Digital Marketing Traffic Optimisation and Growth Strategy According to the AARRR Model: The Estee Lauder Case

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Abstract. This paper discusses Estee Lauder's digital marketing strategy using the AARRR framework. There has been a significant transformation of the global beauty industry in the digital sector, marked by the introduction of social media, e-commerce, and smart technologies, which has essentially redefined the relationship between customers and brands. The Acquisition, Activation, Retention, Revenue, Referral (AARRR) model, as a closed-loop logic based on user behaviour, offers a scientific model of analysis for systematically optimizing user lifecycle value within the stages of acquisition, activation, retention, revenue, and referral. The study has theoretical and practical importance. In principle, it broadens the usage of the AARRR model to the luxury consumer goods sector to add value to the body of growth hacking in high-priced brands. In practice, it offers practical implications to international beauty companies to work in the complicated digital world of China and to combine brand equity maintenance with growth via performance. Key implications indicate that prioritizing progressive changes by turning traffic-centric to user-value-centric, premium consumer brands stand to grow sustainably in the digital age, at a balance between brand equity and performance, with precision marketing approaches to the marketing of a brand as scientifically validated narratives and the application of scientific data.

Keywords: Digital Marketing Luxury Brands, Estee Lauder, AARRR Model Luxury Brands.

1 Introduction

The digitalization wave is drastically changing the global business environment, and the beauty and cosmetics industry is not an exception, as it is immersed in the essential shift. On the one hand, the intercombination of social media, e-commerce platforms, and intelligent technology gives the brands diverse channels and data to access consumers. Conversely, the most massive traffic dividends and viewing attention that resembles splintered glass have rendered obsolete the old broad-based advertisement and widespread acquisition of customers, where the prices increase, and the effectiveness reduces. The question of how to transition to focus on the breadth of

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traffic to focus on user engagement and build on user lifetime value, and how one can create sustainable growth in the midst of strong competition, has become one of the central propositions of the leading beauty and cosmetics brands with high holding power.

In this regard, it is important to choose a scientific analysis framework with which the entire lifecycle value of users can be investigated in a systematic manner. The Acquisition, Activation, Retention, Revenue, Referral (AARRR) funnel model is a model developed by Dave McClure in 2007, which includes five main steps: Acquisition, Activation, Retention, Revenue, and Referral. This growth trajectory-based model divides growth objectives into optimizable, measurable, statistically phased indicators, offering a complete analytical view of any business, whether by acquiring traffic or exploring values. Precision marketing and user operations in the consumer goods industry have also largely employed the AARRR model to direct their operations. Its closed-loop logic of being user-friendly is similar to the present-day industry of making products of beauty and cosmetics that seek meticulous development.

Being one of the world leaders in the high-end beauty market, over recent years, Estée Lauder has undertaken systematic layouts within the sphere of digital marketing, which have provided abundant cases and data of organizational structure modifications to localized practices of innovation. The given research aims to focus on the Estée Lauder as its research object and conduct a systematic analysis of its traffic optimization and growth policy according to the AARRR model, which will help to unveil the logic of user operations of the representative of the high-end consumer goods sphere during the period of digital era, give a reference strategy to the industry, and add new empirical insights to the application of the AARRR model in the involved domain.

2 Digital Marketing Environment and the Present Position of the Estee Lauder companies

2.1 Introduction to the Group and Its Major Brands

The Estée Lauder Companies is a global conglomerate in the beauty industry, which was formed in 1946, and has enjoyed a high-end positioning, research and development capacities that are innovative enhanced and a brand portfolio management strategy. It has operations in more than 150 countries and regions and has over 25 brands which cut across four broad categories, namely, skincare, makeup, fragrance, and hair care. In 1995, the company was listed on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE).

