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The continuous maturity analysis of Li Ning's brand marketing through Weibo, China

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Abstract: Social media provides a convenient platform for brand marketing of enterprises, and lays a foundation for enterprises to enhance brand image and good consumption conversion rate. Based on the brand marketing theory, this study introduces the concepts of 'cultural marketing' and 'influencer marketing', links the published content of enterprises in social media with specific brand marketing methods, and explores the reasons why the published content plays a good marketing role. This study analyses the contents of 158 blog posts published by Li Ning's official Weibo account from January to June 2021, trying to test the effect of Li Ning's brand marketing by using Weibo as social media. The research shows that the blog content of 'influencer marketing' related to influencer endorsement published by Li Ning's official Weibo account has gained more attention for its brand than the blog content of other topics, which is embodied in the interactive data composed of modules such as forwarding, praise and comment.

Keywords: social media; brand marketing; influencer marketing; China.

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Biographical notes: Ziqi Xiang received her Master's degree, an Assistant Lecturer and graduated from The University of Edinburgh in 2021. She is currently working in Chongqing Preschool Education College. Her research field are marketing and management of sports.

1 Introduction

The emergence and development of the internet promotes the expansion and integration of the social circle in which users live, and plays a bridge role in connecting information [Jiang, (2017), p.35]. Furthermore, a tool and platform, namely social media, was born to help people share their views and experiences (Mahan, 2011). Different from traditional media such as TV and newspapers, the new media represented by social media emphasises the sense of participation, that is, everyone is the producer, transmitter and reviewer of content (Billings, 2011). At the same time, the original personal information created by countless users can be transformed into commercial value and social value by summarising and analysing with data analysis tools (Grady, 2016). Social media not only promotes the development of social business model and the convenience of personal life,

but also accelerates the weakness of human feelings and the proliferation of online fraud in real life (Burns et al., 2021). The marketing of social media, represented by Weibo, China, uses Weibo and other social media platforms to carry out marketing, so as to maintain public relations and develop customer service (Abeza et al., 2013). Enterprises using social media for marketing not only have the advantages of benefit classification, low investment cost and accurate positioning of consumers, but also have the potential risk of being countered by online public opinion (Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018). Social media marketing can enhance the brand image of enterprises, which is mainly reflected in the convenient way of information transmission, the efficient accumulation of exposure and the three-dimensional modelling of customer service role (Witkemper et al., 2012). As a branch of social media marketing, brand marketing is a marketing planning process in which enterprises create brand value by satisfying consumers' brand needs and finally form brand benefits (Parganas et al., 2015). Improving brand awareness through marketing strategy can be carried out from four aspects: brand identification, brand positioning, brand image building and brand promotion (Baena, 2016). Considering companies as commodities; having a vision statement; designing new category; considering companies as investments. Creating ground-breaking promotional strategies and attaining integrative commercial messaging (IMC) are two examples. Creating a marketing presence, effective brand growing, reinforcing brand relevancy, or increase your sales externally.

This study takes Weibo, China as the research object, observes 158 blog posts published by Li Ning's official Weibo from January to June 2021, and records information such as publishing frequency of Weibo, content of Weibo, attention degree of Weibo (forwarding amount and comment amount), etc., and then summarises the sorted information and makes a table for comparative analysis. A branding strategy is the comprehensive method used to increase a company's recognition and likeability among current or prospective consumers. Branding aspects including language, narrative, corporate identity, product attributes, or general feeling are all included in a brand management. Based on the brand marketing theory (brand identification, brand positioning, brand image building and brand promotion), this study focuses on the analysis of how Li Ning used Chinese Weibo for brand marketing (Machado et al., 2020). On the premise of comprehensively sorting out the past literature on social media and Weibo, brand marketing and identification, this paper makes it clear that its research problem is to analyse how Li Ning uses Chinese Weibo for brand marketing (internal laws and external performance). Next, 158 Weibo messages (interaction quantity and comment quality) are listed into a table, and the popularity of blog posts with different topics and the evaluation and understanding of Li Ning brand by online audiences are analysed by using a mixed research method. At the same time, it also lists the validity and reliability of the research, as well as the shortcomings of data collection.

2 Literature review

2.1 Internet, social media and Weibo

The internet has set up a new bridge between people. With the continuous maturity of internet technology and people's media usage habits have quietly changed [Jiang, (2017), p.35]. If the traditional media is the News Media 1.0 era, then the emerging media is the

news media 2.0, and the self-media that emerged and quickly occupied the online market is the News Media 3.0. As far as the media is concerned, users are the centre, not things. Core applications such as blog, podcast, TAG, social network service (SNS), RSS (aggregated content), Wiki, etc. Based on new theories and technologies such as ‘six degrees separation theory’, it will bring stronger social interaction and audience participation [Jiang, (2017), p.35]. Social media is a tool and platform for people to share their views, opinions and experiences (Dixon et al., 2015). This platform supports the two-way interaction between users, and also promotes the expansion and integration of the social circle in which users live (Dixon et al., 2015). Based on WEB 2.0 and mobile application technology, it creates a two-way dialogue and encourages new users to generate content, mainly covering specific media types with personalisation, such as content community, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), dating sites, Weibo, instant messaging, etc. (Billings, 2011). Different from the one-way information transmission of traditional media, the support of new media technology makes social media emphasise the sense of participation, and everyone is the producer, transmitter and reviser of content (Billings, 2011). Social media is a new type of online media, which is user-centred, enabling users to actively obtain valuable information and create and share new original information, thus improving users’ sense of participation and freedom (Grady, 2016). This media is characterised by openness, participation, dialogue, communication, community and connectivity (Mahan, 2011). On the open platform, any piece of information may become the focus and get the participation of many users; at the same time, the original personal information created by countless users gathers into a torrent, which can be transformed into immeasurable commercial value and social value by using data analysis tools (Grady, 2016).

2.2 The influence of social media on social and cultural life

The influence of social media on social and cultural life is mainly reflected in social, personal and cultural life (Maree, 2013). Social media has promoted the change and development of business models in society (Lewis, 2015). WeChat, a social software launched by Tencent in China, is not only a social tool for people to communicate and share daily information resources, but also a new payment method based on social media (Waliczko, 2020). At the same time, enterprises can refer to the feedback and suggestions of consumers in social media, so as to improve the performance and quality of products and establish brand image (Lewis, 2015). The existence of social media brings convenience to personal life, and the distance and transportation cost of social communication are reduced (Lewis, 2015). At the same time, the migration of rural population to cities leads to the separation of family members, the loneliness of the only child, and people looking for a place to vent their dissatisfaction in the face of the present situation, which are also the reasons for the development of social media in the human community (Burns et al., 2021). However, it also leads to the weakness of human feelings and the proliferation of online fraud in real life (Burns et al., 2021). Social media mainly relies on text and video as information transmission media, which indirectly improves users’ ability of reading, writing and expressing, and makes people have deep connection in network dimension, thus making the public become more socialised (Hingle et al., 2013).

