

Stimulating Mechanisms of Sports Consumption through Tennis Celebrity Endorsement under Consumption Downgrade: A Case Study of Qinwen Zheng and Nike

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of consumption downgrade, the sports consumption market is confronted with the dual challenges of shrinking demand and intensified brand competition. Celebrity endorsement has thus emerged as a crucial strategy for enterprises to unlock consumer potential. Taking the collaboration between China's rising tennis star Qinwen Zheng and Nike as a case study, this research examines the stimulating mechanisms of sports celebrity endorsement on consumer behavior and its effectiveness under consumption downgrade conditions. Through literature review, case analysis, and consumer surveys, the study reveals three key findings: (1) the "emotional identification" effect of celebrity endorsement reduces consumer price sensitivity, as consumers achieve value association with their idols by purchasing endorsed products; (2) Zheng's image as a "next-generation athlete" aligns closely with Nike's brand narrative of "breaking one's limits," and, amplified through social media communication, creates a "motivation-participation" loop that drives sportswear consumption; and (3) consumption downgrade increases consumers' emphasis on functional product value, requiring celebrity endorsement to synergize with cost-performance and scenario adaptability. Based on these findings, the study proposes a three-dimensional stimulation model of "symbolic empowerment-scenario extension-value reconstruction," demonstrating how sports celebrity endorsement balances emotional mobilization with rational decision-making to achieve consumption transformation. The research provides strategic insights for brands in responding to structural shifts in consumer behavior.

Keywords: consumption downgrade; sports celebrity endorsement; sports consumption; brand narrative; Qinwen Zheng; Nike

1. Introduction

Consumption is one of the three drivers of economic growth and the core of a resilient economic system^[1,2]. Consumption downgrade has emerged as a new normal amid weak global recovery and insufficient domestic demand. In 2025, the State Council issued the "Opinions on Unleashing Sports Consumption Potential," positioning sports consumption as a key driver of market vitality. Sports celebrity endorsement—leveraging healthy images and emotional connections—has become a critical strategy for enterprises to stimulate consumption and strengthen brand value^[3]. In the 'post-traffic era,' endorsement emphasizes deep resonance with brand spirit, promoting the transformation of 'fan economy' into 'trust consumption'^[4].

Taking 'post-00s' tennis rising star Qinwen Zheng as an example, her Paris Olympics gold medal win rapidly made her a dual focus of sports and youth culture. Nike has precisely conveyed the 'JUST DO IT' brand spirit through collaboration with Zheng, promoting its tennis product line among young groups^[5]. Zheng's endorsement not only drives short-term sales through emotional arousal but also builds a deeper consumption stimulation chain by shaping brand meaning and cultural identity, providing a typical case for exploring celebrity-driven consumption transformation under consumption downgrade.

Existing research has focused on the promotional effects of celebrity endorsement on corporate

earnings and brand image^[6], but lacks in-depth exploration of its stimulation mechanisms under changing consumption structure. Traditional endorsement strategies mainly focus on endorser-product fit and communication effects^[7]. Yet in the current society where consumers pursue cost-performance and value, single exposure paths struggle to drive consumption decisions. This article takes the Qinwen Zheng–Nike collaboration as the research object, exploring how sports celebrity endorsement stimulates consumer purchase intention in the ‘consumption downgrade’ context, providing theoretical basis and practical insights for enterprise marketing strategies.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Symbolic Interaction Theory and Qinwen Zheng’s Image Symbols

Symbols are the basic intermediaries of social interaction—media for meaning transmission and identity recognition in social interactions^[8]. Their referential function promotes efficient social communication^[9]. In sports, athletes’ achievements, spiritual demeanor, and social images are symbolically perceived by the public^[10], becoming key factors connecting athletes, brands, and consumers.

Qinwen Zheng won runner-up at the 2024 Australian Open and China’s first Olympic tennis singles gold medal at Paris 2024, condensing ‘China—tennis—gold medal’ into her distinct personal image symbols. Her tenacity on court earned labels such as ‘Queen Wen’ and ‘female power,’ reflecting society’s value recognition and spiritual projection on female athletes.

