Research on the Use of Storytelling in Branding Chinese National Sports Brands

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Abstract. In the context of story marketing becoming the mainstream marketing tool for sports brands, Chinese national sports brands also need to write their own brand stories to improve their competitiveness. Using literature research and case study, this paper analyzes the story marketing of Xstep’s 2020 618 shopping festival and finds the brand stories of Chinese national sports brands. Based on the analysis, Chinese national sports have problems such as lack of continuity, lack of Chinese characteristics, single content and communication channels, and no feedback mechanism. Corresponding solutions are also proposed, including writing a sequel to the story, adding Chinese elements to brand stories, adding special characters that reflect the brand image to enrich the story, making full use of social media, and establishing a consumer feedback mechanism. This paper presents conclusions of general significance based on the analysis of Xstep’s brand stories. It provides a new approach to analyzing and implementing storytelling elements for Chinese national sports brands.

Keywords: Storytelling, Branding; Chinese National Sports Brands.

1. Introduction
1.1 Research background

The sports goods manufacturing industry in China has developed rapidly in recent years. In 2021, three Chinese sports brands ANTÀ, LI-NING, and Xstep, entered the global top 10 in terms of market value, which was 3852 billion yuan, 1940 billion yuan, and 248 billion yuan, respectively. In such a fiercely competitive environment, it is not only the quality and technology of their products that determine whether a brand can stand out but also the values and concepts conveyed by the products or services they offer are equally important. Telling a good brand story distinguishes a brand from other brands and helps position it and build its image. As one of the major marketing tools in modern times, storytelling plays an important role in branding and is increasingly used in sports. Internationally renowned sports brands such as Nike and Adidas started to sell experience and value instead of products only early. This is the trend, and if Chinese national sports brands want to improve their competitiveness, they will write their own brand story. Therefore, it is important to study the use of storytelling in Chinese national sports branding to guide the late start of the domestic sports market on how to create and use brand stories.

1.2 Literature review

Storytelling is a way to deliver information by telling a story, usually based on people’s real life. It has become a widely used marketing strategy that allows consumers to understand a product of enterprise culture better. Kristensen et al. considered that storytelling could add value to the products and give a sense of both functional and meaningful aspects of a product as a branding tool [1]. Pan and Chen found that consumers are more willing to purchase those brands they are more familiar with, and storytelling effectively promotes consumers’ purchase intention [2]. Lundqvist et al. reached a similar conclusion by doing comparative experiments that consumers exposed to brand stories are more positive about the brand and are willing to pay more [3]. Huang divided brand stories into three categories according to their character. The enterprise story focuses on establishing the brand, the internal organization, benefits and values, brand image, and social relationships. The product story is about the goods or services, including brand history and innovation, detailed descriptions of the
manufacturing process, etc. The consumer story involves consumers’ experience of the brand and the relationship between consumers and the brand [4]. Yang summarized the steps of story marketing: (1) positioning the brand accurately, (2) creating brand stories, and (3) establishing communication channels. She also mentioned that consumers would pay attention to the product when sports goods companies use storytelling in marketing [5].

Most articles analyzed the different ways to build a brand image, the impact of storytelling on brand image and consumer perception, and how to tell a good brand story and use storytelling for marketing. In contrast, few articles have examined the use of storytelling in sports brand image building.

1.3 Research framework

This paper will analyze specific cases based on the theoretical framework constructed by the previous authors, and finally, draw corresponding conclusions and make development suggestions.

2. Method

2.1 Case study

This paper aims to conduct an in-depth study of the current state of storytelling marketing for Chinese national sports brands, analyze the problems and draw conclusions accordingly. To ensure the typicality and representativeness of the analyzed cases, the selected case samples must meet the following selection criteria: (1) Alternative brands should be founded by Chinese entrepreneurs and have not brought in foreign capital to date; (2) Alternative brands should have developed to at least the maturity stage of the brand life cycle; (3) Alternative brands can carry out brand marketing strategy activities independently; (4) Alternative brands have newly created stories to promote in the last three years. Following the above four criteria, this paper searched the Internet with “Chinese sports brands” and “brand stories” as keywords and finally identified the research case as Xstep. This paper will use the theoretical framework constructed by previous authors to analyze the three short videos released by Xstep during the 618 online shopping festival in 2020 and study how Xstep used stories to build its brand image.

2.2 Literature research

There are many different perspectives on the theory of brand storytelling, with many different ways of defining and analyzing it. After reading a large amount of literature, the author chose the theoretical framework presented in Peng’s paper published in 2012 for a specific case analysis. Peng proposed a “brand narrative theoretical framework” consisting of 2 levels, 6 dimensions, and 17 elements [6]. This paper will use the theory’s last four dimensions (storytelling) to study and analyze.

