

Analysis of the brand image transformation of Chinese sportswear and sports shoe brands——Based on the cases of Li Ning and Anta

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Abstract: *This thesis analyzes the brand image transformation of two of China's top sports brands, Li Ning and Anta, with the aim of extracting the successes of Li Ning's and Anta's transformations and offering advice to other sports brands. It also analyzes the shortcomings that still exist in the transformation of these two brands. This will also form part of the advice for other brands not to make the same mistakes in the future. In this thesis, we use theories mainly from the marketing field, such as SWOT analysis and brand image. Market research is also done to collect consumers' opinions and comments to evaluate the result of the brand image transformation of the two mentioned brands. At the end, the advices that are taken out from the transformation of the two brands are presented to give suggestions to other brands and also to the two brands themselves.*

Keywords: *Marketing, sports brands, Li Ning, Anta, brand image, SWOT analysis, Market research*

1. Introduction

As the Chinese economy and the purchasing power of the Chinese people continue to grow, there is a demand for higher quality sports shoes and apparel. However, until 2010, Chinese sports brands had their own advantage in terms of low prices, a feature that now prevents them from competing with foreign brands whose products have high quality and good design, such as Nike and Adidas. Ultimately, Chinese companies are offering products that do not meet the needs of Chinese consumers. As a result, they had to change their brand image. Today, some brands have been making this shift for years. For example, Li Ning has launched a fashion brand, China Li Ning, with well-designed products and relatively high prices. And Anta has signed several NBA stars, such as Klay Thompson and Rajon Rondo, and has launched many high-quality products at high prices. However, the process of changing the image of these brands is far from easy as they have long been perceived by consumers as low-priced and poorly designed.

However, Anta and Li Ning, the first companies to initiate a brand image transformation, have been successful in several ways. On the one hand, studying their successes so far can offer some advice to companies that are planning a rebranding or are in the process of doing so. On the other hand, studying some of the mistakes made by these two brands during their transformation process can help not only other companies, but also themselves.

In this thesis, theories such as brand image, consumer decision and SWOT analysis were used to evaluate the results and impacts of the brand image transformation carried out by the two brands. A market survey was also conducted to collect consumers' opinions, which was part of the evaluation of the transformation results. In addition, the thesis also analyses financial indicators to assess whether this strategy helped the two companies to grow.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Brand image

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is necessary to understand exactly what brand image refers to and what it means in the field of sports products.

When we talk about brand image, we refer to the set of meanings that consumers perceive about a brand[1]. Specifically, it can be said that the image of a brand is the first word or image that is evoked in

the mind of costumers immediately after hearing the brand name[2]. And there are many factors that influence this word or image, such as the pricing of the product, the slogan, the culture that the brand promotes and represents, the image of the brand ambassador, etc. For example, when we think of Apple, we think of innovation and the high pricing of Apple products has also led to the positioning of Apple as a high-end brand. People can't help but label people who use Apple products as "have high income" [3]. The same explanation exists in the case of sports product brands. Nike's slogan, "Just Do It", represents the culture that Nike promotes. It encourages people to do what they want to do, without hesitation. Such an evocative slogan can easily resonate with consumers and be recognized by them. In addition, Nike's pricing strategy also allows people to consider it as a premium brand, which is of course backed by its excellent R&D capabilities.

3. Introduction of related background information

3.1. History of Li Ning

Li Ning Group was founded in 1990 by Li Ning, a famous gymnast who won three gold medals at the Los Angeles Olympic Games.

The history of its development can be divided into four stages[4].

Stage I (1990 to 2003): Li Ning was established in Sanshui, Guangdong Province of China. Leveraging on Mr. Li Ning's personal influence and the shortage of sports brands in China at that time, Li Ning grew rapidly. Since 1992, Li Ning Group has been the sponsor of the Chinese national team for four consecutive Olympic Games, and in 1993, Li Ning Group moved to Beijing. In 1998, Li Ning established its own sportswear and footwear product design center.