2.3 Comparison of social media between China and Western countries

Western countries have Facebook, Snapchat and Twitter, while China has Weibo, WeChat, Zhihu and Douban (Harp et al., 2012). The main social modes in social media in China and western countries are relational social mode (the main purpose of which is to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships and expect to achieve this effect) and rational social mode (the main purpose of which is to obtain information and improve oneself and expect to achieve this effect) (Harp et al., 2012). The differences between Chinese and Western social media are mainly reflected in the different degrees of freedom in content creation and supervision (Gan and Wang, 2015). China's social media platforms prohibit the publication of violence, pornography, politics and other related content, and the platform mainly conducts network supervision through keyword retrieval, and generally adopts the forms of background message notification, information failure and account ban (Gan and Wang, 2015). Social media platforms in western countries are more tolerant of the above contents, especially in publishing works of art. Some paintings including human body, lust and politics can be browsed normally on social platforms such as Instagram, which is not common in China (Kang et al., 2019).

2.4 The significance and specific means of social media marketing

Social media marketing is a way to use social media marketing and sales to maintain public relations and develop customer service (Abeza et al., 2013). In recent years, concepts such as word-of-mouth marketing and virus marketing are almost all based on social media (Abeza et al., 2013). Under the background of network marketing, the main content publishers of these websites are the users of websites rather than the employers (Nisar et al., 2018). Brands or enterprises want to use social media marketing to enable their target customers and admirers to independently introduce brands or enterprises on social media platforms (Nisar et al., 2018). It improves internet visibility, giving businesses access to a huge audience through which you can promote to everyone. One such group of people can significantly boost brand recognition. 60% of consumers, according to social media sites like Facebook, explore different items on their network. Social media marketing emphasises mutual cooperation. For every member participating in the social media marketing process, enterprises and users need to share information while obtaining information, so as to achieve a win-win situation (Nisar et al., 2018). Marketers' use of social media to promote their products and services mainly includes the following specific measures: regularly publishing high-quality content with clear target customers, automatically creating word-of-mouth content through social evaluation, creating topic group chat for target audiences and setting up hosts on social platforms, launching games such as lottery and prize-winning quiz to increase interaction, creating online shopping links to make product sharing more convenient, and guiding users to keep interaction with correct topic tags (#) (Kordumova et al., 2016). Publish content linked to hot topics, put the most representative and best quality posts at the top, put targeted advertisements for target users, and cooperate with influential people to promote (Rohm et al., 2013).

2.5 *Advantages and potential risks of social media marketing*

Enterprises use social media for marketing, which not only has the advantages of interest classification function, low-cost investment, accurate positioning of consumers, but also has the potential risks of being countered by online public opinion (Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018). In the process of marketing by social media, marketing information can be sent to specific people in a short time through the unique interest classification and community grouping attributes of social media, which is beneficial to accumulate consumer groups (Khan et al., 2014). Enterprises can use social media for free, so the cost of marketing products by using social media will be much lower than that of traditional media (Khan et al., 2014). Through the analysis of social media platform data, enterprises can more accurately locate consumer groups and master consumers' consumption habits, and consumers can fully express their thoughts and opinions through social media (Burton et al., 2019). Consumers are no longer just recipients of product information, they can participate in social media marketing of enterprises (Burton et al., 2019). After consumers evaluate enterprises and products through social media, they also become new senders of product information (Burton et al., 2019). Since both consumers and enterprises are users of social media, enterprises can also monitor customers' opinions in real time through social media and get the latest feedback information at any time (Burton et al., 2019). While seeing the power of social marketing, enterprises tend to ignore the practical operability of using social media to promote product marketing, which leads to unsatisfactory marketing effect and role (Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018). Instability of applicability is one of the important factors: any marketing tool has its applicability, which depends on the characteristics of products and industries [Kenealy, (2013), p.43]. Different social media have their own characteristics, and these characteristics may help different enterprises and products achieve good marketing results, but may also limit the play of marketing strategies [Kenealy, (2013), p.43]. Assessments, interviewing, group discussions, and consumer watching are four popular forms of marketing methodological approaches. This problem can be resolved by assessing the marketing strategy and making the necessary changes to the channel or content. The type of the enterprise itself, its industry characteristics, product characteristics, and the consumption characteristics of the target customers all determine which social media is more suitable for itself and whether it can achieve the expected marketing effect. Different social media play different roles in users' 'purchase journey' [Kenealy, (2013), p.55]. The wide and rapid spread of social media accelerates its uncontrollability: due to the high public participation of social media, the information on the platform is often fragmented, large in quantity and complicated in content, and there are also many exaggerated or false information that violates the truth; At the same time, another feature of social media, that is, the speed and wide range of information dissemination, makes a large number of mixed information spread quickly between people like viruses (Higgins, 2013). Driven by the interactive characteristics of social media, a large amount of information, real or virtual, which spreads rapidly among users has both positive and negative impacts on corporate brands – it can effectively enhance the brand value, and may also weaken the existing brand value (Higgins, 2013). For enterprises, it is difficult to control the direction of information development, the speed and scope of communication in social media, and it is also difficult to predict the results caused by this communication behaviour (Higgins, 2013). In the social media platform with strong development of public opinion effect, how to guide the audience to have

positive and benign interactions and control negative interactions has always been a permanent topic of social media marketing (Higgins, 2013). The marketing effect of social media is difficult to evaluate: as a brand-new communication channel and marketing platform, the measurement and standard of social media for enterprise marketing effect is not comprehensive and accurate, and it is only limited to 'empty indicators', such as the forwarding amount, comment amount, search amount and the number of fans (Tuna et al., 2016). At the same time, when enterprises conduct social media marketing, there are not a few phenomena such as 'buying fake fans' (Herold, 2018). It seems that it has become an indisputable fact in the industry to help enterprises 'like' and 'swipe click rate', which leads users and enterprises themselves to be sceptical about the authenticity and reliability of data, and their data cannot be used as the basis for evaluating the social media marketing effect [Tuna et al., (2016), p.56]. Therefore, it is difficult for enterprises to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness and quality of their social media marketing [Tuna et al., (2016), p.56].