From the perspective of symbolic interaction theory, Zheng’s image is continuously reproduced through mass communication, endowing endorsed brands with new cultural symbols. Consumers not only complete meaning recognition of the athlete but also construct their own social identity and group belonging through consumption behavior.

2.2 Scenario Extension under Sports Celebrity Endorsement

“Scenario extension” refers to celebrity endorsement breaking through single instrumental attributes, reconstructing brand connotations across broader social scenarios through cross-media narratives and situational recreation^[11,12]. Building on Baudrillard’s insight that contemporary consumption is about symbol systems and cultural meanings^[13], scenario extension promotes migration of brand value from the material level to the spiritual level.

In the Qinwen Zheng–Nike collaboration, scenario extension is particularly prominent. Her court tenacity aligns with Nike’s ‘Just Do It,’ constructing an inspirational scenario and associating consumer values with brand objects for youth self-construction^[14]. Her international achievements nationalize endorsement symbols, forming collective emotional cohesion. Her competitive authority converts consumer trust into brand quality confidence, echoing research on professional symbolic endorsement enhancing purchase intention^[15]. Her outfits, disseminated via social media, shape a ‘sports as fashion’ daily scenario, reflecting that consumption scenarios are key spaces for value co-creation^[16,17].

Online platforms achieve natural docking between Zheng’s endorsement scenarios and consumers’ daily lives—from competitive courts to urban streets, from functional equipment to fashion symbols—allowing consumers to ‘perform’ the idealized ‘Queen Wen’ image in reality.

Zheng’s endorsement achieves layered leaps in brand value: from product functions to spiritual symbols, and from consumption fields to cultural fields, strengthening emotional drive and promoting deep integration in daily life.

2.3 Value Reconstruction Perspective on Qinwen Zheng’s Image

Against consumption downgrade, consumers show rational pursuit of ‘cost-performance’ and heightened demand for spiritual compensation^[18]. Value reconstruction in this article refers to brands overlaying emotional, cultural, and social meanings onto functional values through sports celebrity symbolism^[19], reshaping consumer cognition and motivations. Qinwen Zheng’s value reconstruction effects are reflected in five aspects.

First, national symbol reproduction: Zheng’s breakthroughs bind personal achievements with national honor, strengthening brand-consumer emotional connections^[20]. Second, sports value chain

reorganization: her championship drives equipment and derivative consumption, converting emotional recognition into purchase behavior and brand loyalty^[21]. Third, youth culture redefinition: her confident, independent image links brand values with consumer self-recognition. Fourth, international discourse reconstruction: foreign media reports amplify transnational brand symbolic value^[22]. Fifth, commercial synergy: her Nike collaboration transforms brand value from ‘function—commodity’ to ‘culture—image—lifestyle,’ accumulating brand assets^[23].

The value reconstruction in Zheng’s endorsement compensates for psychological deficits from material consumption contraction, stimulating sports consumption through emotional recognition, cultural belonging, and social symbols. This illustrates that celebrity endorsement value lies not only in immediate stimulation but also in sustained brand-consumer interactions through cultural and symbolic construction.

3. Research Design and Methods

3.1 Qualitative Research

3.1.1 Case Anchoring

In this research process, through platforms such as WeChat public accounts, Weibo, and Baidu Encyclopedia, news related to Nike and Qinwen Zheng activities were searched, specifying ‘event marketing’ related cases as the analysis focus, selecting five characteristic cases (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1 Analysis of Qinwen Zheng’s Event Marketing Cases