Stage II (2004 to 2010): The event that marked the beginning of this stage was Li Ning's listing on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. In 2008, Mr. Li Ning lit the torch at the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, an event that also brought much publicity to the Li Ning brand. In 2010, Li Ning achieved a market share of 9.7% in China, surpassing the German brand Adidas and only 5% below Nike.

Stage III (2011 to 2014): In this stage, Li Ning Group encountered an unprecedented crisis. In 2012, Li Ning became the sponsor of the CBA (Chinese Basketball Association), China's top-level basketball league, for RMB 2 billion for 5 years. In this year, Li Ning also signed NBA player Dwyane Wade to a 10-year, \$100 million contract, making him the brand ambassador. Despite the huge investment in marketing, Li Ning has not innovated in terms of design, technology, management and channels. Coupled with changing consumer demands, the rapid development of the digital economy and the impact of the financial crisis around 2008, Li Ning found itself in deficit for three consecutive years starting in 2012. It was not until 2015 that it returned to profitability.

Stage IV (2015 to present): In 2015, Li Ning changed its brand positioning from a provider of sports products to a provider of an "Internet + sports" life experience. It put consumer experience at the forefront. Meanwhile, Li Ning created a fashion brand, China Li Ning, which appeared at New York Fashion Week in 2018. Li Ning's revenue reached RMB10.197 billion, net profit grew to RMB1.962 billion in the first half of 2021. This marks the desired effect of Li Ning's brand image transformation strategy.

3.2. History of Anta

Anta Group was founded in 1991 by Mr. Ding Shizhong, and is headquartered in Jinjiang City, Fujian Province, China, where a large number of shoe factories are located and where Chinese factories that manufacture shoes for some international brands such as Nike and Adidas are also located. Like Li Ning, Anta was one of the first Chinese sports brands to establish itself and took advantage of government support to achieve rapid growth. In 2004 Anta became a sponsor of the Chinese Basketball Association, the first Chinese sports brand to sponsor this league. In 2007, Anta was listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange and in 2008 launched Anta Kid to enter the children's footwear market. In 2009, Anta acquired Fila's business in mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau. In 2014, Anta became an official partner of the NBA. In 2018, Anta and the Beijing Winter Olympic Games Organizing Committee have agreed on a partnership to supply sportswear to 24 Chinese national teams.

According to the financial statement released in mid-2021, Anta Group achieved revenue of RMB 22.81 billion in the first half of 2021, surpassing Adidas' revenue in the Chinese market. Net profit reached RMB 3.84 billion.

4. Case analysis of Li Ning and Anta

4.1. Brand image survey of Li Ning and Anta

4.1.1. Questionnaire design

The aim of the survey was to measure the brand image of Li Ning and Anta in the minds of Chinese consumers. By comparing Li Ning, Anta and other Chinese brands, these two brands and well-known foreign brands to infer whether their brand image transformation strategies have worked. As well as investigating the reasons why consumers currently buy Li Ning and Anta products.

In terms of brand image, the author designed two identical questions for each of the two brands. Question 1, Do you think Li Ning/Anta is a high-end or low-end brand compared to other Chinese sporting goods brands? (such as Guirenniao, Qiaodan, Xtep etc.) The different scores represent: 0=very low-end, 5=equal to other Chinese brands, 10=very high-end; Question 2, Do you think Li Ning/Anta is a high-end or low-end brand compared to international sports brands? (such as Nike, Adidas, Under Armour etc.) The different scores represent: 0=very low-end, 5=equal to international brands, 10=very high-end.

As for consumers' purchase motives, the author proposed the following options: high quality (variable 1), relatively low price (variable 2), the culture and personality that the brand represents (variable 3), to support Chinese brands (variable 4), I like the brand ambassador (variable 5), I think this brand is very professional (variable 6) and I have not bought the brand's products (variable 7).

As for the questions in the questionnaire, L1, L2, A1 and A2 are mainly used to verify whether Li Ning and Anta have become higher-end brands compared to other Chinese sporting goods brands and are already almost at par with international brands such as Nike and Adidas after the implementation of their brand image transformation strategy. If it is true, some advice can be drawn from the experience of these two brands and given to other Chinese sporting goods brands.

