

A Study on the Marketing Strategies of Emerging Sports Brands: Taking SPO Basketball Shoes as an Example

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Abstract. The research deeply discovers and observe a brand called SPO. Its unique method of selling products and marketing strategy attract me to find out its effect on promoting the brand's fans to follow and purchase their products. What's more, SPO's creator coconut's way of setting and managing the brand is really worth working on, it has found out some main strategies and perfect effect of their promoting way. This research could be used and referred by the sports market in the future, especially those who don't have a huge market scale. Large-scale sporting events are not only platforms for competition but also crucial mediums for promoting a city's image. For instance, Liaoning Province has significantly enhanced its "Sporting Liaoning" city brand through hosting events like the National Games and marathons, leading to increased cultural tourism revenue and investment attraction. Also, focus on the globalization of brands and products, and strive to have a clear and accurate understanding of the actual situation of brand development, to provide a foundation for the brand's future sports marketing and global development.

Keywords: Branding; Sports marketing strategies; Sneakers design.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Research Topic

“Starting from February of the Lunar New Year in 2021, he began shooting short videos with a fun attitude, sharing stories about my collection of basketball shoes, mostly those of Kobe. used Douyin to talk about the stories behind the shoes he bought over the years, their practical performance, design concepts, and my understanding of them. In about half a year, he accumulated 60,000 followers. Since the content he shared was neither interesting nor funny, it did not fall into the category of entertaining content on Douyin.

This conversation cut from interviews of Coconut, the creator of SPO, shows exactly why he set this personal brand. However, not even himself has thought of it would be such popular, not only in China, but it also even stood on the stage of NBA.

In recent years, the e-commerce market size of sports brands has grown rapidly. The popularization of the Internet and the transformation of consumer shopping habits have driven more people to purchase sports products on e-commerce platforms. From 2020 to 2024, the global sports brand e-commerce market size increased from 33.102 billion US dollars to 36.581 billion US dollars, with a compound annual growth rate of 2.56%. The Chinese market has shown significant growth, exceeding 542.5 billion yuan in 2024, accounting for 20.90% of global sports brand sales. This is attributed to the convenience of e-commerce, rich product offerings, and improved logistics, which have attracted young consumers. Big data and artificial intelligence help brands accurately understand consumers and implement precise marketing; virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) provide immersive shopping experiences; live-streaming sales and social e-commerce have brought new opportunities [1].

1.2. Research Objectives and Research Significance

Large-scale sporting events are not only platforms for competition but also crucial mediums for promoting a city's image [2]. In the research, the main point is to find out why SPO as a small-scale sneaker E-commerce has been able to quickly capture the popularity and a portion of the market share in the sneaker market. Can this unique case in the sneaker market be applied to larger markets? In

addition, in-depth research into the brand's marketing methods can also provide some references and reflections for future e-commerce platforms and sports brands.

1.3. Research Methods and Research Framework

According to the national sports industry data for 2019 released by relevant national authorities in December 2020, the total scale of sports-related production in China reached RMB 2,948.34 billion. In nominal growth terms, the overall output value increased by 10.9% compared to 2018, while the value-added rose by 11.6%. A detailed analysis of the composition of the total sports industry scale reveals that the sports service sector experienced the most rapid development, with a value-added of RMB 761.5 billion. This sector accounted for 67.7% of the sports industry, marking an increase of 2.9 percentage points from the same period in 2018. Within this category, the sales and trade of sports products and facilities constituted the largest segment, achieving a value-added of RMB 256.2 billion [3].

After conducting a lot of research and observations on SPO's e-commerce platform by comparing the sales performance of products at various price points. By controlling variables, it could identify the relationship between sales volume and the set price as well as product type. In addition, they personally purchased some products of this brand for trial wear and went out to test the performance of each product along with its corresponding price and sales volume. Investigating the popular demographic is also important, such as which age range is more favorable to SPO, and how SPO's marketing methods relate to its target audience. The most important core is to track the relationship between SPO's niche marketing and sales methods and its industrial data and public opinion, which can lead to the most accurate and objective research on the marketing strategies of emerging sports brands.

2. Literature Review

2.1. SPO Brand Introduction and Development Status

SPO (Serious Player Only) is a Chinese brand focused on basketball shoes and street culture, dedicated to presenting the unique aesthetics of Chinese basketball to the world. Founded in 2019 by Ruoye Qin who were influenced by foreign fashion and street culture during their studies in the UK and returned to China to co-find the brand.

