw massive secondary creation [E4, E13]. Within the private domain, a “direct purchase first, then follow” strategy raised Mini Program average daily GMV by 30% through social fission [E14]. A logo name-changing campaign, “changing the name to everyone’s name,” invited mass participation [E15]. When consumers proactively post outfit shares, join community discussions, or engage in referral campaigns, they transition from purchasers to active participants in the brand relationship.

#### ***4.5. From “Participants” to “Co-creators”: Individuality-Driven Deep Collaboration***

Co-creators go beyond sharing and commenting to engage in product design, content generation, or brand agenda setting. Individuality enables this leap through data segmentation, differentiated experiences, and customized participation opportunities.

Li-Ning has made initial explorations. Its membership system offers tiered benefits linked to spending, providing infrastructure for identifying active users, but it remains primarily purchase-oriented rather than co-creation-oriented [E17]. In July 2024, the “Chuàng” Designer Platform was launched to systematically co-create with global Chinese young designers, upgrading traditional collaboration into an open co-creation experiment [E16]; however, it currently targets professional designers, not mass consumers. The BADFIVE tournament’s UGC cycle—participation → content →

re-attraction—hints at an organic participant-to-co-creator trajectory but lacks an institutionalized pathway [E13]. Thus, while Li-Ning has laid a foundation (membership data, tiered privileges, a co-creation platform), a large-scale, normalized mass user co-creation leap has not yet been achieved. Bridging this gap may require transforming the membership system from a purchase-reward structure into an open innovation architecture, where user ideas are systematically solicited, evaluated, and rewarded through digital platforms.

#### **4.6. Summary of the Overall Mechanism and Strategic Reflections**

Synthesizing the above, Li-Ning's digital marketing strategy exhibits a phased transition logic: Interestingness captures attention, Interests drive first purchase, Interaction embeds consumers into the brand network, and Individuality seeks to guide participants toward co-creation. Underpinning these is professional product strength and a "technology cascading + cultural elevation" dual barrier. The company consistently invests in core professional categories and R&D (2024 R&D ratio 2.4%, ten-year cumulative RMB 3.8 billion) [E23], and transfers professional technologies such as BOOM midsoles and carbon plates to fashion lines [E12]. This ensures that each 4I mechanism is built on the trust foundation that "the brand genuinely understands sports," a key distinction from general consumer goods.

Effectiveness is evidenced by e-commerce channel revenue growth of 10.3% [1], a Douyin Double 11 growth rate exceeding 600% [E9], and the BADFIVE league's 600-million-view exposure [E4]. Nevertheless, challenges persist. First, Guochao symbols face diminishing marginal utility risk as competitors imitate them. Second, different platform logics may cause brand tonality inconsistency or duplicate resource investment. Third, mass user co-creation remains uninstitutionalized; most users are still at the participant stage. Fourth, coordinating the rapid pace of fashion trends with the slower rhythm of sports technology innovation is a strategic issue for future sustainability. More fundamentally, the Guochao trend itself is evolving from symbolic borrowing toward deeper cultural narrative construction. As consumers become more discerning, brands that merely deploy traditional visual symbols without embedding them in authentic cultural stories or product innovation risk accelerated fatigue. Li-Ning's future digital marketing will likely need to shift from "showing Chinese elements" to "telling Chinese stories with product substance," a transition that requires closer integration between cultural strategy, R&D pipelines, and digital content creation.

### **5. Conclusion**

#### **5.1. Key Research Findings**

Adopting the 4I theory as its analytical framework and employing a single-case study method, this paper has systematically analyzed Li-Ning's digital marketing strategies in the Guochao context, drawing on Li-Ning's official annual reports, industry statistics, and publicly verifiable marketing events. The findings reveal a digital marketing system in which the four 4I dimensions serve as core mechanisms: Interestingness captures the attention of potential audiences through Guochao cultural symbols and platform content; Interests drives first-time purchases through professional product strength, identity recognition, and e-commerce conversion; Interaction deepens user relationships through platform synergy, community operations, and user-generated content (UGC); and Individuality guides users toward the transition to co-creators through membership tiering and data-driven outreach. This system is underpinned by professional product strength and a technology cascading pathway, forming a dual barrier of "technology cascading + cultural elevation"—a key characteristic that distinguishes digital marketing for sportswear brands from that for general consumer goods.

The findings further reveal that this system propels users along a five-stage evolutionary pathway of "potential audiences → potential users → consumers → participants → co-creators," with different 4I dimensions playing dominant transitional driving roles at each stage. Concurrently, Li-Ning's digital marketing still confronts challenges such as the risk of homogenization in Guochao expression, insufficient depth in individualized operations, and the lack of an institutionalized co-creation mechanism.

Drawing upon this systematic analysis, we distill the following three theoretical propositions as follows.