Questions L3 and A3 can be used to study the reasons why consumers currently buy Li Ning and Anta products. Different variables are used to measure different aspects, e.g. variables 1 and 2 are used to measure the brand from a product perspective (quality and price), variable 3 is used to measure the culture that the brand represents and variable 4 represents the phenomenon of "national pride" that currently exists in the Chinese market. Variables 5 and 6 represent the marketing success of the two brands. Most important is the brand culture as measured by variable 4. This is because success, whether of a product, a social phenomenon or marketing, is relatively short term. Only if a brand is culturally successful can it succeed in the market in the long term and become a truly high-end brand.

4.1.2. Result of the survey

The language of this questionnaire was Chinese and the opinions were collected online through an application called Wenjuanxing. The author distributed the questionnaire online on the Chinese social networking application, WeChat, on 10 April 2022. As of 26 April 2022, the author had received 552 questionnaires. 531 of them were valid questionnaires. Invalid questionnaires were judged by selecting "I have never bought Li Ning or Anta products" and any other option in questions L3 or A3 (the question on purchase motives). That is, the respondent selected at least one purchase reason and "I have never bought Li Ning or Anta products" at the same time. The data were processed by Excel. The results of the questionnaire are as follows.

Table 1: Results of question 1 about Li Ning (L1)

Do you think Li Ning is a high-end or low-end brand compared to other Chinese sports brands? (such as Guirenniao, Qiaodan, Xtep etc.) 0=very low end 5=equal to other Chinese brands 10=very high end		
Score	N.	Total score
1	0	0
2	0	0
3	0	0
4	22	88
5	54	270
6	86	516
7	105	735
8	136	1088
9	99	891
10	29	290
Total number		531
Average score		7.30

Table 2: Results of question 2 about Li Ning (L2)

Why do you buy Li Ning products? (you can choose more than one option)		
Option	N.	Percentage of case
High quality	102	10.93%
Relatively low price	227	24.33%
The culture and personality that the brand represents	120	12.86%
To support Chinese brands	228	24.44%
I like the brand ambassador of Li Ning	16	1.71%
I think this brand is very professional	145	15.54%
I have not bought Li Ning products	95	10.18%
Total number	933	

Table 3: Results of question 3 about Li Ning (L3)

Do you think Anta is a high-end or low-end brand compared to other Chinese sports brands? (such as Guirenniao, Qiaodan, Xtep etc.) 0=very low end 5=equal to other Chinese brands 10=very high end		
Score	N.	Total score
1	0	0
2	0	0
3	0	0
4	51	204
5	74	370
6	109	654
7	134	938
8	112	896
9	49	441
10	2	20
Total number	531	3523
Average score	6.62	

Table 4: Results of question 1 about Anta (A1)

Do you think Li Ning is a high-end or low-end brand compared to international sports brands ? (such as Nike, Adidas, Under Armour etc.) 0=very low end 5=equal to other Chinese brands 10=very high end		
Score	N.	Total score
1	7	7
2	53	106
3	138	414
4	109	436
5	107	535
6	80	480
7	27	189
8	8	64
9	2	18
10	0	0
Total number	531	2249
Average score	4.24	

Table 5: Results of question 2 about Anta (A2)

Do you think Anta is a high-end or low-end brand compared to international sports brands ? (such as Nike, Adidas, Under Armour etc.) 0=very low end 5=equal to other Chinese brands 10=very high end		
Score	N.	Total score
1	10	10
2	62	124
3	163	489
4	132	528
5	82	410
6	42	252
7	29	203
8	9	72
9	2	18
10	0	0
Total number	531	2106
Average score	3.97	

Table 6: Results of question 3 about Anta (A3)

Why do you buy Anta products? (you can choose more than one option)		
Option	N.	Percentage of case
High quality	134	13.47%
Relatively low price	287	28.84%
The culture and personality that the brand represents	79	7.94%
To support Chinese brands	177	17.79%
I like the brand ambassador of Li Ning	32	3.22%
I think this brand is very professional	90	9.05%
I have not bought Li Ning products	196	19.70%
Total number	995	

Based on the results of questions L1 and A1 we can conclude that Li Ning and Anta are higher-end brands than other Chinese sporting goods brands in the minds of Chinese consumers. Because both results are more than 5 points.