2.6 Importance and influence

Social media marketing can promote the brand image of enterprises, which is mainly reflected in the convenient way of information transmission, the efficient accumulation of exposure and traffic, and the three-dimensional modelling of customer service role (Witkemper et al., 2012). Enterprises directly publish and explain product information to users through social media platforms, and form good reputation or improvement plans through user feedback (forwarding, praise, comments), so that the brand image is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people and the transformation of the brand image to the core competitiveness of enterprises is completed (Laurell and Söderman, 2018). Social media marketing has strengthened the stickiness between enterprises and markets, which is mainly manifested in the closer relationship between enterprises and consumers (communication cost is reduced, communication efficiency is improved, market response is quick), and marketing is more accurate (the right information is pushed to the right people at the right time and place) (Wang et al., 2015). Enterprises use social media for marketing to promote the realisation of their own business value (Iankova et al., 2019). Commercial value is mainly reflected in mining effective data, expanding marketing channels, expanding customer service and public relations, and even developing virtual goods for profit (Iankova et al., 2019). In the past, many enterprises only used social media as a broadcast way to release news to the whole world, but gradually, enterprises found that extracting data from social media made the analysis results more meaningful, which enabled enterprises to better listen to the real needs of customers and carry out marketing better (Iankova et al., 2019). Social media has played an important role in sports goods marketing. The huge and effective information covered by social media platform helps sports companies grasp the internal needs of customers (Herbert, 2020). Social media has great interactive advantages, allowing customers to communicate with sporting goods manufacturers in both directions, allowing customers to customise products according to their own preferences, and sporting goods manufacturers to customise products according to their own requirements (Dolan et al., 2019). Under the influence of social media, the efficiency of both parties has been significantly improved (Herbert, 2020). Social media connects the communication between consumers and sporting goods manufacturers, thus making their transactions more humane (Anon,

2015). At the same time, sporting goods manufacturers can also prove their value through social media and other large consumer groups, so that other customers can enhance their trust in themselves, thus ensuring the authenticity and reliability of transactions between the two parties (Anon, 2015). At the same time, when using social media in sporting goods, you can publish your new products on the social platform, and attract more people to understand this product under the social platform with mature traffic, which can attract customers to watch and indirectly advertise your new products at a lower cost (Anon, 2015).

However, the use of social media also has potential risks that cannot be offset by benefits, such as negative evaluation of companies, disclosure of ownership information, disclosure of personal information, and online fraud (Mohd-Sulaiman and Hingun, 2020). Social media can help an enterprise to establish its brand image and destroy an enterprise or brand, and the speed of the latter far exceeds that of the former (Mohd-Sulaiman and Hingun, 2020). Users can quickly express their negative comments or criticisms about specific enterprises or brands through social media accounts and online networks, for example, consumers expose the poor sanitary environment of restaurants or store sales of expired products through blogs (Mohd-Sulaiman and Hingun, 2020). In social networks, negative emotions spread faster and more energy than positive information (Mohd-Sulaiman and Hingun, 2020). In addition to the viral spread of negative information, the risk of information leakage of social media is also worthy of attention (Benson et al., 2015). Social media exposure is brand-new and multi-way. One of the risks of social media exposure is loss of control, that is, information of individuals or companies flows into third parties through social media (Benson et al., 2015). However, the information inflow of these individuals or companies may be illegal, and even unconsciously submitting or publishing such information on social media websites of third parties constitutes illegal (Benson et al., 2015). Violations in social media and internet can be defined as social media accidents (Benson et al., 2015). Social media has many crises that need to be considered, including the negative impact of social media application on work efficiency (Zivnuska et al., 2019). Companies need to weigh the pros and cons between the benefits brought by social media and the abuse of social media by employees, which affects work efficiency (Zivnuska et al., 2019). The productivity within an enterprise is the guarantee for normal work and profit. If employees are addicted to social media and even use social media to chat, it will greatly affect the productivity (Zivnuska et al., 2019).

2.7 The mechanism of social media marketing strategy to attract customers

Human dependence on social media is traceable, which involves many factors such as brain function, psychology and social behaviour (Savci and Aysan, 2017). One of the key psychological characteristics of habitual use of social media is the unpredictability and randomness of what happens on social media platforms (Savci and Aysan, 2017). Social media may bring few physical, psychological and social rewards, but even expecting one of them will make people feel psychological or physical pleasure (Savci and Aysan, 2017). This reward is called 'variable reinforcement schedules', which is one of the main reasons why social media users view the screen repeatedly (Savci and Aysan, 2017). Social media sites have implanted many unpredictable rewards (Savci and Aysan, 2017). Habitual social media users cannot predict whether the next message or notification will bring them pleasure (Savci, 2017). In short, random rewards make individual responses

last longer (Savci, 2017). Another key factor contributing to the habitual use of social media is the like button [Noë et al., (2019), p.23]. Individuals come back to check their social media platforms constantly, with the so-called 'desire to be affirmed' and 'praise each other' [Noë et al., (2019), p.23]. This tendency shows that a person likes what others like about himself ('I like you because you give me some praise') [Noë et al., (2019), p.23]. For example, if a person likes a selfie on a social networking site, the person who receives the praise is more likely to give it back when the other person uploads his photo [Noë et al., (2019), p.23]. Operators of social media take advantage of the human psychology of mutual praise. When the praised person reads the other party's post or chat message online, the platform will send a (read) reminder to the other party [Noë et al., (2019), p.41]. This reminder is to encourage the receiving party to respond [Noë et al., (2019), p.41]. In addition to keeping in touch and getting responses, human beings also like to participate in social competition (Sylwander and Gottzén, 2020). This may also be a factor driving the repeated and habitual use of social media (Sylwander and Gottzén, 2020). Social media platforms can record and display the reading volume, forwarding volume, comment volume and content, and praise volume of each blog post, and users can use these statistics to boost self-esteem or satisfy vanity (Sylwander and Gottzén, 2020). This makes social media users develop a habit of frequently checking their social platforms (Sylwander and Gottzén, 2020).

And the company uses the attribute of social media users' gathering to carry out marketing and realise realisation (realise cash income from the popularity value of websites by some means) (Torrance et al., 2021). Advertising monetisation is the most common form of social media traffic monetisation. Data-based accuracy (accurate delivery for target groups) and content-based integration (unity and cooperation between shared content and advertising content) are two major trends of advertising on the internet (Torrance et al., 2021). Commodity trading is another common form of flow realisation (Liang and Qin, 2019). Social media platform promotes the aggregation of traffic, and realises the realisation of traffic value by buying and selling goods on the platform (Liang and Qin, 2019). Follow-up value-added realisation is also worthy of attention. Value-added services refer to the services provided to customers beyond the conventional service scope or by using the conventional service methods according to customer needs (Olya et al., 2018). Webcast links and game links on social media realise the realisation of traffic in the form of value-added services, which are embodied in live broadcast rewards and game equipment recharge (Olya et al., 2018).