The brand philosophy of SPO is 'Maintain the original voice and do everything purely', majoring in a lifestyle atmosphere of 'Life, Nature, Enjoyment', mainly featuring a simple, daily comfortable casual style, paying attention to design details and interesting patterns. The core idea of the brand is to maintain purity and focus on doing well every product.

Currently, SPO basketball shoes have the following main series:

First, Player Series: The brand's early product line, using NERVNIT upper with TPU yarn lining, with a large number of fiber threads to enhance tensile strength, equipped with a replaceable midsole design.

Second, The Ranger Series: Uses full genuine leather upper with strong wrapping, the sole has serrated tread for anti-slip and wear resistance, with design inspiration from outer spaceships.

Third, Easy1 Series: The latest product line launched, with a foldable tongue that can be adjusted to high/low top, equipped with two different performance insoles, focusing on dual scenarios of the court and daily commuting.

In terms of technical features, SPO basketball shoes adopt:

Replaceable midsole design, providing different performance choices; Nylon TPU braided upper, enhancing wrapping and support; Full-length serrated sole pattern, enhancing grip and wear resistance; Finally, Three-density shock absorption structure, adapting to different sports needs

2.2. Competitive Position and Industry Analysis

As a new brand, SPO's competitive position in the basketball shoe market has the following characteristics. Advantages: Unique design language and aesthetic concept; Innovative technologies such as replaceable midsoles; Higher cost-performance ratio (compared with international big brands) and Ability to respond to market changes quickly. Challenges: Supply chain is not mature enough, leading to difficulties in cost control. Brand awareness still needs to be improved; Compared with international big brands, lacks historical accumulation.

At the industry level, the global basketball shoe market size reached 1.9128 billion yuan in 2025, and the Chinese market size reached 467.5 million yuan. As a new brand, SPO is finding opportunities in the red ocean market through differentiated strategies.

2.3. Latest Developments and Development Trends

Recent developments of the SPO brand include Firstly, Launching the Easy1 High high-top shoes, which can freely switch between high-top and low-top modes. Continuing to deepen its co-branding strategy by collaborating with popular IPs to release limited editions What's more, expanding its offline store network to enhance consumer experience.

Future development trends may include Continuously strengthening the design language of 'Chinese Aesthetics and Modern Trends or Optimizing the supply chain to reduce costs. Then, gradually penetrating from the high-end market downwards. At last, Strengthening the integration of online and offline channels. As a representative of China's emerging basketball shoe brands, SPO is seeking its positioning and development space in the highly competitive market through unique design concepts and product innovation.

3. Analysis of SPO Marketing Strategy Based on the 4P Model

3.1. Product Strategy

In terms of the products quality, some consumers have reported issues such as severe inward curvature of the shoes, TPU (sneaker parts that protect ankles) parts pressing against the sides of the feet, poor wrapping, ankle discomfort, and insufficient inner support, leading to unsatisfactory performance and low cost-effectiveness.

From my personal experience, its products have unique and advanced conceptions. However, its lack of safety and unstable supportiveness to my feet also gave me negative feedback.

In order to create a high-quality basketball shoe, Coconuts made tremendous efforts in the product development process. He personally participated in every part, from determining the style of the design drawings, to creating 2D and 3D drawings, developing wooden molds and production molds, as well as making and testing sample shoes. Throughout this process, he continuously tried and discovered, experiencing countless dissatisfactions and adjustments. For example, to achieve the goal of lightweight, he tried his best to reduce the weight of the shoes in material selection. At the same time, he innovatively introduced a replaceable midsole design, which although had some problems in the initial stage, attracted widespread attention in the market. "This is not my shoe, it's 'our' shoe," Coconuts defined the product philosophy of SPO in this way. During the R&D process, he maintained high-frequency interaction with fans through the Douyin platform, directly incorporating user feedback into product iteration. For instance, Player1's lacing system was criticized by users for being easy to loosen, and the team quickly adjusted and launched an improved version; the upturned toe area of the third midsole was also canceled, which originated from the common suggestions of dozens of users.

Through the Douyin platform, Coconuts established close connections with fans, allowing users to deeply participate in the product development process. This user-co-creation model not only makes the product more in line with consumer needs but also enhances users' identification with the brand.

In the operation of SPO, some fans have even become Coconuts' friends. "Warrior", a fan from Beijing, is one of them. Every time a pair of SPO basketball shoes is released, "Warrior" will buy it immediately. After receiving the goods, he sometimes sends improvement suggestions with a ruler measurement.

3.2. Price Strategy

The pricing is relatively high, targeting the mid-to-high-end market. The first sneaker, Player 1, has a launch price of 1080 yuan, which is higher than some well-known basketball shoe series from Li-Ning during the same period. Among domestic basketball shoes, they fall into a higher price range, making it subject to stricter quality scrutiny and more skepticism. What's more, SPO never change their price even if the products have been crazily purchased.