From the questions L2 and A2 we can conclude that Li Ning and Anta are relatively close to being world famous brands in the minds of Chinese consumers. Because the results of these two questions are relatively close to 5 points.

As for the purchase motivation, we can see that Chinese consumers buy the products of these two brands mainly because of their lower prices and because they are influenced by the "national pride" in the Chinese market. Compared to the two factors mentioned above, the culture represented by the brand plays a minor role in consumers' purchase decision. In addition, the low percentage of cases of the variable L3 V5 and A3 V6 shows that the two brands have not done a good job in choosing their brand ambassadors. Li Ning does a better job than Anta in terms of product professionalism. For Li Ning's products, professionalism is the third reason for purchase, after low price and "national pride". For Anta, the quality of its products is the third reason for purchase. This reflects the results of the Anta Group's investment in product development in recent years.

4.2. Internal analysis

4.2.1. Li Ning

4.2.2. Actions it has taken

A. Change of brand logo and slogan

The first brand logo used by Li Ning is considered to be an imitation of the Nike brand logo. Its slogan, Anything is possible, is also believed to be an imitation of Adidas' advertising slogan: Nothing is impossible. This has left Li Ning with a bad impression in the minds of Chinese consumers and has been the subject of much criticism. Li Ning has therefore changed both the logo and the slogan of its brand.



Figure 1: Li Ning's old logo and slogan in Chinese

The new Li Ning brand logo is more modern in design, but also inherits some of the elements of the old logo. The new slogan, Make the change, encourages consumers to express themselves and change the status quo, in line with the attitudes of today's youth and demonstrates Li Ning's attitude towards

change itself.

B. Change of target audience

As young people born in the 1990s have become the main consumers of sports products, Li Ning has made this group a new target audience in the process of transforming its brand image [5]. In terms of product design, Li Ning has invested heavily in hiring foreign fashion designers to develop new products that respond to the aesthetics of young people. In terms of brand promotion, it is also catering to young people's attitude to life. At the same time, Li Ning is also putting more emphasis on new media promotion than traditional advertising channels.

C. Change of positioning and entry into the high-end.

Before Li Ning changed its brand image, it had been oscillating between the low and middle market and the high-end market. On the one hand, in order to compete with international brands such as Nike and Adidas in terms of market share, Li Ning had to launch high-quality and high-priced products. On the other hand, it did not want to give up the large amount of mid- and low-end market share it had previously achieved. As a result, Li Ning's low-end and mid-range products have had a negative impact on its competitiveness in the high-end market. Following the launch of its brand image transformation strategy, Li Ning has firmly established its determination to enter the high-end market, as evidenced by these actions:

Increasing product prices. From June 2010 to date, Li Ning has made several price increases on its products. Currently, the prices of most of Li Ning's products are close to those of mid-range Nike and Adidas. The price increases are partly due to the rising prices of labor and raw materials, and partly due to Li Ning's requirement to change its brand image and enter the high-end market.

Increased investment in science and technology. In September 2010, Li Ning announced a partnership with SKINS Australia, whose sports compression tights and shirts are among the most advanced in the world. Following the launch of SKINS sports compression tights and shirts, Li Ning also actively promoted this product in the CBA league, leveraging its presence in the professional league to create a high-end image for the new products. Li Ning has also opened a research and development center in Portland (USA), one of the most technologically advanced footwear manufacturing locations in the country. Portland is home to a large number of footwear companies and talent, and opening an R&D center there will also help Li Ning attract talent.

Increased investment in marketing. In addition to investing heavily in research and development, Li Ning has also increased its investment in marketing. For example, it spent RMB 2 billion (266.7 million euros) to buy the naming rights of the CBA league from Anta. It also signed many world-class athletes. By partnering with professional leagues and famous athletes, Li Ning manages to increase its professionalism in consumers' minds, which in turn has a positive effect on its brand image.