2.8 Brand and brand identity

Brand is a compound concept which combines name, symbol and mark (Wetzel et al., 2018). Its purpose is to identify the products or services of a certain seller or a certain type of seller and distinguish them from those of competitors (Wetzel et al., 2018). Brand marketing is a marketing planning process in which enterprises create brand value by satisfying consumers' brand needs and finally form brand benefits (Parganas et al., 2015). Social media is crucial for businesses as they develop their brands. It is crucial for businesses to establish deep relationships with their viewing users. Businesses that interact with their customers on social networking sites get better feedback regarding their product. The establishment of brand identification is a fast and convenient way to spread the business philosophy, establish the enterprise popularity and shape the

enterprise image (Parganas et al., 2015). The design of brand recognition is an important part of corporate image design. Compared to conventional networking, social networking broadens the audience and makes it simpler for more individuals to discover around a service or item. This is crucial for SMEs because they have incredibly limited advertising expenses that must be utilised properly. Facing the increasingly mature business model and marketing model, any enterprise needs centralised and unified dissemination of corporate image (Lee, 2018). At this time, corporate brand recognition is particularly important (Lee, 2018). Individualised and unique creative enterprise brand identification design can help enterprises to establish unique brand image, at the same time, it can also establish the market class position of enterprises, so that enterprises have certain irreplaceability in the market, thus consolidating the share and brand position of brand products in the market, that is, determining the obvious advantages of the industry characteristics of enterprises (Yang et al., 2018). Internally, through the design of brand identification, enterprises can make employees have a strong sense of identity and belonging to the company, thus improving their work efficiency (Machado et al., 2020). Especially in spreading positive spirit to employees, brand identification design is a very effective way for enterprises to build their internal culture (Machado et al., 2020). After an enterprise has its own brand identification system, its popular image can enhance the external publicity of the enterprise, and the breadth and depth of its publicity can effectively increase the sales volume of products (Pareek and Harrison, 2020). After brand recognition comes into play, enterprises will not only have opportunities in product sales and publicity, but also face challenges in operation and transformation, as well as potential negative impacts on consumers in terms of finance and health (Orazi et al., 2017). The establishment of brand recognition system will accelerate the development of enterprises, and the brand image that is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people will exert invisible pressure on the enterprise carriers that form scale (Orazi et al., 2017). When an enterprise makes a negative impression on its brand due to its own mistakes or conscious competition of competitors, and the speed and coverage of internet public opinion fermentation are fast, this will increase the business risk of the enterprise and lead to the possibility of revenue decline (Barros et al., 2020). At the same time, after the brand image of the enterprise is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people, the pressure of enterprise transformation will increase due to the inherent impression of consumers and the emergence of new industries (Chen, 2011). Because of the different enterprise attributes carried by brands, the ideas conveyed to consumers are different (Torelli et al., 2012). While conveying positive emotions such as optimism and enterprising, some enterprises will also publicise negative emotions such as hidden anxiety because of profit targets (Shukla et al., 2016). For example, luxury brands will advocate the class concept of 'separating the rich from the poor', which will inevitably bring morbid influence to consumers' mental health, and at the same time, it will also make some consumers whose economic strength is insufficient to bear the brand products consume ahead of time, which will increase the economic pressure of consumers, thus aggravating the psychological burden and forming a negative cycle (Shukla et al., 2016). It can be seen that enterprises should pay attention to their social responsibilities when carrying out brand identification design and brand concept propaganda (Kim et al., 2010).

2.9 Brand marketing strategy, communication tools and market

To improve brand awareness through marketing strategy can be carried out from four aspects: brand identification, brand positioning, brand image building and brand promotion (Baena, 2016). Brand recognition is the first impression that consumers quickly recognise the characteristics of brands and relevant information of products among many brands of similar products (Rosca, 2011). The core of enterprises' identification lies in consumers' clear understanding of the soul and value of brands and pointing out the development direction for the brand building of enterprises (Strzelecki and Czuba, 2018). Brand positioning is to help enterprises subdivide and determine the target market on the basis of comprehensive market research (Park and Inou, 2018). Enterprises need to combine the target market with the consumption demand of potential customers, and aim at the purchasing psychology and choice preference of consumers for existing products (Park and Inou, 2018). Brand image is the reflection of enterprise's brand characteristics and personality in consumers' minds, including internal image (product image and cultural image) and external image (brand name, trademark pattern, trademark colour and font) (Kunkel and Biscaia, 2020). Enterprises need to combine their own attributes to choose and create a suitable brand image (Kunkel and Biscaia, 2020). Brands can also shape their brand image in a more three-dimensional way by choosing a spokesperson that fits the brand characteristics (Atwal and Williams, 2009). For example, Chanel's brand spokesperson is the famous French singer Vanessa Paradis, and Vanessa's image and temperament are very consistent with Chanel's self-positioning of 'elegance and exquisiteness', which can also bring consumers the most intuitive feeling of brand image (Atwal and Williams, 2009). The marketing methods of brand promotion include push marketing and pull marketing (Venkatesan et al., 2015). Push marketing is a primary promotion method, which is to establish brand awareness, publicise brand connotation and improve brand awareness through traditional means and some advertisements of active communication brand and commodity information (Venkatesan et al., 2015); Pull marketing can promote brand culture, create brand stories that can arouse consumers' emotional resonance, and attract consumers to actively establish diversified interactions with brands, which makes brand image more deeply rooted in people's hearts (Venkatesan et al., 2015). Cultural marketing and influencer marketing are representative marketing strategies in pull marketing (Hati et al., 2020). Cultural marketing refers to injecting emotions by means of cultural logos and classic stories in brand building, increasing the core connotation of the brand, releasing the core emotional energy of the brand in the marketing process, supplemented by the functional and conceptual needs of products, attracting consumers and increasing product sales (Ulver and Laurell, 2020). Influencer marketing refers to a marketing method that uses Influencer as a marketing means to help enterprises to publicise and promote product sales (Stubb et al., 2019). The key to the influence effect is the popularity of influence, which is a person's social cognition, which is conducive to showing the strength of enterprises and shaping a good brand image (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020).