2.2 Digital Beauty Market Competitive Landscape of China

Today, the Chinese beauty market has ushered into a sensitive period marked by greater segmentation, greater investment in research and development, and higher consumer demands and preferences for individualization and effectiveness. As competition ceased to be about traffic acquisition and turned into technology empowerment and brand value differentiation, exhibiting three major features: a market structure dominated by the leading players, online channels becoming the major driver, and AI

technology remaking industry rules. E-commerce digital marketing: it is highly diversified, targeting consumers with high accuracy, data-driven innovation, and multi-channel integration [1].

2.3 Estee Lauder: The Holistic Digital Marketing Strategy and Framework

Organizational Agility, technological insight, and channel integration all contribute to making Estée Lauder leverage its agility in traffic and data, and extend its strengths to digital competitive advantages and build comprehensive advantages in digital competition. The digital marketing of Estee Lauder in China is based on the consumer-centric approach, leading to a change in three main dimensions:

Top-Level Strategy. It is important to deploy a direct-to-consumer (DTC) model and collaborate with Shopify to provide personalized experiences and use AI platforms like ConsumerIQ to make decisions based on the data; use AI and Augmented Reality (AR) systems to enrich the consumer experience. New brand idea, develop information platforms, brand image emphasis, data construction, multi-channel integration [2].

The Implementation of Localization. Through its emotional appeal of storytelling with the 2025 "520" campaign, the brand was able to attach emotional symbolism to the product features, and thus add an extra layer of emotion, ensuring a subsequent purchase intention- in the case of the 2025 "520" campaign. Estée Lauder partnered with a popular short-form drama couple to sell its lipstick, equating to a 5x Return on Investment (ROI) and an 800% increase in search volume on TikTok; the brand also dropped into Honor of Kings as it collaborated with Offline, the concept has switched to being more sales-driven to be more experience-driven, e.g., La Mer has introduced the spa experience at high-end hotels, whereas Le Labo has integrated into local cultural venues like Shikumen in Shanghai and Courtyard Houses in Beijing.

Foundational Support. The company first added the Chief Digital and Marketing Officer position in 2025 to manage the worldwide digital strategy; it uses generative AI in marketing content creation without restraint, but has banned using AI-generated human images. In fiscal year 2025, it made a record percentage of 31.0 of the total sales online.

The overall plan may be summed up in a plan (See **Fig. 1**).

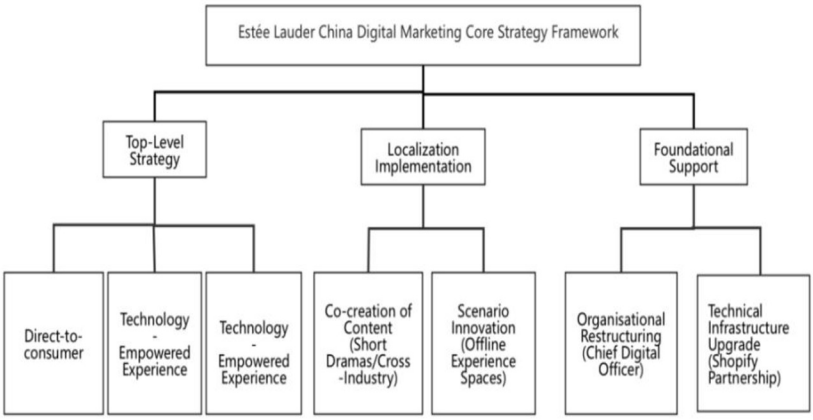


Fig. 1. Core Framework for Digital Marketing (Picture credit: Original).

3 Evaluation of the Traffic Optimization and Growth Plans of Estee Lauder in Accordance with the AARRR Model

3.1 Adoption of the Cross-domain Traffic Approach as the Initial Step in the Acquisition Process

The dual-engine model builds more exposure and conversion efficiency, but also makes the company more reliant on the influencer ecosystems and potentially raises the cost of acquiring traffic, integrating the best-in-class influencer livestreaming with brand-owned livestreaming, using hosts such as Jia Nai Liang to drive viral customer acquisition. On social media, it will activate tiered Key Opinion Consumer (KOC) management in Xiaohongshu, where new customer penetration of the product in the Darphin x "Emotional Aesthetics" co-branded campaign can be increased by 9 percentage points. On the offline side, it uses ultra-luxury hotel spas and cultural landmark experience stores to specifically target the high-net-wealth consumer. The fundamental theory here is not a traffic-based way of thinking but a user-based approach, where promotion tactics are no longer used but rather careful content to find channel synergy as well as data empowerment. 4P-optimized digital marketing acquisition cross-domain traffic acquisition [3].