4.2.3. SWOT analysis

A. Strength

- **Reputation of the founder:** In 1989, Mr. Li Ning, known as the Prince of Gymnastics, founded the Li Ning Group after retiring from gymnastics. While other brands created at the same time were still struggling to gain popularity, Li Ning quickly made a name for itself in the Chinese market and became a well-known brand within the country thanks to its own reputation. Since Mr. Li Ning represented China as an athlete and won many world championships, the Li Ning brand also has a unique sporting spirit and embodies patriotism, an advantage that other brands do not have.

- **High-quality marketing resources:** Thanks to Mr. Li Ning's influence and contacts in the sports industry, Li Ning Group has access to more professional sports teams and famous athletes. Li Ning Group has signed contracts with NBA Shaquille All-Star Players such as O'Neal, Dwyane Wade Jimmy Butler etc., and sponsored national teams such as badminton team, table tennis team and gymnastics team, all of which are very competitive and have won gold medals in world competitions such as the Olympic Games and World Championships, so they can get great exposure for Li Ning brand. In addition, in the transformation of its brand image in recent years, Li Ning has hired many famous Chinese singers and actors, in order to promote its fashion brand.

- **Better market knowledge:** As a local Chinese brand, Li Ning has a more accurate knowledge of the domestic sporting goods market and is better able to understand consumer needs compared to foreign brands. In terms of decision-making, Li Ning can complete market research, decision-making and strategy implementation more quickly, as there is no communication between different countries.

B. Weakness

- Consumers born in the 1990s and the 21st century are unaware of Mr Li Ning's achievements: The current target audience for Li Ning's marketing strategy is younger consumers born in the 1990s and the 21st century. They are looking to rejuvenate their customers. However, this consumer segment is less familiar with Mr. Li Ning. Moreover, because they had access to brands from other countries when they were growing up, there is no special bond between them and Li Ning, which existed between older consumers and Li Ning. In fact, consumers born in the 1960s and 1970s are the brand's loyal customers. They have lived through the periods of Li Ning's creation, rapid growth, glory and decline. Moreover, they have witnessed the many moments when Mr. Li Ning has achieved many honours for China. Therefore, they have a special affection for Mr. Li Ning and the Li Ning brand. How to avoid losing loyal customers and how to effectively attract a younger clientele is a major challenge for the Li Ning Group.

- Consumer confusion over brand logos: Li Ning has adopted a multi-brand strategy. There is no doubt that this has been beneficial for Li Ning in meeting the needs of different market segments. However, this strategy will not achieve the desired results if consumers are not clear about the differences and connections between these brands. This is what is happening now. Below are some of the main brand logos currently used by Li Ning.

C. Opportunities

- Support from the government: the Chinese government has started to promote the sports industry. Documents and policies supporting the development of sports enterprises are constantly introduced, which is favorable for Li Ning's development.

- National pride of Chinese consumers: as China plays an increasingly important role in the world community and global business system, the national pride of the Chinese people is increasing. In addition, China Central Television has launched a series of programs to promote traditional Chinese culture, such as National Treasures and the Poetry Contest. This series of events has made today's Chinese consumers increasingly proud of Chinese culture. They are also increasingly inclined to buy products from local Chinese brands. With this trend, more and more Chinese brands have become international brands in recent years, such as Huawei and OPPO in the communications sector and BYD in the automotive sector. Taking advantage of this trend can give Chinese sports brands a relative advantage over foreign brands. And Li Ning has done just that. It has incorporated many traditional Chinese cultural elements into its products, which are popular with Chinese consumers.

- Continued growth in the number of people participating in doing exercise: with the development of the economy and government propaganda, more and more people in China are exercising regularly. As shown in Figure 2, the number of people who exercise regularly in China has increased from 360 million in 2015 to 435 million in 2020. This number is expected to increase to 530 million in 2030, according to plans by the General Administration of Sports of China. All of these people are potential consumers of sports products. This means that this market is expanding rapidly and represents an opportunity for Chinese sporting goods companies.