Enterprises should pay attention to keeping the core characteristics of the brand consistent with the external information presented in the process of brand promotion (Guyt and Gijsbrechts, 2014). At the same time, it is necessary to coordinate the use of different communication means and communication tools, and establish a long-term and stable relationship with consumers through integrated communication (Manzur et al., 2011). Brand marketing strategy not only brings positive profit to enterprises, but also

has negative influence on product progress of enterprises and product experience of consumers (Lekhanya, 2014). The implementation of brand marketing strategy will weaken the importance of product quality (Liu et al., 2020). If enterprises invest more resources in marketing for more profits, the resources allocated to product manufacturing and quality supervision will be weakened (Liu et al., 2020). Inertia in product manufacturing will directly affect consumers' product experience, which also poses a potential risk to the development of word-of-mouth of enterprises (Liu et al., 2020). As a large economy and manufacturing country in the world, China has a vast market and sufficient productivity (Li et al., 2016). The emergence of new marketing media, represented by social media, connects the brand image and product market of Chinese enterprises, and makes a virtuous circle among brand marketing, social media and Chinese market (Li et al., 2016).

3 Research problem

Previous studies mainly focused on horizontal research, such as extensive comparison of social media such as Instagram, Facebook and Tik Tok (Dixon et al., 2015). This study will take Li Ning's official Weibo account as the research object, and study how Li Ning, a Chinese sports brand, uses Weibo, a Chinese social media platform, for brand marketing. Through observation, I observed the Weibo of Li Ning's official Weibo account from January to June 2021, and recorded the content and theme of Weibo, the attention and interaction amount (forwarding amount and comment amount) of Weibo, and summarised, tabulated and compared the relevant data. At the same time, through literature research, we can understand the history and current situation of Li Ning sports brand and Weibo, and have a clearer cognitive basis for the research [Jiang, (2017), p.35].

The purpose of this study is to analyse how Li Ning uses Chinese Weibo for brand marketing. Based on the brand marketing theory (push marketing and pull marketing, cultural marketing, influencer marketing) and previous studies (Hati et al., 2020), the following research questions are put forward:

- RQ1 Why Li Ning chose to use Chinese Weibo for brand marketing?
- RQ2 Li Ning's external operation mode (blog presentation and interaction feedback) of brand marketing with Chinese Weibo.
- RQ3 Li Ning's internal operation rules (specific marketing strategy and theory) of brand marketing with Chinese Weibo.

4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction to methodology

The title of this paper is 'The continuous maturity analysis of Li Ning's brand marketing through Weibo, China'. It analyses how Li Ning, a sportswear brand, carries out brand marketing through Sina Weibo, a Chinese social media, by studying all published blog posts in the first half of 2021 on Sina's official Weibo account (Torrance et al., 2021). A

vertical ad network targets a specific demographic with its advertising. A horizontal ad system distributes advertisements across the whole pool of accessible content. Companies can target fewer people more precisely with vertically advertising companies. For marketers, horizontally advertising companies provide more size, distribution, or different targeted options. Different from horizontal research (a comparative study of multiple objects) among different social media, this research is vertical research (in-depth study of a single object) on a selected social media (Weibo, China) (internal operation rules, influence of social background, and effect on Li Ning enterprises) (Shavitt et al., 2006). By classifying, coding and tabulating all the relevant information collected, the author makes an in-depth analysis on specific topics (blog post theme, audience interaction and comment content). The main problems studied are the reasons why Li Ning enterprises choose Chinese Weibo for brand marketing, and the external operation mode and internal operation rules of Li Ning enterprises using Chinese Weibo for brand marketing. All of the visible marketing components, including company symbol, online networks channels, visual identity, blogs, publications, and web designing, are considered an additional marketing. The goal of internal marketing is to create staff members throughout all stage's envoys or genuine legislators of the organisation or its ideals. Internal branding is a big business ideology that concentrates on integrating the company's primary society, individuality, or presumption to both its staff and its customers.

4.2 Paradigmatic influences

This research applies the paradigm of interpretivism. Interpretivism is the experience formed by human being's active understanding and interpretation, rather than being formed by passive perception and acceptance (Packard, 2017). Instead of emphasising so-called objective truth, an interpretivist philosophy of organisations concentrates on social life interactions as well as the significance of such connections as understood by people. Relativism is the fundamental standpoint of interpretive paradigm. According to relativity, existence is a personal matter that varies from individual to individual. The perceptions serve as a conduit for our real world. The purpose of this study is to understand how Li Ning, as a sports brand, uses Weibo as a social media to carry out brand marketing (Liang and Qin, 2019). Researchers take the initiative to understand and discuss specific marketing methods and processes and form relevant cognition (Olya et al., 2018). In order to communicate with a consumer, foster brand recognition, and increase transactions, mental advertising communications the body's capacity for self-reflection (Lee et al., 2018). At the same time, there is no experimental design, hypothesis testing, standard answer and right or wrong judgement (Slors et al., 2019). Therefore, this research belongs to interpretivism (Slors et al., 2019). Interpretivism ontology holds that the truth of the real world is constructed and explained subjectively by human beings (Geels, 2010). In the research, the researchers classified all posts of Li Ning's official Weibo account in the first half of 2021 at the content level, which belongs to the active concept construction (Mohd-Sulaiman and Hingun, 2020). Interpretivism epistemology advocates reconstructing these concepts through past experience, deep into real life and supplemented by scientific language (Ryan, 2018). In this study, the comments of Weibo fans are analysed and understood by using the experience and viewpoints of past discourse analysis (Kirkwood, 2017). This study is not applicable to

the paradigm of positivism (Park et al., 2020). Because positivism is based on hypothesis for experimental design, verifying the research or pushing it towards the unknowable is the goal (Park et al., 2020). The research objects in this article are Li Ning's official Weibo account and its accompanying blog posts, interactive data, fan comments and so on. Assessment regulations define the criteria by which an evaluation's effectiveness will be assessed. They can be utilised both for meta-assessment and for the preparation of an assessment. Some organisations have policies that combine concerns about ethics with excellence. The research object is too large, and there is no evaluation standard for objective reference, so it is impossible to design the experiment and guarantee the scientific and objective results of the experiment (Corry et al., 2019). While interpretivists think that people influence civilisation or use qualitative approach, empiricists agree that humanity influences the person as well as employ statistical techniques. The two fundamental sociological methodology techniques are optimism and interpretivism. Therefore, compared with positivism, interpretivism is more suitable for this study (Corry et al., 2019). In a theoretical view, development of scientific prioritises interpretation as well as forecasting. Utilising a theory-verification strategy, investigation is facilitated by the hypothetico-deductive paradigm of knowledge. A descriptive method towards the humanities has two main drawbacks. Initially, given the great challenges of social phenomena, the quest for optimal and faultless norms of research methodology or interpretation is excessively idealistic.

