



Value-driven Brand Identity Construction through Consumer Characteristics: A Case Study of Decathlon

Haotian Chen

Shanghai Shangde Experimental School, Pudong New Area, Shanghai 201315, China
18121302218@163.com

Abstract. In the context of the booming sports industry and the fierce competition in the Chinese market, the relationship between consumer characteristics and brand building is a key issue for sports retailers. The case of this study is Decathlon, a global multi-sport retailer. The study investigates the evolution of the company's brand positioning, the consumer segments it targets and how insights into consumer behavior are translated into branding practices. The research adopts a case study design based on one case. Secondary data are used, i.e., industry reports, academic journals, and corporate reports. The analysis shows that Decathlon has shifted from being a product-based retailer to an experience-based service provider. This change is driven by three interrelated changes in consumer characteristics: the perception of value from product acquisition to satisfaction of quality-price ratio; the desire to buy from utilitarian needs to experiential and social fulfillment; and the cognitive pathways of the brand from awareness to emotional attachment and community membership. Based on these findings, the study proposes three strategic recommendations: strengthening differentiated product portfolios, enhancing digital personalization capabilities, and systematizing community-building efforts. The study contributes a process perspective to the sports brand management literature and provides practical implications for similar enterprises navigating the evolving landscape of sports consumption in China.

Keywords: Decathlon, Sports Retail Brand, Consumer Characteristics, Brand Identity, Experiential Marketing

1 Introduction

1.1 Research Background

China's sports industry is growing and changing at a pace that has never been seen before. In 2025, the Chinese government issued the "Opinions on Unleashing the Potential of Sports Consumption to Further Promote High-Quality Development of the Sports Industry", in which it explicitly proposed that the total scale of the sports industry reach 7 trillion yuan by 2030 and called for the integration of digital technologies, such as big data and artificial intelligence, into the sports sector [1]. This policy direction is consistent with a broader acknowledgment that sports consumption

is an important driver of economic transformation. From a consumer behavior perspective, today's Chinese consumers are not just contented with the basic participation of sports but are also looking for personalized experiences and social interaction in their sport activities [2]. Digitalization has also accelerated this trend, with smart wearables, online fitness platforms, and VR/AR viewing technologies becoming more mainstream and offering consumers with more convenient and diverse experiences. In this changing environment, sports retail brands are confronted by a dual challenge: they must develop functional products to satisfy basic needs, and they must develop value propositions to cater to an increasingly discerning and experience-oriented consumer base.

The academic literature of sports branding and consumer behavior has progressed in several directions. One strand deal with purchase decision factors in the sporting goods market. The main hierarchical factors affecting sporting goods purchase decisions have been identified in brand, price, functionality, word-of-mouth effects and self-expressive display, with brand being the most important factor, followed by price and functionality [3]. Another avenue of investigation examines the link between brand image and brand loyalty. Tran in 2024 showed that brand image and brand personality have a significant influence on brand loyalty in the sportswear industry and this is mediated by customer satisfaction [4]. More recently, researchers have examined how authenticity impacts consumer-brand relationships. According to Rodrigues and Sousa in 2026, consumer-based relational authenticity, perceived brand localness and corporate social responsibility image significantly enhance brand love, which in turn promotes word-of-mouth and purchase intention [5]. This suggests that in culturally embedded markets, authenticity and cultural congruence with the locality, are important for brand advocacy and loyalty. At the same time, the digital transformation of sports retail has attracted increasing scholarly interest. How sports brands can use social media content characteristics – in-formativeness, entertainment, interactivity, and authenticity – to affect brand attitude and loyalty, ultimately increasing purchase intention has been studied by research [6]. In 2019, Trail proposed a Revised Model of Sport Consumer Behavior which offers sport organizations a framework for understanding consumer motivations and segmentation [7].