Figure 2: The logos Li Ning is using

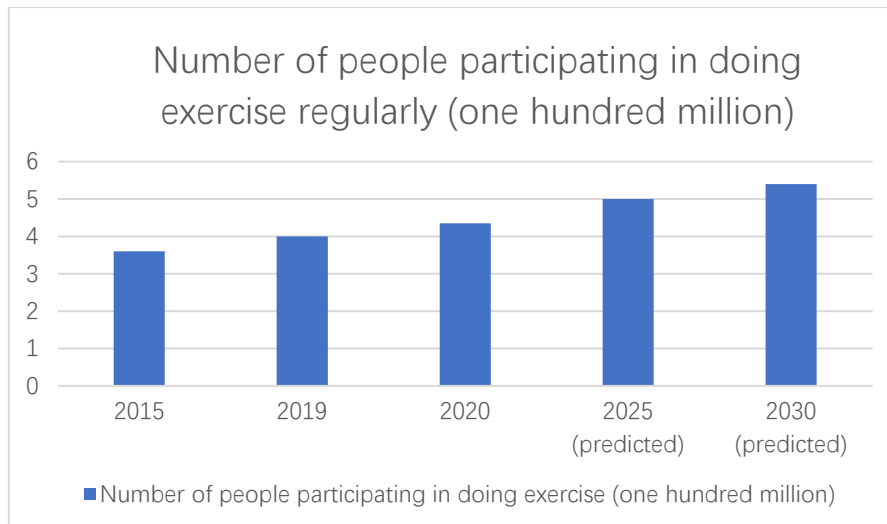


Figure 3: Number of people participating in doing exercise regularly

D. Threats

• The most important threat to Li Ning comes from foreign sporting goods brands, such as Adidas and Nike. These two brands now have the largest market share in China. In the past, when Li Ning implemented its "low price strategy", it succeeded in gaining access to the second and third tier cities in China. In contrast, international brands such as Nike and Adidas have captured the market in first-tier cities. In other words, in the past, Li Ning's source of revenue came mainly from the middle and low-end market, while other internationally renowned brands' main revenue came from the high-end market. Now, with the development of small and medium-sized cities in China and the potential of the sports product market being exploited, Nike and Adidas have also announced their entry into the markets of small and medium-sized cities, thus posing a threat to Li Ning's once major market [6]. In addition, compared to its two brands, Li Ning has no advantages in product design, research and development, marketing and distribution. Although Li Ning sponsors several Chinese national sports teams, Nike also has strong marketing resources. It is the sponsor of the Chinese national soccer and basketball teams, both women's and men's, which are also the two most marketed and popular sports in China. It has also signed many famous athletes, such as basketball players Yi Jianlian and Guo Ailun, track and field athletes Su Bingtian and Liu Xiang, and tennis player Li Na. Adidas also sponsors the Chinese Volleyball Association and is a sponsor of the Chinese women's volleyball team, which is very competitive in the world.

Table 7: Number of followers on Weibo (The most used social networking software in China) of athletes signed by Nike. Until February 26, 2022

Name of the athlete	Number of followers
Yi Jianlian	15.7 million
Guo Ailun	5.3 million
Su Bingtian	5 million
Liu Xiang	2.7 million
Li Na	21.5 million

4.2.4. Anta

4.2.5. Actions it has taken

A. Investment in technology and development

Like Li Ning, Anta, having achieved some success in the Chinese market based on imitating the products of well-known brands, hoped that by strengthening its investment in technology and R&D, it could completely change from its previous image in the minds of consumers. In recent years, the Anta Group has set up experimental facilities such as the sports science laboratory, testing laboratory, advanced materials laboratory, footwear innovation laboratory and intelligent manufacturing laboratory. And design and R&D centers have been established in China, the United States, Japan, South Korea, Italy and other countries. A sports fashion research center has also been established together with Tsinghua University, one of the top universities in China.

B. Collaboration with the International Olympic Committee

In 2015, when Beijing was successful in its bid to host the 2022 Winter Olympics, Anta, a Chinese sporting goods brand, seized the marketing opportunity and gained a lot of brand exposure between 2015 and 2022. In 2009, Anta became an official partner of the IOC until 2024 and in 2019, Anta succeeded in becoming the official supplier of the IOC. At the closing ceremony of the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics, IOC President Bach announced that the Winter Olympics entered "Beijing Time" with an Anta down jacket. At the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, the Chinese team wore Anta down jackets for the opening ceremony, which was widely commented on Chinese social media.