The business model is centred on the idea of using the item to meet the wants of the consumer and alleviate their issue (requirements). The marketing concept is a significant shift in today's business attitude that lays the groundwork for acquiring a comparative benefit. From a microscopic point of view, the purpose of this study is to explore the marketing approach and action process that can be realised for Li Ning, a sports brand, through Weibo in China (Park and Inou, 2018). Weibo serves as a significant resource of popular and informative as it is a content aggregator. Its profiles are used by Chinese businesses, organisations, or personalities to engage with their supporters. Positive thinking and statistical methods for gathering data go hand in hand. The foundation of interpretive paradigm is the idea that actuality is arbitrary, complex, or culturally produced. On the basis of the analysis of social media marketing ideas for this specific case, whilst findings cannot be generalised, they can provide valuable insight for the marketing of other brands, and also provide more realisation ideas and cooperation modes for other social media platforms that have been used or are being developed (Rosca, 2011). A social connecting system, often known as an SNS or networking sites site, is indeed an interactive portal that allows users to create online platforms or interactions with others who have similarities, experiences, or real-world affiliations. From a macro perspective, based on brand marketing theory (brand identification, brand positioning, brand image building and brand promotion), this research can explore whether and how social media can play a role in brand marketing of enterprises, and also analyse the influence and value of brand marketing for the overall development of an enterprise (Baena, 2016). From the perspective of macro social background, we can analyse what influences (progress and restrictions) Weibo, as a Chinese social media, has received from China's macro political background (Kang et al., 2019). Macro perspectives are a type of study that concentrates on socioeconomic system and offers a means to view civilisation as a cohesive entity. The individuality or the personality of individuals receives very little consideration in this macroeconomic view. Combining at

least one subjective or one data analysis element defines a mixed methodologies study. The exact description of mixed technique analysis is used in this article.

4.3 Research methods

In this study, the mixed method is applied. In a total of 158 blog posts from January to June 2021, the researchers conducted manual data collection and observation, and the table produced not only has the quantitative expression of interaction amount (forwarding, praise and comment), but also has the quality description of comment content (Mahlamäki and Nieminen, 2019). Consequently, qualitative as well as quantitative investigation can be consolidated to strengthen the reliability of the findings. This is similar to trilateration, except that instead of employing one technique to substantiate the outcome of another, alike quantitative as well as qualitative methodology are used for one collective power. Choosing the combination of quantitative research and qualitative research, we can combine the data of quantitative research on self-closure with the personal data of qualitative research on openness through two different method perspectives to form a comprehensive research perspective, and at the same time, we can obtain more comprehensive research data, so as to obtain more accurate and comprehensive research results (Mason et al., 2021). To address a study issue, mixed methods analysis combines statistical as well as subjective data. Although qualitative exploration includes gathering information for exploration reasons or to identify recurring characteristics, quantitative research entails the examination of quantifiable information that can be accessed for descriptive statistics. According to the number of blog posts on different blog posts, the specific number of interaction types (forwarding, praise, comment) in the top ten blog posts and the number of times of positive and negative words appearing in the comment area shown in Tables 1, 2 and 3, we can know that this kind of quantification and data collection behaviour can be more intuitive in comparative analysis (Iosad and Lamb, 2020). A blog, sometimes known as a weblog, is an academic website or conduct a site that is published on a constant schedule through a people, community, or organisation. It is presented in a casual or colloquial tone and offers facts in reversed temporal sequence. Through the definition and classification of blog posts' topics, the topic categories of the top ten blog posts in the total amount of interaction, and the positive and negative feature definition of words with high frequency in the comment area, it can be found that the behaviour of defining and classifying content topics and discourse features can obtain more detailed views of the research object (Kelly, 2023). The method of data collection is to review social media posts (Hingle et al., 2013). The methods of data collection are assessments and applications, discussions, inspections, documentation, participant observations and more. The reason for choosing this data collection method is flexible operation, which is not limited by time and place (Gonzalez-Hernandez et al., 2017). Although the manual collection mode cannot completely guarantee the accuracy of data, it can play a role and ensure the perfection of basic data when the research conditions do not support software investigation (Gonzalez-Hernandez et al., 2017). One must re-analyse the information to observe out whether their findings contradicted the assumption if the study's findings did not back up it. Users shouldn't change the studies, data, or both in order to obtain findings that support your theory. At the same time, because the scope of the research object is limited (only the blog posts in the first half of 2021 are studied), the obtained data also retain a

certain degree of authenticity (Burns et al., 2021). The selected participants are network users who participated in interaction (forwarding, praising and commenting) in all visible blog posts from January to June 2021 (Burns et al., 2021). The reason for choosing participants in this range is that controllable selection range is conducive to increasing the realisability and accuracy of collected data to a certain extent (Avegno and Hart, 2014). Businesses may efficiently guarantee system stability and guarantee that they can utilise information efficiently by implementing relational durability design. Meanwhile, the content covered by blog posts published during this period contains comprehensive categories (including Chinese star Xiao and Li Ning Fashion Show, which made Li Ning's brand sales increase rapidly) (Stubb et al., 2019). Also, the selected blog posts are published at the latest time, which is conducive to comparative analysis combined with relevant research in previous time periods, and meanwhile, combined with the current social and political environment and network environment, new research results can be extracted, which can provide reference value for future related research and development of related industries (Laurell and Söderman, 2018).

4.4 Data collection

This study collected the topic contents, reports, comments and likes of 158 blog posts from January to June 2021 in Li Ning Sina Weibo official account. I first completed the data collection task, including recording the interaction amount (forwarding, likes, comment) and comment content of each blog post within the selected range, and then inputting all the data into the computer to calculate the interaction amount and the frequency of key words (Maree, 2013). The steps to adjust the theme content are establish a centralised registry, maintain your sources of information up to date, do not even write anything down, follow the standard entering data procedure, gather and save all data results. Next, the processed data are analysed and coded, and summarised into the following table, including three levels: blog post theme, audience interaction and comment content, combined with corresponding tables (Lewis, 2015). A WordPress design is a collection of resources (visuals, template files, or coding) that determines how the site or blog will look altogether. The design of a website can be controlled by patterns, as well as the colours of its hyperlinks. The design, typeface, colour, and other visual components of the website are all customised by templates. A thematic is a collection of files included in a compressed directory, such as a collection of PHP-coded webpage template and CSS files. Live bands in which the community is supposed to DO anything is known as interactive content (used that word together for convenience, though numerous others would be appropriate). They must ACT in certain way, no matter how minor or significant. The reason for choosing observation and manual data collection is that Weibo, a social media platform, will only retrieve and provide the information of the most popular Weibo in the selected account, while the interactive amount of a large number of blog posts in a selected period will not be automatically reference (Mahan, 2011). At the same time, because the number of blog posts (158) in the selected range is limited and controllable, the method of observation and manual recording is feasible (Grady, 2016).