No.	Case	Case Description
1	“Medal” Poster and Same-Style T-Shirt Launch	After the Paris Olympics women’s singles final, Nike quickly replaced the “medal” copy on Qinwen Zheng’s championship poster with “gold medal” and launched the same-style commemorative T-shirt that night, which sold out at one point.
2	“Victory Answers Everything” Promotional Video	Nike released a short film themed “Victory Answers Everything,” combining Qinwen Zheng’s match highlights with inspirational slogans, and widely disseminated it, enhancing the emotional association between the brand and the champion image.
3	“Winner’s Home Court” Fan Meet-Up	Nike held the “Winner’s Home Court” offline event, where Qinwen Zheng shared her court experiences and personally designed limited-edition shoes and T-shirts, interacting with fans on-site, while the shoes were sold for a limited time.
4	Post-Event Social Media Explosion	Nike continuously tracked event heat on platforms like Weibo and Douyin, coordinating with related topics for short video placements, synchronizing purchase links with topic reading volumes.
5	“Nike Alate Bra” Advertising Promotion	She promoted the Nike sports bra series “Nike Alate Bra,” appearing on Nike Women’s Instagram, and combining phrases like “Olympic gold medalist” and “closer to victory” in the copy, integrating sports performance with champion identity.

3.1.2 Case Analysis

In the social background of consumption downgrade, the event marketing cases triggered by the collaboration between Qinwen Zheng and Nike demonstrate how brands build emotional resonance and value recognition through symbolic empowerment of sports celebrities, thereby promoting the regeneration and upgrade of sports consumption. The following is the author’s analysis of the selected cases.

Case One: Awakening Emotional Resonance and National Identity. ‘Victory Answers Everything’ visuals and ‘Gold Medal’ posters created emotional climaxes for fans, transforming national pride into bidirectional consumption-emotion linkage through commemorative product purchases.

Case Two: Fusion of Material Carriers and Spiritual Projections. Fans purchasing Zheng’s same-style products project idol qualities through material carriers. Nike’s scarcity marketing generates ‘panic buying’ motivations, forming a reinforcement cycle between consumption psychology and idol pursuits.

Case Three: Strengthening Authenticity and Sense of Participation. Qinwen Zheng’s personal involvement in product design at the ‘Winner’s Home Court’ fan meet-up enhanced fans’ participation

and belonging, elevating brand trust and purchase conversion rates.

Case Four: Amplification of Community Fission and Word-of-Mouth Effects. Nike leveraged topic tags to drive fans' spontaneous sharing of purchase experiences, forming secondary word-of-mouth dissemination. Real evaluations in fan communities strengthened group imitation psychology and follow-up consumption.

Case Five: Enhancement of Functional Cognition in Segmented Product Lines. 'Nike Alate Bra' social media promotions, binding champion aura with event heat, significantly enhanced female consumers' product functionality cognition, expanding women's sports product line potential.

These cases reveal that consumers break through price sensitivity due to celebrities' symbolic meanings, forming emotion-driven consumption. Official data shows that within 48 hours of Zheng's championship, Nike's Tmall tennis apparel pages received over 20,000 visitors with 4,000+ adding to cart; tennis court bookings in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou saw significant increases—demonstrating event marketing drives not only product sales but the broader sports consumption ecosystem.

3.1.3 Text Analysis

Analysis of Zheng Qinwen's Popularity on Nike's Official Social Media Platforms. Weibo, with 431 million users, is the main platform for fan community aggregation. Comparing Nike's official Weibo data before and after Zheng's endorsement (73 data pairs), variance analysis shows extremely significant growth in Zheng-related posts (M before=147.75; M after=4194.78, sig<0.001), as shown in Figure 1.

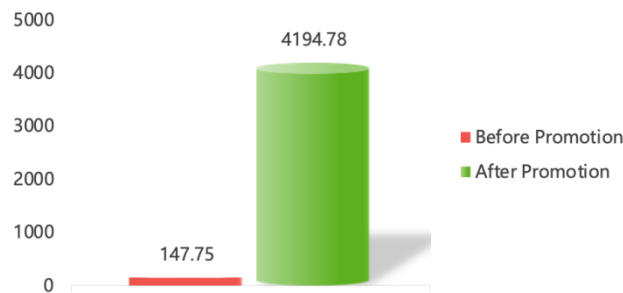


Figure 1 Zheng Qinwen's changes in likes and reviews before and after celebrity endorsement advertisements

(A bar or line chart comparing pre- and post-endorsement metrics for forwards, likes, and comments on Weibo posts. X-axis: "Before Endorsement" and "After Endorsement"; Y-axis: Average values. Significant increases are observed post-endorsement.)