1.2 Research Gap

Given the huge existing literature, some research gaps exist. First, while consumer behavior has been researched in relation to single-category sportswear brands such as Nike and Adidas, relatively little research has been done on sports retail brands, i.e., brands that operate large format, multi-category, multi-sport retail environments. Sports retailers face unique brand management challenges compared to single-product brands, due to their wider product portfolios, more diverse consumer bases, and the need to balance store brand identity with several private-label sub-brands [8]. Second, the majority of existing studies employ a cross-sectional approach to capture consumer characteristics at one point in time and ignore the dynamic evolution of both consumer preferences and brand positioning strategies over time. Third, the relationship between consumer characteristics and brand practices is largely assumed to be one-directional (consumer characteristics → brand strategy), with little attention to the way brand

practices in turn reshape consumer perceptions and characteristics in a recursive fashion. Fourth, even though several studies have looked at Decathlon from an operational or financial angle, there are very few that have systematically looked at the brand from the perspective of consumer characteristics, or to investigate how Decathlon's branding practices are both a reaction to and an active shaping of the profiles of its target consumers.

Decathlon is selected in this study as a representative case study of global sports retail brand in China. The core research question of this study is: How does a sports retail brand operating in the Chinese market build brand identity through responding and at the same time reshaping consumer characteristics? To address these gaps,

The answer to this question is of interest to both theoreticians and practitioners. The study theoretically provides a process view of the consumer characteristics-brand practices relationship, moving beyond static, cross-sectional analyses. It also extends the Revised Model of Sport Consumer Behavior to the sports retail industry that has been less studied than professional sports or single-brand environments [7]. Practical implications the findings offer actionable suggestions for sports retailers in the increasingly complex and competitive Chinese sports consumption market.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2: Literature review This section discusses relevant theoretical frameworks and key empirical findings. Section 3 describes the case study design, research methodology, and offers a detailed description of Decathlon as the research subject. The core analysis is shown in Section 4. The relationship between consumer characteristics and brand building is elaborated from three thematic perspectives: consumer value perception, purchase motivation, and brand cognitive pathway. Section 5 provides strategic recommendations based on the analytical results. Section 6 concludes the paper with a summary of the main contributions, some limitations, and directions for future research.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Relevant Theory

Sport consumer behavior refers to the processes and activities of searching, selecting, purchasing, using and disposing of sport-related products and services to meet their needs and desires [7]. Trail's revised model of sport consumer behavior integrates psychological, social and situational factors and provides an empirical basis for understanding sport consumption [7]. Using this model, researchers have also adopted a "cognition-emotion-behavior intention" paradigm to explore how sport marketing stimuli are transformed into consumer responses [9].

Brand identity is the unique set of brand associations that brand strategists seek to link to a brand in the minds of target audiences. These associations may include brand values, personality, positioning and visual identity. In the sport industry, where brand choices are closely tied to identity expression, emotional investment, and lifestyle alignment, building a coherent and compelling brand identity is especially important. Rodrigues and Sousa suggested the concept of consumer-based relational authenticity which measures the degree to which consumers perceive their relationship with a brand

as authentic and meaningful [5]. Empirical studies with structural equation modeling have found that brand authenticity positively affects brand loyalty through mediating roles of brand empathy, brand image, and brand attachment [10].

A separate line of research in sport brand looks at how brands can position themselves on value, as opposed to premium pricing or discount positioning. Contrary to luxury sport brands or pure budget brands, “value-first” brands aim to provide an optimal quality-price ratio – delivering functional performance that meets consumer expectations at accessible prices [11]. A good example of this is Decathlon who have a straightforward customer journey, maintaining a unified portfolio that is value-first.

2.2 Important Empirical Findings

A hierarchical analysis of factors influencing sporting goods purchase decisions found that the results identified five main factors, including brand, price, functionality, word-of-mouth effects and self-expressive display. The most important factor was brand, followed by price and functionality [3]. Some of these effects were moderated by demographic characteristics: income levels produced significant differences in the importance attached to brand, functionality and price; gender influenced the weight given to word-of-mouth effects; and athletic career history moderated the significance of functionality and price [3]. In a related study on sports brand character cognition, symbolism and aesthetics were rated by consumers as the most important design factors. The most frequently mentioned reasons for brand preference were design, brand image and quality [12]. The influence of color, design, brand and recommendations of others was more significant among female consumers while older consumers were more concerned with durability, comfort and quality [12].