3.2 Activation: Crafting a High-Conversion First Experience

The Activation stage that Estée Lauder has developed is based on the following multidimensional activation system: contextual reach, reduction of trial barrier, content resonance, and engagement on the owned platform. The core strategies are: full collaboration with the Huawei Weather to engage in accurate targeting when the

weather is hot; the use of the Sampl platform to execute accurate sample distribution, a purchase conversion rate of more than 20%-through the accurate sampling ability provided by the Sampl platform, brands of the Estee Lauder Group have achieved a purchase conversion rate of more than 20%.Moreover, the anti-aging cream sampling of the Estée Lauder flagship brand to high-value customers, aged 40 years and above, had a purchase conversion rate of 26, which drove brand conversion through the associated emotional marketing of the 520 campaign and in-depth seeding on Bilibili, and facilitated continued activation by livestreaming on the brand. This system will be a transition toward "spray-and-pray" strategy to "refined and meticulous cultivation, " and promotion-driven strategies to value-driven interaction, and effective conversion of traffic into first purchase. Sustainable digital transformation in South-South cross-border E-Commerce: Implications of cultural adaptation and green marketing strategy and inclusive business model innovation [4].

3.3 Ecosystem Development and Membership Cultivation in Private-domain Retention

Estée Lauder has developed a four-dimensional retention system based on Claire Customer Relationalship Management positions so that the user growth and retention strategies could be coordinated, with Customers Relationalship Management roles established with the aim of transforming its Tmall flagship store into a user asset management platform rather than a sales channel. For organizational support, Customers Relationalship Management positions were created to make sure that the user retention and growth strategies were aligned, with the Tmall flagship store being used as the primary platform to manage user assets. Operational-wise, Estée Lauder uses the audience segmentation capabilities of Tmall to optimise its membership programme: new clients are served with the personalised membership benefits, i.e., depending on their individual needs, whereas existing customers will have differentiated rewards depending on their spending size (e.g., the standard members or the high-value platinum members). They are tiered points redemption and exclusive repurchase voucher, as well as a new product trial privilege. This intensive strategy is an efficient way of maximizing the lifetime value (LTV) of every member. According to data released during the August 2025 Tmall Golden Beauty Awards, in the course of strong cultivation of member LTV, the leading brands of the beauty category such as Estee Lauder demonstrated a high growth in retention with an increase of repeat-purchases by 23% each year and transaction value of the platform high-purchasing-power segment of beholders known as the 88VIP segment has risen by 25% each year. Combining the advantage of cross-scenario experience with online platforms, like Fliggy and Amap, to build the value of members further, and establish emotional bonding, including fragrance workshops offline. The business concept changes, from one-time purchases to full-lifecycle, using data-based segmentation, predictive analytics, and an enhanced level of membership benefits, as part of maximizing customer lifetime value. Professions DeFi platforms promote retention and the development of membership by increasing the degree of engagement and trusting approaches [5].