Table 1 Contents and number of posts on Li Ning's official Weibo account from January to June 2021

| <i>Category of content</i> | <i>Activities (store information, sponsor, competition cooperation)</i> | <i>Product introduction and promotion (poster)</i> | <i>Influencer</i> | <i>Lucky draw</i> | <i>Holiday greetings</i> | <i>The fall 2021 show</i> | <i>Annual performance of the company in 2020</i> |
|----------------------------|---|--|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| Proportion | 20% | 47% | 6% | 8.2% | 8.8% | 9% | 1% |
| Number of posts | 31 | 74 | 10 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 1 |

Source: Sina (2021)

Table 2 Top10 total reports, comments and likes of Li Ning's official Weibo account from January to June 2021

| <i>Serial number</i> | <i>Content of post</i> | <i>Category of content</i> | <i>Reports</i> | <i>Comments</i> | <i>Likes</i> | <i>Total quantity</i> | <i>Total proportion</i> |
|----------------------|---|--|----------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1 | Xiao Zhan – global spokesperson of Li Ning fashion products | Influencer | 100,0000 | 549,000 | 548,0000 | 7,029,000 | 69% |
| 2 | Hua Chenyu – Global spokesperson of Li Ning sports and fashion products | Influencer | 1,000,000 | 127,000 | 360,000 | 1,487,000 | 15% |
| 3 | Xiao Zhan publicises Li Ning autumn and winter 2021 fashion show | Influencer | 189,000 | 69,000 | 687,000 | 945,000 | 9% |
| 4 | China Li Ning autumn and winter 2021 fashion show video | The fall 2021 show | 22,000 | 7,500 | 159,000 | 188,500 | 1.9% |
| 5 | Backstage video – China Li Ning autumn and winter 2021 fashion show | The fall 2021 show | 40,000 | 6,500 | 118,000 | 164,500 | 1.6% |
| 6 | A cooperative shop between China Li Ning and Hajime Sorayama | Activities (store information, sponsor, competition cooperation) | 700 | 3,600 | 124,000 | 128,300 | 1.3% |

Source: Sina (2021)

Table 2 Top10 total reports, comments and likes of Li Ning's official Weibo account from January to June 2021 (continued)

| <i>Serial number</i> | <i>Content of post</i> | <i>Category of content</i> | <i>Reports</i> | <i>Comments</i> | <i>Likes</i> | <i>Total quantity</i> | <i>Total proportion</i> |
|----------------------|--|---|----------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| 7 | The name of the lucky draw winner announced (prise – the new type of running shoes) | Lucky draw | 100 | 3,500 | 96,000 | 99,600 | 1% |
| 8 | Cooperation guests – China Li Ning autumn and winter 2021 fashion show | The fall 2021 show | 4,600 | 1,600 | 36,000 | 42,200 | 0.5% |
| 9 | New product – China Li Ning autumn and winter 2021 fashion show | The fall 2021 show | 1,600 | 2,100 | 22,000 | 25,700 | 0.4% |
| 10 | New shoe design concept – integrate young people's sports (skateboarding, skiing, outdoor camping) | Product introduction and promotion (poster) | 2,300 | 1,500 | 20,000 | 23,800 | 0.3% |

Source: Sina (2021)

Table 3 Key words and sentences that appear more frequently in the comment section

| <i>Character</i> | <i>Serial number</i> | <i>Keywords and sentences</i> | <i>Number of times</i> | <i>Proportion</i> |
|------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|
| Positive | 1 | Fashion | 109,100 | 24% |
| | 2 | Brand | 77,500 | 17% |
| | 3 | Creativity | 71,300 | 16% |
| | 4 | Xiao Zhan | 69,700 | 15.7% |
| | 5 | Chinese culture | 68,800 | 15.3% |
| | 6 | Sense of design | 54,500 | 12% |
| Negative | 1 | Customer service is not perfect | 2,700 | 42% |
| | 2 | Slow delivery time | 1,600 | 25% |
| | 3 | Excessive hunger marketing | 900 | 14% |
| | 4 | The associated APP is loading slowly | 600 | 9% |
| | 5 | The secondary market is overpriced | 500 | 8% |
| | 6 | Uncomfortably dressed | 200 | 2% |

Source: Sina (2021)

4.5 Data analysis

The data collected in this study include the number of all blog posts in Li Ning's official Weibo account in the first half of 2021, the top ten blog posts in terms of interaction volume, and key words with high frequency in comment area. It provides the response and feedback of fans and other brand target audiences to brand image, service and publicity, which is reflected in the interaction quantity and comment quality of different blog posts (Grady, 2016). Statistical techniques, that draws inferences from information through normality test like the two-sample t, is one of the two major quantitative methodology employed in research methodology. Descriptive statistics displays information utilising indices like average and median. Data analysis is to use appropriate statistical analysis methods to summarise and understand the collected information, so as to obtain useful information and form conclusions (Clarke et al., 2018). The data analysis process consists of information demand, data collection, data analysis, data evaluation and improvement (Nychka et al., 2015). Qualitative research data analysis is the analysis of non-numerical data such as words, pictures and observation results (Woods et al., 2016). The specific methods of data analysis include tabular method and graphical method (Graham et al., 2010). The design of tables and graphs helps researchers find the relationship between related quantities, so as to better analyse and predict information (Graham et al., 2010). This research mainly observes the post contents (including words and pictures) of Li Ning's official Weibo account, and makes a list analysis of the collected data, so it belongs to qualitative research data analysis, supplemented by the specific analysis method of list method. Data coding is to establish the internal relationship between data through coding (Bevan and Palau, 2020). Classification coding is to divide a data block into several small data blocks representing specific meanings, and each small data block can be conveniently searched, operated, analysed and sorted (Li and Rothwell, 2016). On the premise of collecting specific data, the similarities of some contents are found out, and then the appropriate analysis unit (as a classification standard to describe and explain individual units) is selected, and then the category system and quantitative system are constructed for analysis (Li and Rothwell, 2016). As shown in the following table, it is the process idea of subject analysis and data coding for 158 selected blog posts, and I selected some contents as examples. What can be found is that I first screened out blog posts related to 'Store information', 'Sponsor' and 'Competition' from a large number of blog posts, and classified them as 'Activities'. Activities have the characteristics of goal, planning and multi-person participation (Brown et al., 2022). 'Store information', 'sponsor' and 'competition' are all planned with Li Ning brand as the main body (implementation body, capital contribution body and cooperation body), supported by venues and audiences (online and offline), all for the purpose of brand promotion and promotion. Therefore, it is reasonable, scientific and convenient to search and analyse.