During this Winter Olympic cycle from 2015 to 2022, Anta has gained great exposure through its partnership with the International Olympic Committee and the Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games Committee. It has also strengthened its professionalism in the minds of consumers through its association with China's top professional athletes. This has been very favorable for the transformation of the Anta brand.

C. Acquisition of other brands positioned in the high-end market.

As mentioned above, Anta's approach to implementing a multi-brand strategy is to acquire other existing brands. Each brand differs in terms of price, segmentation, products and services to meet different consumer needs and cover more market segments.

Anta's main brand, Anta, mainly targets the low-end and mid-range market, but thanks to its collaborations with several NBA stars and the International Olympic Committee, it has also launched some high-quality and recognized sports shoes and apparel for professional athletes. The task of entering the high-end market is mainly carried out by the three brands FILA, DESCENTE and KOLON. On the one hand, these brands come from abroad and it is easy to establish them as high-end brands in the minds of Chinese consumers. In addition, these brands are specialized in a particular field. Therefore, their products are of very high quality.

4.2.6. SWOT analysis

A. Strengths

- The multi-brand strategy has yielded good results: Compared to Li Ning's multi-brand strategy, Anta's multi-brand strategy is clearly more successful. The two have different multi-brand strategies. Li Ning develops new brands on its own, while Anta develops new brands by acquiring subsidiaries of foreign brands in China. In this way, consumers will not be confused about the positioning of the brands. Anta has acquired the Chinese subsidiary of Italian brand FILA, Japanese skiwear manufacturer DESCENTE and Korean mountaineering materials manufacturer KOLON, whose products are a good complement to Anta's products. Not only do they not clash with Anta's products, but they allow the company to enter more market segments. The brands have an independent image to avoid confusion.

- It has a healthy financial situation: in 2020, Anta's revenue reached RMB 35.512 billion, surpassing Li Ning and Adidas. Net profit reached RMB 5.162 billion and gross margin reached 58.2%, the highest among the four companies - Nike, Adidas, Li Ning and Anta. The debt ratio once stood at around 50%. All these figures show that Anta is currently in a healthy financial position, which gives it sufficient funds to take the next step.

B. Weaknesses

- Anta started its internationalization strategy late. Compared to Li Ning, which signed NBA star Shaquille O'Neal in 2007, Anta did not go public until 2007 and did not start its high-end and internationalization strategy until later. As a result, Anta has a shorter development time and less experience than other international brands and some of the fastest-growing Chinese brands.

- Anta's slogan is not appealing enough to consumers: Anta's slogan is Keep Moving, and these two words do not convey the brand's personality. This slogan can be used by any brand, and it is not different from other brands' slogans, which makes it more difficult for consumers to remember the brand. In addition, Anta lacks long-term consistency in the choice of brand ambassadors[7]. In 2013, Anta signed Chinese table tennis players Zhang Jike and Liu Shiwen as its main brand ambassadors. But later on, Anta made NBA player Klay Thompson its main brand ambassador and launched high-priced products related to him.

C. Opportunities

Same as the analysis of opportunities in point 2.5.1.2.

D. Threats

Same as the analysis of threats in point 2.5.1.2.

5. Suggestions for other sports brands in China

After analyzing the brand transformation process and results of two of the most successful sporting goods brands in China today, Li Ning and Anta, we can draw some advice for other sporting goods companies trying to transform their brand image.

5.1. Develop research and design capabilities with a product focus

Both Li Ning and Anta increased their investment in research early in their transformation. This is because consumers are no longer satisfied with the basic functions of sports footwear, but prefer to pay for products that can bring them a special experience. Chinese sporting goods companies started late and in the early stages of their development focused too much on taking advantage of low labour prices in China to capture the market. Now, this advantage no longer exists. If companies want to break away from their original brand image, they have to break away from their original business model. They have to stop relying on low labor prices and use technology as their new advantage.