3.4 Mining the Revenue-Full-Path Value

Estee Lauder constructed a four-dimensional revenue growth model in the Fiscal Year (FY)2025 that includes product innovation premium and channel-efficiency optimization, growth category expansion, and medical aesthetics scenario extension. The 7th-generation Advanced Night Repair serum takes advantage of scientific validation to care about charging a higher price; the sales of the item on Douyin during Double 11 increased by more than 50%. The only increasing category (up 13% in the first quarter FY2026) is fragrance, which backs up this growth strategy, as Estee Lauder has a clear understanding of the trend of skincare supported by science. The 2025 period of the Double Eleven had been found to display strong parameter-based purchasing behavior of beauty products- more than ninety percent of consumers were found conducting research on what they put on their skin, and almost 60 percent were found to seek efficacy assurance. The seventh-generation Advanced Night Repair serum took advantage of this market situation, so its luxury price tag was based on the scientifically proven effectiveness. It ensured brand premium pricing power during this period of logical consumption by developing a sense of consumer trust with open efficacy information and ingredient research. Estée Lauder enhanced synergy and store livestreaming on Douyin in its channel strategy. International luxury brands in the 2025 Double 11 period of Douyin took up more than 40 percent of total Gross Merchandise Value (GMV), where the number of merchants with more than 100 million yuan in store broadcast sales increased by 900 percent annually. With a highly sophisticated live-streaming business, Estee Lauder realized more than 50 percent growth in this time frame, penetrating into a larger youth consumer demographic. At the same time, the group has found a new business growth factor in the fragrance business. The net sales in the fragrance category were US$1527 million as indicated in the first quarter (Q1) FY2026 financial report of Estée Lauder, which is an increase of 13 percent per annum. It has experienced growth in all the geographical regions with strong performance in premium brands such as Le Labo, TOM FORD, and Jo Malone. It has changed its strategic core of traffic monetization to value extraction, whose gross margin has increased by 74 percent. The company targets to recover organic growth in FY2026.

3.5 Referral-user Recommendation Endorsing

Estée Lauder has established four-dimensional self-propagation strategy-content-driven engagement, cross-category breakout, mechanism design, and social momentum leveraging- using short-form drama marketing to generate social currency, using the Honor of Kings collaboration, letting community barriers be broken down and cross-circle virality to be ignited; systematizing word-of-mouth amplification, the Soreto Referral Program, which uses a systematic viral mechanism activated after purchase and projected a 118% growth in the conversion rate and a ROI of 1, 000, high conversion growth When the order is finalised, a personalised sharing window will be shown on the thank-you page and will encourage the customers to save private offers to their friends. Referrers also get discount rewards, and those who are new users get first-purchase incentives. Referral links are disseminated free of charge and on social and messaging platforms without spending any money on paid media, which results in

a closed-loop referral expansion system where the costs of media are zero, and trust is highly rated as the endorser. Importantly, Estée Lauder used the implicit A/B testing functionality of Soreto to continuously test the visual design of the referral page, the type of rewards (samples, gift cards, or discounts), and the wording. The brand confirmed the most beneficial incentives that could be used to increase the rate of conversion and retain the premium position by testing consumer preferences in various markets. This elegant viral approach eventually resulted in a 9 percent increment in the average order value and it had gained an amazing 1000 percent of the earned capital clearly reflecting this strategy as extremely successful in the long-term outlook, but the basis by which the case study compares this statistic (year-over-year, month-over-month, or control group analysis) is not clearly stated in publicly available resources. And take advantage of the trending topics and social proof to enhance the effect of the organic word-of-mouth. The brand is transitioning to a user-led, co-creation-based brand instead of a brand-led narrative with a mix of control of brand identity and participatory consumer engagement, resulting in authentic advocacy that makes every purchase the point of customer acquisition and creates a flywheel of self-reinforcing growth. TikTok makes use of external sharing capabilities and challenges to propagate virally through personal social networks, drawing in new users and cutting marketing channels [6].

4 Performance Evaluation, Challenges and Optimisation Recommendations

4.1 Performance Analysis: General Effectiveness of Digital Growth Strategy

The Estée Lauder Companies has made a great score in traffic optimisation and user growth through its digital marketing strategy driven by the AARRR model to create measurable results in both quantitative and qualitative metrics across the brand equity measures. The financial data show that although there are overall performance demands, digital channels have become a workforce of growth. The third quarter of fiscal year 2025 recorded the growth of organic sales to online channels at mid-single-digit growth by means of pure-play e-commerce and third-party platforms. The sales made online now represent 31 percent of the total revenue every year. This information implies that online reinvention is aiding the strength of Estee Lauder in the face of declining trends in the markets.