### Table 1. The brand narrative theoretical framework by Peng

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2 Levels</th>
<th>6 Dimensions</th>
<th>17 specific conclusions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create stories</td>
<td>1. Story theme</td>
<td>(1) The theme of the story should reflect the core value of the brand and be embodied as the brand’s declaration and belief.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(2) The theme of the story should conform to the values of consumers.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(3) whether the story theme contains positive significance.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(4) The theme of the story should be selected around the characteristics of the brand, the history of the brand, or the future vision.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Story content</td>
<td>(5) Story characters can be shaped according to the brand prototype.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(6) The story should be unfolded according to the sequence or causality of the opening, middle, and end.</td>
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<td>(7) The plot should contain the conflict that causes tension, which is generally the contradiction between ideal and reality.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(8) The content of the story should make consumers feel authentic. It can use real people and real things, and it can also use the spokesperson recognized by the public.</td>
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<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>(9) The content of the story can use humor and other techniques to trigger the emotional reaction of the consumer.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(10) The content of the story should include what can be generally accepted by consumers. Consensus can be the common aspiration, experience or social norm of the group.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(11) If the story contain a promise to make a difference to consumers.</td>
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<td>3. Consistency</td>
<td>(12) Whether all story versions are spread around the same “core story” (brand proposition or belief).</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Differences</td>
<td>(13) Brand narrative should be based on the target audience (consumer group). Tell different versions of stories according to the characteristics and preferences and use appropriate story characters and language style.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(14) Brand narratives can be different in ways, times and occasions from other competitive brands.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(15) Brands can integrate advertising, songs, TV dramas, books, theme activities and other ways to spread the brand story.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Simplicity</td>
<td>(16) After the brand story is told, it will leave consumers space for imagination, and guide consumers to associate with the brand.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6. In stages</td>
<td>(17) The brand should decide the role, theme, audience and communication channel of the story according to different development stages.</td>
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</table>

3. Result

Chinese national sports brands have been using storytelling for marketing for a long time. The most famous example is Li Ning. Li Ning, the founder of the sporting goods brand “Li Ning”, started practicing gymnastics at age 8, joined the Guangxi provincial gymnastics team at 10, and was selected for the national gymnastics training team in 1980. In the World Cup gymnastics competition in 1982, he became the first gymnast to achieve such a feat, winning six titles, including free gymnastics, bars, vault, pommel horse, rings, and all-around. Li Ning has won more than 100 medals engaged in gymnastics for over a decade. In 1990, he founded Beijing Li Ning Sporting Goods Company [5]. The brand image of this sports brand has been firmly tied to the image of this outstanding athlete. People will think of Li Ning’s transformation from a world champion to a successful entrepreneur whenever the brand story is mentioned. However, according to the latest statistics for 2022, by coding and analyzing the 480 popular Weibo of Li Ning, Shao found that Li Ning’s official popular Weibo has the largest number of “behavior guidance” type content, accounting for 67.7%. Followed by “relationship building” type content, accounting for 23.8%, and the least amount of “information provision” type of content, which includes building the brand image, only accounting for 8.5% [7].

Chinese national sports brands rely heavily on entrepreneurial stories in storytelling marketing but fail to achieve good communication results. Xstep made a different attempt to promote the 618-shopping festival in 2020.

Xstep produced three short videos about people of different ages. The first one released on May 28 was called “Campus chapter”, telling a story of a male high school student facing tremendous academic pressure and the expectations of parents and teachers. At the end of the short video, he won the basketball game with a last-second kill. He also adjusted his mindset and was determined to study until the last minute. The second one released on June 4 was called “Workplace chapter”, telling a story of a young woman who just took up her career, was under huge work pressure, and was always denied by leaders. But in the face of such adversity, she was just like in sports. Even if bruised and battered, she chose to fight repeatedly. The third one released on June 10 was called “Middle Age”, telling a story of a man in his middle age, facing stress from work and family. Even though his life was full of hardships, he stopped occasionally but never gave up moving forward, just like when running. All three videos end with an emphasis on “moving forward to the ideal in your heart”. Next, use the framework to analyze these three videos.
Table 2. Analyzing Xstep’s brand stories with Peng’s framework

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Consistency</th>
<th>Differences</th>
<th>Simplicity</th>
<th>In stages</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(12)</td>
<td>(13)</td>
<td>(14)</td>
<td>(15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus chapter</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes (for students)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace chapter</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes (for newcomers to the workplace)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle age</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes (for people in their middle age)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</table>

The theoretical analysis shows Xstep’s story marketing is doing well in consistency and differences. The theme and slogan of the story remain consistent and different stories are created for different age groups. All three videos were released earlier than the 618 online shopping festival and did not clash with other brands. Each video has a corresponding poster, achieving a variety of formats. In terms of simplicity, these three videos also left room for consumers to imagine instead of writing the ending rigidly. But then Xstep did not continue the promotion or advancement of these three stories and did not keep up with the times.

4. Discussion

After using the theoretical framework to analyze Xstep’s story, it can be seen that its brand story framework is almost complete and has made a breakthrough in Chinese brand story marketing. However, there is still a gap between Xstep and international sports brands regarding storytelling and communication methods. This paper will give relevant development suggestions based on previous literature research and the case study.

4.1 The stories are independent of each other, and there is no subsequent extension

Authentic and concise stories resonate more easily with consumers, but independent stories are difficult for consumers to make long-term brand associations [8]. The three stories told by Xstep have three different protagonists, and no subsequent chapters are written, making it difficult to establish a long-term and stable brand image in consumers’ minds. This paper offers two kinds of solutions to this problem.