In homogeneous sportswear markets studies on brand loyalty have found that brand concept – the identity-relevant meanings and values attributed to a brand – is more strongly related to consumer attachment than product design [13]. When consumers feel that a brand’s value corresponds to their own, they tend to develop stronger emotional attachment, often leading to long-term repurchase intention. Income was also found as a limited and conditional moderator in the study. Specifically, the product design is more important on the consumers with higher income, while the attachment to brand concept is relatively less dependent on income [13].

With the advent of digitized sports consumption, scholars have investigated the impact of social media content features on consumer attitudes and behaviors. Research on sports brand content analysis found that the quality of information and the accessibility features of social media content had positive significant effects on consumers’ purchase intention and that brand attitude and brand loyalty played a significant mediating role [6]. The concept of “unified commerce”, which connects brand applications, websites and physical stores in a seamless way, has been highlighted as a major driver of integrated sporting experiences [14, 15].

2.3 Summary

Common themes arose from the literature review. First, sport consumer behavior is multiply determined with brand, price, functionality, social influence and self-

expression playing a significant role. But the significance of these factors differs by demographic segments and consumption situations. Second, brand loyalty in the sport markets is affected by both cognitive and emotional pathways. Product attributes are important; however, the brand concept and authenticity appear to be more and more important in long-term consumer relationships. Third, digital transformation is changing the way consumers engage with sports brands, opening new opportunities for personalization and engagement, but also increasing the expectations for a seamless omnichannel experience. Fourth, there is a dearth of research on sport retail brands as the bulk of the conducted research is limited to individual sportswear brands or professional sport organizations. Decathlon is the world's largest sporting goods retailer with more than 300 stores in China. This makes it an ideal case to fill this gap.

3 Case Study

The French sporting goods company Decathlon, founded in 1976, opened its first store in Shanghai in 2003. In 2024, Decathlon had over 300 physical stores in China, which made it one of the largest brick-and-mortar retail networks among foreign sport brands in the country [16]. Decathlon does not target one segment, but rather a wide consumer base from absolute beginners to advanced enthusiasts. It supplies products in over 80 sports categories. According to the 4P marketing theory, Decathlon's product positioning targets the low-to-mid sporting goods market, emphasizing innovation, complete categories, and all-independent brands. The price strategy primarily employs low-price positioning. The place strategy utilizes a mix of online and offline sales channels. The promotion strategy focuses on experience marketing and word of mouth, with minimal traditional advertising [11].

In recent years, Decathlon has undergone a major strategic transformation. The company launched a global rebranding and new brand identity in 2024 with the "the Orbit" icon which represents movement and aspiration and plans to renovate over 1,700 global stores [17]. In China, Decathlon has sped up the process of upgrading its stores. In June 2025, three new concept stores opened simultaneously in Shanghai, Beijing and Nanjing, turning sales spaces into hubs of sports experience and reinforcing the brand's standing as a curator of sports lifestyles [18]. Another hallmark of Decathlon's recent strategic direction is its "dual-track" product strategy, which combines entry-level and professional-grade offerings to build a complete product matrix from affordable basics all the way to high-performance equipment. The company has separately established four professional sub-brands to serve advanced enthusiasts [18]. Decathlon has also invested heavily in digital innovation, adopting a "unified commerce" model that integrates its application, website and physical stores [14]. In Singapore, the company established a Data Lab to centralize the development of digital services [19]. But perhaps most importantly, Decathlon has turned its stores into "sports social hubs." Take the example of the Bengaluru Whitefield flag-ship store which includes multi-sport arenas, coaching programs, circular services and community spaces, including weekly cycling and running meetups, sports birthday parties and workshops [20].