In the context of user acquisition and conversion, the scenario-based marketing plan of Estée Lauder has been very successful. An example would be the 2025 Summer Cooling Initiative collaboration with Huawei Weather. The project produced over 900 million online impressions, created an excess of 1.2 million clicks to the mini-program inside the brand, and obtained a total of 7.2 million page views on the benefits redemption page, by generating smart push notifications on sunscreen products, when exposed to a situation causing overheating. The case study has just supported the effectiveness of precision scenario marketing by showing that the click-to-page-view ratio was 6x as compared to industry average

baselines, meaning it resonated with the content and the user intent well beyond the top-of-funnel awareness. Utilizing the need to use and gratify, browsing incites a sense of novelty because of anthropomorphism, due to its capacity to construct parasocial relationships and increase purchase intention [7].

4.2 Challenges Encountered

Although Estee Lauder has a significant digital success, the company has several problems with traffic optimization.

To start with, there are constitutively increasing costs of acquiring traffic and traffic-related performance pressures. With an operating loss of US$785 million, Estee Lauder recorded a net sales of US14.326 billion in the fiscal year 2025, an 8-year-on-year decrease of 8 percent. It is against this context of performance pressure that increasing traffic acquisition expenses pose a complex challenge, which is based on heightened competition among platforms, increasing influencer collaboration charges, and high consumer acquisition tension.

Secondly, there are generational changes in the demographics of consumers and emerging brands, which pose two issues. The emergence of the new beauty brands with an ingredient-centered approach, such as The Ordinary, has forced Estee Lauder to re-align its approach to products. Although the collective was able to introduce the Tmall flagship of The Ordinary within China, the notion of staying appealing to the Generation Z consumers and Alpha customers implies the incorporation of scientific narrative and ingredient transparency in the high-end products. Storytelling- identities support Gen Z's electronic word of mouth in digital heritage [8].

Thirdly, there is a juggling between high-end brand position and traffic-based business. As it goes after the traffic conversion, Estee Lauder will need to maintain the luxury brand image. An example is when using generative AI in marketing, the group makes it clear that it will never use AI-generated human imagery to prevent the promotion of unrealistic beauty ideals. Although it is a defense mechanism to retain the integrity of the brand, brands can reduce the limitations of innovation by implementing AI in their backend analytics, like trend forecasting and consumer segmentation.

4.3 Optimisation Recommendations

By responding to the above challenges in the context of the AARRR framework, optimisation as follows is recommended:

Fine-tuning of Private Domain Operations. Based on the successful cooperation with Huawei Weather, Estée Lauder should expand relationships with solutions working at the ecosystem level to form brand-specific private domain traffic pools. It is necessary to create a system of user tagging with the help of touch stores, such as mini-programs and WeCom, at the level of tiered operations.To give a few examples, the brand should

provide high-end customers with trials of limited-edition products and plan the redemption of points to the active users to increase retention and repeat purchasing.

Artificial Intelligence incl. Personalised Recommendations. It is strategically beneficial to leverage the deployed ConsumerIQ system to its full potential to strengthen AI-driven personalised recommendations. It is highly beneficial to harness more than 200 million unique user profile data points in order to generate personalised content and product recommendations. At the same time, the brand should consider AI-supported functionality like virtual make-up tests and skin scans in order to increase the efficiency and decision-making turn-out of users. Personalized recommendations are 52.9 times more likely to convert with the help of AI than regular marketing [9].