Proposition 1: Stage-specific dominance of the 4I dimensions. In the Guochao context, the four 4I dimensions exhibit stage-specific dominance across the five-stage user evolution from “potential audiences” to “co-creators.” Interestingness dominates the attention capture stage, Interests dominates the value perception and conversion stage, Interaction dominates the relational deepening stage, and Individuality dominates the co-creation transition stage. These dimensions do not operate independently; rather, they synergistically exert force with varying weights at different stages.

Proposition 2: Professional product strength as the credibility foundation. Professional product strength constitutes the continuous credibility foundation that distinguishes digital marketing for Guochao brands from that for general consumer goods. Li-Ning’s “technology cascading+cultural elevation” pathway demonstrates that the credibility of Guochao narratives depends on verifiable support from professional sports technology. Cultural symbols detached from product strength are unlikely to foster sustained user trust.

Proposition 3: The absence of institutionalized mass co-creation as a core bottleneck. The absence of an institutionalized channel for user co-creation represents the core bottleneck hindering the transition of current Guochao brands from “participants” to “co-creators.” Although Li-Ning has established a membership system and a designer co-creation platform, a normalized co-creation mechanism targeting mass users has yet to be formed. Consequently, users largely remain at the level of shallow interactions such as sharing and discussion, and have not yet engaged in deep collaboration involving product design, content generation, or other higher-order activities at scale.

Collectively, these propositions indicate that the 4I framework is not a uniform checklist but a stage-sensitive mechanism, effective only when cultural narratives align with verifiable product strength and institutionalized co-creation channels.

## **5.2. Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications**

Theoretically, this study integrates the 4I theory with a five-stage user evolution framework, extending its applicability to Guochao sportswear brands and identifying professional product strength as a key credibility anchor. By demonstrating that cultural typicality (Wei et al., <sup>[6]</sup>) interacts with digital marketing execution to shape user trajectories, we respond to calls for research that bridges cultural branding and digital marketing capability theories<sup>[2,4]</sup>. It addresses the identified research gaps and provides a verifiable framework for understanding digital marketing under “culture+digitalization.”

Practically, brands should allocate resources according to user stage rather than striving for perfection on all 4I dimensions simultaneously; Guochao expression must be supported by credible product experience; and the participant-to-co-creator transition requires independent institutional designs such as open design voting or creator incentive programs, rather than relying solely on content interaction. For instance, brands can embed co-creation touchpoints within existing digital platforms—such as in-app voting for new colorways, reward systems for high-quality UGC, or beta-testing communities for upcoming products—thereby lowering the organizational barrier to mass participation. For brands with lighter digital infrastructure, even lightweight mechanisms—such as soliciting design ideas through social media polls or inviting loyal customers to vote on limited-edition releases—can initiate a participatory dynamic without requiring heavy technological investment. The key is to signal genuine openness to user input, which can itself strengthen brand attachment even before formal co-creation structures are in place.

Furthermore, the Li-Ning case suggests that Guochao brands at different development stages may need to calibrate their 4I investment priorities. For brands still in the awareness-building phase, resource concentration on Interestingness—through distinctive cultural storytelling on short-video platforms—may yield higher marginal returns. For brands seeking to improve customer retention, investment in Interaction infrastructure, such as private domain communities and systematic UGC campaigns, becomes more critical. For mature brands approaching the co-creation frontier, Individuality mechanisms that institutionalize user input into product or content decisions represent the next competitive frontier. Across all stages, however, the Li-Ning case underscores a consistent principle: investments in digital marketing tactics yield sustainable returns only when anchored in verifiable product strength and authentic cultural narratives.

## **5.3. Research Limitations and Future Directions**

Some quantitative marketing data come from industry media, which may introduce minor

inaccuracies; future research could gather internal corporate data. Industry media data may overrepresent successful campaigns, underreporting less visible ones and potentially biasing strategy effectiveness assessments. The single-case design limits generalizability, given differences among Guochao brands. Furthermore, certain events reported widely but lacking verifiable original sources were excluded, potentially affecting completeness.

Moreover, this study focuses on a leading brand with substantial resources for R&D and digital infrastructure. The applicability of the “technology cascading + cultural elevation” pathway to small and medium-sized Guochao brands, which may lack comparable technological accumulation or marketing budgets, remains an open question. Future research could examine whether alternative resource configurations—such as cultural IP licensing or community-driven co-design—can serve as functionally equivalent credibility anchors for brands with different resource profiles. Comparative studies across brands at different maturity stages could also help identify which 4I dimensions are most salient under varying resource conditions. Additionally, with major platforms increasingly offering user journey analytics, future studies could partner with brands to access aggregated clickstream data, enabling granular tracking of stage-by-stage conversion rates and dropout points within the five-stage model—an empirical dimension the present cross-sectional design could not address. Moreover, future studies could investigate how algorithmic curation shapes the dissemination and potential homogenization of Guochao narratives, using experimental designs to test whether algorithm-driven recommendations amplify or distort cultural signals. Comparative research on small and medium-sized Guochao brands would also help identify alternative resource configurations—such as cultural IP licensing or community-led co-design—that sustain authenticity without heavy R&D investment.

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