4 Analysis

4.1 Consumer Value Perception

Industry report and consumer data analysis reveal that Decathlon's core consumer base in China has experienced a significant shift in value perception over the past decade. In the past, Decathlon was known for offering low-cost, functional sports equipment – a value proposition based on price leadership. However, with the maturation of the Chinese sports market, this perception has evolved to a more nuanced appreciation of the quality-price ratio that Decathlon offers [3, 16].

The hierarchical importance study of sporting goods purchase decision factors, brand was the most influential factor, followed by price and functionality [3], which supported the empirical evidence. What makes Decathlon stand out from its competitors is that it can score well on all three factors: perceived brand value, reasonable cost and functional performance. This dual track product strategy is a direct response to the stratified value perceptions within the target consumer base of the company [18]. Besides, income levels affect decisions on purchases of sporting goods, and the relative importance of brand, functionality and price factors are significantly influenced by income levels [3]. Decathlon has responded to the rise of China's middle-income consumers with professional-grade products as well as entry-level items, proving that the brand can support consumers' entire sports participation journey.

The brand authenticity literature argues that perceived value is not only the outcome of objective product attributes but also is mediated by perceived brand consistency and genuineness. Rodrigues and Sousa in 2026 found that consumer-based relational authenticity has a significant positive impact on brand love and subsequent word-of-mouth behaviors [5]. Decathlon's cohesive "value-first" portfolio may also contribute to perceptions of authenticity, which is particularly important for nurturing consumer relationships as the brand moves into higher-priced product categories.

4.2 Consumer Purchase Motivation

In recent years, research into Chinese sports consumption has identified a clear shift in consumer motivations. Contemporary consumers are no longer satisfied with only sports participation but more want personalized experiences and social interaction in their sport activities [2]. Decathlon has taken a variety of strategic actions to respond to this shift in motivation. The firm has reimaged its brick-and-mortar outlets from transactional spaces into experiential destinations. The new-concept stores, opened in 2025, are designed as "sports experience hubs" to invite consumers to try, test and experience products prior to purchase [18]. The Bengaluru Whitefield flagship goes even further by incorporating multi-sport arenas, coaching programs and community spaces within the retail environment itself [20]. The sports brand content literature also supports this experiential approach: entertainment and interactivity, two dimensions of experiential value, are significant predictors of brand attitude and loyalty, which in turn affect purchase intention [6].

Equally important are social motivations. "Real encounters are where customer loyalty is born," said one industry analysis, pointing out that community events that

bring people together are fundamental to building long-lasting brand relationships [21]. A direct response to this social motivation has been Decathlon's conversion of stores to "sports social hubs" – with weekly running and cycling meetups, sports birthday parties and coaching sessions.

Research on brand love shows that social bonds that are created in brand-mediated contexts increase switching costs and that community-based loyalty is more sustainable than transaction-based loyalty [5]. Crucially, as Chinese consumer motivations have moved from the utilitarian to the experiential and social, so Decathlon's strategic priorities have shifted – from expanding the number of stores to building links with local communities.

4.3 Brand Cognitive Pathway

The literature on sport brand loyalty suggests that the consumer-brand relationship can be conceptualized as developing in a hierarchy of stages: from brand awareness (recognition and recall) to brand attitude (evaluative judgment), to brand identification (psychological connection), to brand community belonging (social embeddedness) [7, 21]. At the awareness stage, Decathlon's unique in-store experience marketing is the main tool it uses to attract consumers' attention. Studies have shown that store displays are the main source of information for consumers and most purchases are made in the brand outlet stores, where consumers usually come with friends [12].