#Topics# are key brand dissemination indicators. The #Qinwen Zheng# topic reached million-level daily interactions during the Paris Olympics, with 840 million total readings by May 2025; during the 2025 Rome semifinals, a related topic approached 4 million readings in three days. Fan groups also spontaneously become information nodes, generating word-of-mouth that attracts non-fan groups to pay attention and purchase.

Analysis of Narratives and User Comment Sentiment on Zheng Qinwen's Personal Social Media. Qinwen Zheng shapes a 'next-generation athlete' image combining professional strength and affability through Weibo content on training, match mindsets, and breakthrough experiences, enhancing immersion and interactivity with young users.

By analyzing 300 comments from 10 representative posts (2023–2024), we find that comment contents mainly focus on "encouragement", "blessings", and "praise". Brand promotion posts elicit consumption intentions such as 'after watching your video, I decided to play tennis,' reflecting that Zheng has transcended 'sports idol' positioning to become a 'life role model.'

From the brand perspective, Zheng's 'youth, effort, breakthrough' image aligns with Nike's 'Just Do It' narrative. Her public statement—'Nike reproduced this shoe for me, without them there would be no my Olympic champion'—sparked hot discussions with comment sections filled with purchase intentions, forming an emotion-driven path of 'inspiration—recognition—participation—purchase' through social media.

In summary, Qinwen Zheng achieves value reconstruction from 'emotional recognition' to

'consumption guidance' in social media contexts, providing market-penetrating dissemination paths for brands and expanding the stimulation mechanisms of sports consumption.

3.2 Questionnaire Survey

Brand Identification is usually defined as the emotional resonance, value fit, and symbolic belonging that consumers generate psychologically towards brands. Based on social identity theory, when individuals view brands as part of their self-concept or tools for self-expression, they form positive attitudes and preferences towards brands at cognitive and emotional levels. In the sports consumption field, sports celebrity endorsement amplifies brand emotional connotations through image binding and situational dissemination, allowing consumers to migrate emotions from supporting celebrities to brands. Existing research shows that brand identification has a more prominent driving role in consumption decisions for high-involvement products^[24]. Moreover, price sensitivity is an important variable measuring consumers' reaction intensity to price fluctuations. Brand identification has moderating and buffering effects in this process: when consumers form strong emotional attachments to brands, they are more likely to transcend rational price weighing, showing higher tolerance for high-priced products^[25]. Sports celebrity endorsement further amplifies this effect through tight connections between social images and fan emotions, making brand identification more prominent in moderating price sensitivity, thereby effectively promoting the elevation of purchase intention.

Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis H1: The higher the brand identification, the stronger the consumers' purchase intention.

Hypothesis H2: The higher the price sensitivity, the lower the consumers' purchase intention.

Hypothesis H3: The higher the brand identification, the lower the consumers' price sensitivity.

Hypothesis H4: Brand identification negatively moderates the relationship between price sensitivity and purchase intention.

3.2.1 Reliability and Validity Analysis

All questionnaire items in this article are adapted from mature scales at home and abroad and recompiled. Measurement items adopt a five-level Likert scale scoring method, with 1 representing "completely disagree" and 5 representing "completely agree." A total of 320 questionnaires were distributed, with 280 valid questionnaires, an effective rate of 87.5%.

This study conducted reliability and validity analysis on questionnaire data through SPSS, results show that the scale's Cronbach's α coefficient is 0.940, with extremely high internal consistency, good reliability, suitable for subsequent analysis. In terms of validity, the KMO value is 0.826, at a high level, indicating strong collinearity among variables. Bartlett's test of sphericity is significant ($\chi^2 = 1268.032$, $df = 105$, $p < 0.001$), the scale has good structural validity.