3.3. Promotion Strategy

SPO employs diverse marketing strategies and excels at leveraging traffic. By signing NCAA star Xavier Lee and NBA rookie Mobi, they utilize player influence to boost brand awareness. Also, they invite American street ballers such as Slim, who come to China for living as their image ambassador and players under their management. They sponsor a famous university team with clothes, sneakers and even a stadium. It also collaborates with basketball influences for promotion and gains extensive exposure on platforms like Douyin (Tiktok), quickly accumulating high popularity. SPO is really good at promoting their product by exposing them to self-media celebrities who are popular with the young generation.

3.4. Channel Strategy

Traditional shoe enterprises rely on offline channels and large-scale sales on e-commerce platforms, but as a startup brand, SPO neither has a huge marketing budget nor a mature dealer network. The 'interest recommendation + content planting' model of Douyin E-commerce has allowed Yezhi (Coconut) to see an opportunity. Also, SPO has market overseas, people from other places out of China could purchase their products in real sneaker stores of SPO, according to the data shown online, their business overseas was rather welcomed and earn some popularity.

4. Suggestions for the Future Development of the SPO Brand

4.1. Suggestion1: Lowering the Price, Improve the Product's Safety

From my perspective, SPO could slightly lower their price and improve the technology and material used on their products. It's true that they have explored an entirely new way of brand managing, constructing bridges to consumer's requirements is necessary. There were so many people I knew that give up purchasing their products because of the unreachable price.

Experiential retail: Physical stores can set up interactive spaces such as midsole replacement experience zones and customization service areas to enhance consumer participation and brand recognition.

Membership system optimization: Establish a tiered membership system, providing high-frequency consumers with privileges such as exclusive midsole configurations and rights to purchase limited editions to improve user stickiness.

4.2. Suggestion2: Telling Stories

Strengthen the brand narrative of 'Chinese Aesthetics + Modern Trends', showcasing cultural confidence through design details (such as traditional patterns and color application), thereby distinguishing itself from international luxury brands.

In addition to signing professional basketball athletes, it can also collaborate with KOLs in street culture and trendy fashion fields to expand the brand's influence among general sports enthusiasts.

While maintaining the current mid-to-high-end positioning, it can develop a 'Youth Edition' product line (simplified configuration but retaining core design) to attract student groups and cultivate potential customers for the future.

To adapt to the marketing development needs of the global sports brand market, domestic sports brands have formed new brand positioning, and on this basis, launched new products and services, enabling domestic sports brands to achieve good marketing results [4].

Prioritize overseas cities with concentrated Chinese communities (such as Los Angeles and Vancouver) for small-scale pilot programs to test market acceptance in international markets.

Sponsor amateur basketball leagues or street basketball events to gain brand exposure at a relatively low cost while collecting real user feedback. As a representative of China's emerging basketball shoe brands, SPO has the potential to establish a more solid competitive position in the highly competitive sports shoe market if it can systematically optimize the supply chain, deepen brand building, and accurately expand the market while maintaining design innovation [5].

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the emergence of SPO has also brought some new possibilities to the domestic sneaker market. Perhaps, in the future, more homegrown brands will make their mark on the international stage. Coconuts are full of anticipation for the future of the industry: 'When every brand starts to truly value user feedback, Chinese manufacturing will inevitably make a qualitative leap.' SPO's story proves that in this era of consumer sovereignty, those who best understand their users will ultimately become market winners. From a small creative idea to growing into a prominent sneaker brand, SPO's story is not only a personal entrepreneurial journey for Coconuts but also an example of the rise of new-generation brands. A good marketing strategy is a competitive advantage.

In terms of their general weakness: SPO is a relatively young and unique brand managed by personal celebrity Coconut. It takes E-commerce sales(Live-stream selling, online platforms) for a large account, with tiny scale of retail and production it could be less popular with the diminish of some players they sign with. Their sale accounts would go straight downwards if the exposure isn't strong as before.

Their series of sneakers is fewer than other brands, which means they introduce new products much slower. Moreover, their inventory is particularly small, and they don't restocks very often which cause some consumers to lose their expectation to the brand. Also, its expensive price determines that they couldn't attract abundant buyers.

The Internet era has given new brands different opportunities. From reviewing sneakers to manufacturing them, he is taking a path that no one has walked before. Just as the new energy vehicle industry once experienced transformation, the basketball shoe industry may also be in need of new thinking at this time.

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