This reliance on the store's experiential appeal to create awareness and word-of-mouth is consistent with these consumption patterns. The literature on the brand concept provides a glimpse into how Decathlon affects consumer evaluations at the attitude stage. Brand concept is more strongly associated with consumer attachment than product design in homogenous markets [13]. Decathlon has created a brand concept based on accessibility, inclusivity and real sport participation. The brand's tagline has been repositioned to "Move People Through the Wonders of Sport" which signals a shift to enabling sport participation rather than just selling products. Rodrigues and Sousa found perceived brand localness significantly enhances brand love – consumers value brands that demonstrate cultural alignment and local relevance [5]. Decathlon's long-term commitment to localization of its operations in China, including developing China as the only overseas market that has a complete "R&D-production-sales" value chain, likely contributes to the favorable brand attitudes. In the identification stage, consumers feel more emotional connection when they identify the values of a brand with their own values [13]. Decathlon is also working on brand identification by introducing lifestyle-oriented collections such as the "Late Bloomers" collection, designed for young consumers with a slower, more reflective approach to sport and life, and artist collaborations [22].

Finally, for the community belonging stage, the retail and community literature emphasizes the importance of creating a robust community for lasting brand success [21]. Decathlon's transformation of stores into community hubs – for coaching sessions, workshops, meetups and social events – provides the structural conditions for community belonging to emerge. Decathlon combines digital tools and physical community spaces to create community belonging through both digital and physical touchpoints.

5 Strategic Recommendations

Based on the analysis of Decathlon's consumer profile and branding practices, this study provides three strategic recommendations along the three analytical dimensions discussed above.

Develop a more diversified product portfolio to cater to stratified value perceptions, without sacrificing brand authenticity. The analysis shows stratification of the perceptions of value among Decathlon consumers. The "dual track" strategy is a good idea in principle, but it must be implemented with an eye on brand authenticity. The perception of authenticity that now sets Decathlon apart from competitors could be challenged if the perception of professional-grade offerings as a distinct "premium" sub-brand, separate from Decathlon's integrated value-first identity, is not maintained. Hence, this study recommends that Decathlon should maintain communication transparent about the trade-offs between product tiers while consistently emphasizing the underlying value-first principle. Educational content explaining why a professional-grade product costs more than an entry-level alternative, in terms of materials, research and development, and performance characteristics, can help consumers interpret the product hierarchy as a reflection of different needs rather than price discrimination [5, 11]. Decathlon might also consider developing tiered community programming (e.g., beginner clinics vs. advanced technique workshops) to further underscore the brand's commitment to supporting consumers through the entire sports participation journey.

Enhance digital personalization capabilities to support experiential and social purchase motivations across the consumer journey. The analysis showed that consumer purchase motives changed from purely utilitarian goals to experiential pleasure and social satisfaction. Decathlon has made a huge leap in converting physical stores into experiential destinations, but the digital experience is still relatively under-utilized in aiding experiential and social motivations. The company has developed a unified commerce model that connects its app, website and stores but personalization capabilities – which research indicates are key to providing relevant and engaging experiences – are still an opportunity for further development [6, 14]. The study suggests that Decathlon should invest in predictive personalization systems that infer the customer's intent from his/her historical purchasing patterns, browsing behavior, and participation in community events. For example, if a customer purchases entry-level running shoes and attends a running meetup, they could be shown personalized suggestions for mid-level running shoes, ideas for training plans, and invites to upcoming running events. By taking experiential and social value into the digital space, Decathlon can address the entire spectrum of purchase motivations across all consumer touchpoints.

Create community-building initiatives along the brand cognitive journey to accelerate the transition from awareness to belonging. The analysis revealed that the transformation of Decathlon into a brand focused on the community is a strategic response to the social motivation and the need for identification of consumers. However, anecdotal evidence suggests community programming varies by store location and market, with flagship stores providing extensive programming and smaller

or newer locations providing more limited community engagement [18, 20]. Such inconsistency is likely to hinder the consumer's progress along the brand cognitive route. The study suggests that Decathlon develop a standardized framework for building communities, which would include minimum viable community programming for each store tier, scalable training materials for community managers, and metrics for monitoring community engagement results (e.g., event attendance rates, repeat participation, cross-event retention, net promoter scores among community participants). The framework should acknowledge that the path to belonging is cumulative: consumers tend to progress through an arc from attending an event to becoming a regular participant to contributing to the community (e.g., leading a run group, mentoring beginners). Decathlon can create programming that supports each step of this evolution, creating clear pathways to deepen consumer relationships with both the brand and the community.