5.2. Develop marketing resources to increase brand professionalism with the use of endorsements from athletes and professional organizations

Through the previous analysis of Li Ning and Anta's brand image transformation process, as well as our knowledge of existing high-end brands such as Nike and Adidas, we can say that high-end brands cannot be separated from the endorsement of professional athletes and institutions. In addition to being able to use partnerships with athletes and organizations to increase brand exposure, what is more important for brand image is that these partnerships increase the level of professionalism of the brand in the minds of consumers. This is because products used and endorsed by professional athletes and institutions are necessarily the best.

On the other hand, products associated with a famous athlete are often more likely to reach the high-end market and be recognized by consumers as a high-quality product. For example, Li Ning's top-of-the-line basketball shoe range is the Way of Wade series, developed by former NBA player Dwyane Wade. The average price of all basketball shoes in this series exceeds RMB 1,000 (142 euros), a price that is already on a par with the high-end products of Nike and Adidas. Moreover, the demand for this line of basketball shoes usually exceeds the supply, and the price on the secondary market is always higher than the official price.

5.3. Have a clear positioning

Today, most Chinese sporting goods companies have already achieved some success in the mid- and low-end market. And this segment constitutes a large part of their revenues. In this context, there are some companies that try to enter the high-end market but are not willing to give up their market share in the middle and low-end market. As a result of this thinking, there is often a lack of clarity in brand positioning. It can make the original mid-market consumers feel that the price is high, and it can also make consumers in the high-end market not recognize the brand.

In response to this, other sporting goods brands in China may opt for a multi-brand strategy, as Li Ning and Anta are doing. The aim of a multi-brand strategy is to cover a wider range of market segments. By adopting this strategy, companies can use their original brands to continue to generate revenues in the low-end and mid-range markets while building high-end brands. However, it is important to make the difference between the two clear to consumers, to avoid the two brands having a negative impact on each other and impeding each other's growth.

5.4. Develop the culture that represents the brand

A great brand adheres to and spreads a culture that resonates with consumers. This makes the target audience become a loyal "believer" in the brand, as is happening with the Apple brand at the moment. However, neither Li Ning nor Anta, the main brands analyzed in this article, nor other Chinese brands have performed well in this regard. Therefore, they need to continue to improve on this point. First of all, it is necessary to choose one or more values that represent the company's culture. In addition, it is

important to ensure that consumers recognize these values and find them attractive. Secondly, it is important to reinforce the link between the brand and these values so that consumers associate the brand with the values when they mention them, to have a clear positioning.

6. Conclusions

Through case studies of the brand image transformation of Li Ning and Anta and related market research, the following conclusions are drawn.

Firstly, for the case studies of the brand image transformation of Li Ning and Anta, the author found that these two brands were more successful than other Chinese brands after their brand image transformation, but there is still room for improvement. For example, in terms of product quality, the choice of brand ambassadors and the culture they represent.

Secondly, based on the above market research and case studies, the author offers advice to other Chinese sports brands trying to change their brand image, based on the successes and shortcomings of Li Ning and Anta, including develop research and design capabilities with a product focus, and marketing resources, using endorsements from athletes and professional bodies to enhance brand professionalism, having a clear positioning and focus on the culture and the attitude that the brand represents.

7. Limitations

The analysis in this thesis can still be improved. For example, the conclusions drawn from the market research would have been more accurate if the "national pride" factor, which is likely to be a short-term influence and cannot be controlled by the companies themselves, had been excluded. In addition, this study was not sufficiently convincing in the selection of the survey sample. The reason is that the authors do not have access to the number of Li Ning and Anta consumers. Therefore, it is not possible to derive a sample size based on the total number. In addition, the author could not guarantee that all respondents had actually purchased a Li Ning or Anta product. If the author had access to Li Ning and Anta's internal information and could contact consumers of both brands in the future, the survey data would be more accurate. As for the suggestions given to other Chinese companies, in future research the author can analyze to what extent each strategy has helped the company separately. For example, if it is concluded from this specific survey that increasing product professionalism helps the brand the most, then these SMEs with limited financial resources could focus most of their resources on prioritizing increasing product professionalism and thus increase the effectiveness of their brand transformation.

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