Deepening the Online-to-Offline (O2O) Experience. The convergence of the digital and the physical worlds is a clear strategy that is clearly expressed by the management at Estee Lauder. It is strategically beneficial to make the closed-loop model of online lead generation and offline experiences more efficient by launching the consumer identity system that allows tracking the cross-channel journey, such as making online reservations, making a trial in the store, or interacting with digital screens in physical stores, so that data can be gathered on all channels. The collaboration with Shopify reinforces integrated trade infrastructure and achieves international DTC growth.O2O consumption is seamless as offline experience, online purchase, and bonded delivery are integrated [10].

5 Conclusions

5.1 Summaries

The current paper utilizes the AARRR framework to analyze Estée Lauder's digital growth strategy in a systematic manner by illustrating the user acquisition and value conversion processes. Results indicate that in the Acquisition phase, Estée Lauder has instated a detailed matrix that integrates both a diversion of the public domain traffic and the targeting precision. It attained low-cost customer acquisition through a sampler platform and synergistic Douyin content, where the conversion rate of customers to make purchases was more than 20%. In the Activation stage, the brand promoted its scientifically proven content strategy, as a rough strategy to play the premium positioning of its seventh-generation Advanced Night Repair serum. This strategy created a bombastic growth when Douyin was holding the Double Eleven event, where it showed the highest attractiveness among people who consume skincare most regularly, which makes the first-time buying intentions interesting. In the case of Retention, at Estee Lauder, to concentrate membership management, the Customer Relationship Management position was created to engage members of the Tmall. This translated to a 23% growth in repeat-purchase members and a 25% growth in 88VIP transactions, which is a strong high-value user moat. Fragrance affected revenue was also witnessed, as can be inferred in the Q1 FY2026, where perfume sales of Le Labo

produced premium brands were up 13 per cent in comparison with market trends, which showed the revenue-based qualities to be strong across most classifications. Under the Referral stage, the brand took the opportunity of the Referral programme offered by Soreto through its systematic viral growth processes. It tested all the possible incentive combinations through A/B testing, and it increased the conversion rate by 118 percent, the average order value increased by 9 percent, and generated a 1000 percent ROI.

The strategy of Estee Lauder provides three lessons that luxury consumer brands can learn: Firstly, online growth demands that the AARRR model should shift towards value-based growth, and not necessarily focus on volume-based growth. Second, scientifically designed stories and data authentication are the key resources of brand premiumisation and resilience in cycles. Thirdly, the tradeoff between accurate segmentation and high-end positioning is the determinant of the level of user value extraction depth and sustainability. The case illustrates that in a period of skyrocketing traffic acquisition prices, the traffic mindset can only be transformed into a user-value mindset, which will enable the brands to grow long-term in a fashion that brings cohesion between brand equity and performance.

5.2 Limitations in the Research and the Future Perspective

This work has some limitations: first of all, due to the lack of data, the quantitative analysis of some phases of AARR (e.g., Referral) is not conducted in a sufficient depth; secondly, on the one hand, because of the dynamics of the change in the brand market value, the short-term data cannot reflect the long-term impact of digital marketing, however; thirdly, digital marketing works have lagging characteristics, which, on the one hand, are difficult to capture short-term data. In the future, digital marketing in the cosmetics industry will be determined by two trends:

Profound AI Penetration throughout the Marketing Channel. Estee Lauder has already received the initial AI empowerment using such tools as ConsumerIQ or Adobe Firefly. Generative AI could permit an end-to-end intelligence on marketing decisions in the future, but would have to be carefully governed in relation to privacy and bias—trend forecasting and product development to personalised recommendations and after-sales service. The use of AI agents will necessarily transform the manner in which cosmetics companies interact with customers.

Accelerated Implementation of Immersive Experiences such as the Metaverse. The metaverse experiences can seem like an additional marketing platform, but in the short term, the use of the platforms remains limited by the maturity of the platform, such as the virtual make-up trial, digital collectibles, and virtual idols, which will be the new arenas of brand communication. The challenge of maintaining the perception of the luxury of high-quality brands in virtual worlds and converting this traffic will be a frontier issue faced by Estee Lauder and its other brands.

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