The first one is to make three stories interconnected, using the same main character to tell the story of the different stages of his life, from school to work to middle age. It releases these three videos one by one before the shopping festival continuously strengthening consumers’ impressions and understanding of the brand story.

Another one is to write a follow-up to each story, what twist or change happens when the main character overcomes a certain difficulty. For example, a student enters a new study stage after taking the college entrance exam; a newcomer in the workplace gets his or her first promotion; a middle-aged person solves a problem of a child’s education. It is a way to explain the story’s subsequent progress to consumers and make the story keep up with the times.

Both solutions aim to make brands more focused on continuity in storytelling. Independent stories can build the brand image, but continuous stories can better convey brand values and enhance consumers’ brand association.

4.2 The stories lack Chinese elements

Before story marketing became popular, some scholars pointed out that the brand culture of Chinese brands lacked innovation and was not sufficiently localized [9]. Xstep’s story marketing also has this problem, with a lack of obvious Chinese elements in these stories. Some existing Chinese
social phenomena or issues should be added to highlight Chinese characteristics, which can increase the identity of local consumers.

For instance, the “Campus chapter” can focus on Chinese students choosing a graduate school, studying abroad, and working after university. “Workplace chapter” can talk about the dilemma of newcomers in the workplace when facing forced socialization, such as group activities. “Middle Age” can illustrate the reality that middle-aged people have to face the pressure of supporting the elderly and taking care of children simultaneously and strive for success in the secular sense despite the loss of work-life balance.

Using distinctive social issues to build and convey brand values is more likely to gain high attention, but paying attention to the story’s content should also be in line with mainstream social values. This avoids the topic that is too sharp and may negatively impact the brand.

4.3 The story content is not diverse enough

Chinese sports brands strongly rely on star spokespeople in advertising, often ignoring the importance of sports for all [10]. These three stories of Xstep have no spokespeople participation, and the content is close to real life, but it also leads to the result of a small impact range and low spread. In order to be close to reality, resonate with the masses, and use the star power of professional athletes to expand the range of publicity, Nike chose a combination of professional athletes and sports for all in advertising [10]. Xstep can also choose a star to play a special role in the brand story to make the story more diverse.

These three stories are about three ordinary people of different ages, lacking a character that can highlight the brand’s personality. For example, when it comes to fields where trust is an essential element of the relationship, including healthcare and financial services, companies may choose the persona of a “mentor” who provides guidance or a “mom” who provides nurturing and safety [11]. As a sports brand, Xstep should choose an image that aligns with its brand philosophy, “a never-ending tester”, and work with sports stars to tell the story.

4.4 Insufficient communication formats and lack of feedback mechanisms

Xstep has more than one official account on social media platforms such as Weibo and Kuaishou, so when releasing these videos, they were not placed on each account entirely, resulting in some restrictions on the dissemination channels. Take Weibo as an example, there was less interaction between consumers and the brand, and the story’s effect could only be reflected in the sales of 618 shopping festivals, lacking an effective feedback mechanism.

Xstep should use social media platforms, including its official and kol accounts in the sports field, to place advertisements. In addition, it is necessary to establish an effective consumer feedback mechanism. Xstep can implement a campaign in the official online shop that answers the questions to receive coupons. By asking consumers to identify Xstep’s tagline, the characteristics of the story’s main character, and describe their perception of the brand in order to get feedback on the brand story and make improvements based on it.

5. Conclusion

This paper uses literature research and case study to study the use of storytelling in branding Chinese national sports brands, taking Xstep as an example, and finds some problems in brand storytelling. Brand stories do not have continuity and cannot establish a long-term stable brand image in consumers’ minds. Lack of Chinese elements in brand stories, resulting in the brand culture of Chinese national brands without local characteristics. The content of the brand story lacks diversity and does not combine sports stars and sports for all. The form of brand story communication is limited, and there is no feedback mechanism. To address these problems, the following solutions are proposed in this paper. Appropriately extend the storyline of brand stories to keep up with the times. Add specific phenomena or issues in Chinese society to brand stories to enhance consumer identity.
Collaborate with a sports star and make him a special character in the brand story that can reflect the brand image. Make full use of social media to spread brand stories and get consumer feedback through questionnaires and other means.

This paper presents conclusions of general significance based on the analysis of Xstep’s brand stories. It provides a new approach to analyzing and implementing storytelling elements for Chinese national sports brands.

The research in this paper has certain limitations, as Chinese national sports brands started late in storytelling marketing, there are limited cases to choose from, and only the storytelling marketing of Xstep’s 2020 618 shopping festival is specifically analyzed. At the same time, this paper does not collect primary data and only uses secondary data for analysis and research.

In future related studies, attention should be paid to the current development status of Chinese national sports brands and benchmarking of the international sports brand storytelling marketing process. Further, optimize the theoretical framework of brand storytelling, and establish a perfect consumer feedback mechanism to change consumers’ perception of the brand in time to facilitate the brand to make marketing strategy adjustments.

References