6 Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship of consumer traits and brand building approaches in the sports retail industry with the case of Decathlon's Chinese operations. The analysis yielded three main findings. First, the stratified value perceptions of Decathlon's target consumers in China and the brand's "dual-track" strategy and unified "value-first" positioning are a coherent response to these perceptions, but an ongoing challenge is to maintain brand authenticity as the portfolio broadens into professional-grade offerings. Second, the consumer purchase motivations of China's sports market have changed from the utilitarian to experiential and social drivers. Decathlon's conversion of physical stores into "sports social hubs" is an answer to these motivations but the digital experience is still relatively underleveraged. Third, the brand cognitive pathway through which Decathlon consumers relate to the brand progresses from awareness to attitude to identification to community belonging. Decathlon has made significant strides in transforming stores into community hubs, but consistency in programming across locations and systemic support for consumer progression along the pathway are areas to further develop.

This study adds to the literature on sport brand management in several ways. It extends the application of the Revised Model of Sport Consumer Behavior from professional sport contexts to the sports retail sector, illustrating how psychological, social and situational factors interact in a retail setting. The study also contributes to the authenticity literature by investigating how "value-first" positioning can foster consumer-based relational authenticity in contexts that might be more receptive to authenticity perceptions via premium or luxury positioning. Moreover, the study offers a process-oriented account of the recursive relationship between consumer characteristics and brand practices, documenting how the shifts in consumer expectations have shaped Decathlon's strategic evolution and how Decathlon's practices are reshaping consumer expectations, thereby complementing the predominantly cross-sectional orientation of existing research. Finally, the conceptualization of the brand cognitive pathway as moving through awareness,

attitude, identification and belonging stages provides a framework that could be applied to other sports retail brands undergoing similar experiential transformations.

Several limitations to this study should be noted. First, as a single-case study, the generalizability of findings to other sports retail brands or other markets is limited. Decathlon shares some characteristics with other large-format sports re-tailers, but its distinctive positioning as “value-first”, integrated model of manufacturing and retail, and French origin with deep localization in China make it a distinctive case. Second, the study used secondary data sources only, such as industry reports, corporate disclosures, and publicly available consumer surveys. Though these sources are rich in their insights at the aggregate level, they do not capture the granular consumer experiences and perceptions at the individual level that could be accessed through primary data collection methods such as consumer surveys, in-depth interviews, or ethnographic observation. Third, the analysis examined Decathlon’s branding practices in a particular historical time frame (circa 2020–2026), but the sports retail landscape is changing rapidly, especially in China where digital transformation and demographic shifts are occurring at accelerated paces. Fourth, the study did not systematically explore the dynamics of competitors; understanding the importance of consumer characteristics for brand building may require a comparison with how competitors address similar consumer segments.

These limitations indicate a number of promising avenues for future research. A natural extension would be to use a comparative case design studying two or more sports retailers in the same market (e.g., Decathlon and Intersport in China, or Decathlon in China versus Decathlon in other Asian markets such as India or Japan). This comparison would help to distinguish brand-specific effects from market-specific effects. A second approach is to collect primary data to validate and extend the findings reported here. Survey research measuring Decathlon consumers’ value perceptions, purchase motivations, and stages of brand identification would allow for quantitative testing of the relationships posited in this study. Qualitative research, such as semi-structured interviews with Decathlon consumers at different stages of the brand relationship pathway, could provide insights into the lived experiences and meaning-making processes underlying the patterns identified at the aggregate level. A third issue is the role of digital transformation in reshaping sports retail branding. As Decathlon continues to move forward with its Data Lab, omnichannel capabilities and personalization systems, longitudinal research on how these digital investments affect consumer value perceptions, purchase motivations and identification would be valuable. Fourth, future research should explore the viability of Decathlon’s “value-first” position as the brand moves into professional-grade and lifestyle-oriented product categories.

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