3.2.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 2 Correlation Analysis

	Purchase Intention	Brand Identification	Price Sensitivity
Purchase Intention	1	.812**	-.391**
Brand Identification	.812**	1	.087(NS)
Price Sensitivity	-.391**	.087(NS)	1

Note: $p < 0.01$, NS = not significant

As shown in the Table 2, it can be seen that there is a significant positive correlation between brand identification and purchase intention ($r=0.812$, $p<0.01$), indicating that the stronger consumers' identification with brands, the higher their purchase intention, thus supporting hypothesis H1.

Second, there is a significant negative correlation between price sensitivity and purchase intention ($r=-0.391$, $p<0.01$), indicating that the more sensitive consumers are to prices, the weaker their purchase intention, verifying hypothesis H2.

However, the correlation between brand identification and price sensitivity is not significant ($r=0.087$, $p=0.372>0.05$), i.e., no obvious linear relationship between the two, so hypothesis H3 is not supported.

In summary, H1 and H2 are established, H3 is not established.

3.2.3 Moderating Effect Analysis

Table 3 Moderating Effect Analysis

Variable	B	SE	t	p	Conclusion
Constant	4.800	0.210	22.857	<0.001	—
Price Sensitivity (X)	-0.600	0.120	-5.000	<0.001	Significant Main Effect
Brand Recognition (W)	0.450	0.100	4.500	<0.001	Significant Main Effect
Interaction Term (X x W)	-0.270	0.012	-2.250	0.016	Moderating Effect Significant

To test whether brand identification moderates the relationship between price sensitivity and purchase intention, this article uses Model 1 in the PROCESS macro for analysis. As shown in the Table 3, Results show that the interaction term “price sensitivity x brand identification” has a significant negative impact on purchase intention (B=-0.220, p=0.016), indicating that brand identification has a significant moderating effect on the relationship between the two. Further analysis finds that in groups with higher brand identification, the negative impact of price sensitivity on purchase intention is significantly weakened. This result verifies hypothesis H4.

Through data mining of consumption after Qinwen Zheng’s championship, combined with Nike tennis category sales data and the above hypotheses, the synergy of brand identification and emotional marketing can be confirmed. Nike binds Qinwen Zheng’s ‘gold medal’ symbols to upgrade products from functional consumption to emotional consumption, utilizing H4’s moderating mechanism to offset potential resistance from price sensitivity. At the same time, social media heat acts as a catalyst, accelerating the conversion efficiency from brand identification to purchase behavior, ultimately achieving dual breakthroughs in sales data and brand influence.

4. Mechanism Analysis Based on the Theoretical Model of Symbolic Empowerment-Scenario Extension-Value Reconstruction

Qinwen Zheng’s symbols of ‘gold medal girl,’ ‘female power,’ ‘youth idol,’ and ‘Chinese tennis’ generate emotional projections in consumer behavior, becoming brand entry points. Her traits of ‘perseverance,’ ‘patriotism,’ and ‘trend endorsement’ place Nike products in inspirational and national scenarios. Facing rational consumption trends, her four symbol categories prompt consumers to pay for endorsed products by integrating price, function, and emotional values.

As shown in Figure 2, this model presents a complete logical path from ‘emotional recognition’ to ‘rational consumption’ to ‘stimulating consumption behavior.’ Sports celebrities, by strengthening symbolic meanings and embedding diverse scenarios, prompt consumers to find recognition in individual emotions and social values, achieving a closed loop from brand influence to market conversion.

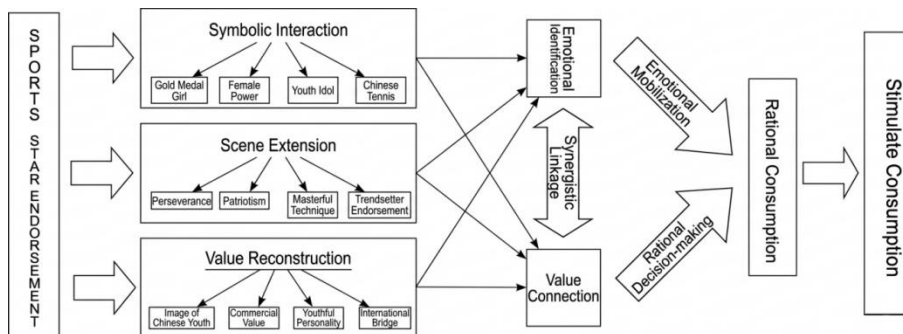


Figure 2 Theoretical Model of Celebrity Endorsement Stimulating Consumption

The Qinwen Zheng–Nike case demonstrates how sports celebrities stimulate consumption via the three-dimensional mechanism of ‘symbolic empowerment—scenario extension—value reconstruction’: symbolic images trigger emotional recognition; patriotic spirit and trend culture extend brand content to diverse scenarios; and multiple identities reconstruct product value, guiding consumers from attention to purchase.

5. Research Conclusions and Suggestions

5.1 Conclusions

First, celebrity endorsement achieves consumption drive through emotional recognition mechanisms. Qinwen Zheng, with her “inspirational, young, self-disciplined” next-generation athlete image, provides consumers with distinct emotional projection objects. In the process of purchasing her endorsed products, consumers not only obtain material use values but also achieve value connections to idol spirits. This consumption logic based on emotional recognition weakens price sensitivity to some extent, enabling brands to break through price-centered competition modes, effectively stimulating consumption intention, and providing theoretical and practical feasible paths for building “non-price driven” purchase motivations in consumption downgrade environments.

Second, the fit between brand narratives and celebrity images constitutes the core engine of dissemination drive. Nike’s “Just Do It” and “breaking through oneself” brand narratives form high-frequency alignment with Qinwen Zheng’s striving and enterprising sports image. Empowered by social media platforms, this fit is amplified through interactive dissemination, gradually forming a trinity closed-loop mechanism of “inspirational content—user participation—consumption behavior.” At the same time, celebrities’ personal account daily narratives further enhance fans’ emotional resonance, amplifying brand exposure and recognition in situational dissemination, providing solid support for brands to build sustainable community networks and emotional stickiness.

Third, the shift in consumer value orientations requires endorsement strategies to achieve synergistic optimization with cost-performance. In the increasingly significant trend of consumption rationalization, consumers’ purchase decisions increasingly emphasize practicality, cost-performance, and adaptability to daily consumption scenarios. Therefore, celebrity endorsement is no longer solely reliant on emotion-driven symbolic consumption but needs to rely on product functionality and cost-performance advantages, achieving dual matching of emotional values and rational demands. Through this synergistic linkage, celebrity endorsement can not only maintain consumers’ emotional resonance but also respond to their rational appeals, thereby achieving stability and extension of brand values in the context of consumption downgrade.

5.2 Suggestions

First, enhance narrative consistency and emotional connection power. Brands should ensure high matching between celebrity images and core brand concepts. Through continuous, life-oriented, and emotional narrative strategies on social media, enterprises can elevate user participation and enhance endorsement’s emotional resonance and brand recognition.

Second, strengthen product persuasiveness through dual ‘emotion + function’ dimensions. Enterprises should balance celebrity emotional values with product functional values, enhancing performance through technological innovation, strengthening experiences through scenario penetration, and improving purchase rationality through differentiated pricing to expand conversion paths from celebrity images to product recognition.

Third, build integrated ‘community operations + emotional marketing’ dissemination strategies. Brands can leverage celebrities’ social media platforms to create fan-centered community ecosystems through task-based interactions, co-branded collaborations, and UGC diffusion mechanisms—precipitating emotional assets and building long-term resonance-based dissemination mechanisms for sustained brand value amplification.

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