| <i>Criteria for classification</i> | <i>Classified categories</i> | <i>Examples</i> |
|---|------------------------------|--|
| Store information (concept store, store address) Sponsor (the brand icon appears on the background board of the sponsored game) Competition (cooperative sneakers with designers) | Activities | A cooperative shop between China Li Ning and Hajime Sorayama |

Discourse is a regular practice used to explain statements (Fletcher, 2019). The focus is not on specific words or texts, but on the cultural model and ideology behind discourse that restrict the realisation of specific language (Rohde and Horton, 2014). Cultural paradigms organise thought. We all have latent thought processes of the way the system functions that we accept as a part of a culture, but also, we use such patterns to interpret fresh, foreign concepts. Such culture frameworks support our ability to prioritise and categorise additional knowledge, assess its significance, and make informed decisions. Discourse analysis explores the organisational and usage features of language by observing language expression, and explains the hidden meanings in language from the communicative functions of language and cognitive features of language users (Kirkwood, 2017). Discourse structure, function and relationship with society are the three dimensions of discourse analysis (Aristizábal and Guerrero, 2018). The basic task of discourse is to find the formal equivalence between words, and summarise these distribution structures into a grammar to explain the generation process of discourse (Lee, 2018). Language is a social symbol with potential significance, and symbolic theory emphasises situational context (Paterson and O’Hanlon, 2015). Language can also be regarded as a kind of social behaviour and social fact (Paterson and O’Hanlon, 2015). In this study, the researcher made a discourse analysis of the content of the comment area as shown in the following table. By observing the organisational features of language, such as ‘adjustable + object’ indicates negative emotion, the words ‘slow delivery, slowly loading’ are classified as expressing negative emotions. By exploring the use characteristics and situational context of language, for example, when some words exist in specific context and reflect positive meaning, it expresses the positive and positive attitude of the speaker. Comments are the direct reaction of commentators to the products, services and publicity contents of Li Ning brand, and are a kind of social connection between brand subject and target audience.

| | | |
|---|--|----------|
| Sense of design, brand, Chinese culture | Exists in specific context and reflects positive meaning (‘the appearance of new shoes has a sense of design’, ‘the brand image is impressive’, ‘the idea of integrating with Chinese culture is great’) | Positive |
| Slow delivery, slowly loading (APP) | ‘Adjective + object’ indicates negative emotion | Negative |

4.6 *Validity and reliability*

In order to ensure the reliability of data collection and research methods, I recorded the interactive data generated by accurate calculation on the official Weibo page of Li Ning brand, and entered various data contents such as forwarding, praise and comment into the computer for keyword screening (identification and indexing of keywords), quantity sorting and part-of-speech classification (Miller et al., 2018). Using mixed research method, quantitative research is used to record the specific data quantity and sort and analyse the activity degree of interaction quantity, and qualitative research method is used to record the user comment content in comment area and analyse the part of speech and hidden emotional expression (In written comments, it usually shows as follows: adjectives with commendatory meanings, existing in specific context and reflects positive meaning, interaction effect and existence context have positive significance, ‘adjective + object’ indicates negative emotion, words/prefixes with negative meanings) (Hardley

et al., 2021). I use the method of combining qualitative research with quantitative research to minimise the possible prejudice in the research process. Qualitative research may have some shortcomings, such as lack of science and rigor due to experience and intuitive analysis, while quantitative research may have some shortcomings, such as insufficient data or difficult operation when data analysis is difficult (Lau and Traulsen, 2017). In this study, the two are used comprehensively, qualitative analysis is the basic premise of quantitative analysis, and quantitative without qualitative analysis is a blind and worthless quantitative (Del Toro and Yoshikawa, 2016); Quantitative analysis makes it more scientific and accurate, and it can make qualitative analysis draw extensive and in-depth reference (Del Toro and Yoshikawa, 2016). This reduces the deviation of research results to the greatest extent. The limitation of this study is that: First of all, the selected sample can only represent the brand marketing activities carried out by Li Ning brand in the selected time period, but can not cover all the brand marketing activities in all time periods since the establishment of the whole brand (Parker, 2020). The representative scope of the sample is limited (Parker, 2020). Secondly, the results of this study can not be guaranteed to be applicable to brands in other fields, because the selected research scope is limited to Chinese sports brand Li Ning and Chinese social media Weibo, lacking universal value and experience reference standards to a certain extent (Mahan, 2011). Third, the evaluation mechanism of research results, such as specific consumption data, is not included in the scope of evaluation criteria, and the evaluation criteria need to be more detailed and perfect (Hammond et al., 2018).last but not least, it only uses the methods of reviewing social media posts and manually recording data (Stepnowsky et al., 2013). Compared with triangulation, which uses a variety of data sources and data collection methods, the limited methods adopted in this study have limited interactive confirmation effect, which lacks the comprehensiveness of research results and the accuracy of data collection to a certain extent, and increases the possibility of deviation (Stepnowsky et al., 2013).

5 Discussion

The research focuses on how Li Ning brand uses Chinese Weibo for brand marketing, with emphasis on external operation mode (blog presentation and interaction feedback) and internal operation rules (specific marketing strategy and theory) (Torrance et al., 2021). This study attempts to expand the literature on social media and brand marketing, especially focusing on specific marketing theories and methods such as 'push marketing and pull marketing' (Venkatesan et al., 2015).

This study collected the subject content, forwarding volume, comments and likes of 158 blog posts from January to June 2021 in Li Ning Sina Weibo official account. I will analyse it from three aspects: blog post theme, audience interaction and comment content, combined with corresponding tables. Table 1 records the contents and number of posts on Li Ning's official Weibo account from January to June 2021. All blog posts in the selected time are mainly classified into six topics, which are activities (store information, sponsor, competition cooperation), product introduction and promotion (poster), influencer, Lucky draw, holiday greetings, the fall 2021 show, annual performance of the company in 2020). Among them, 'product introduction and promotion' accounts for 47% (n = 74), which is the most frequently published content. The least published topic is

‘annual performance of the company in 2020’, which accounts for about 1% ($n = 1$). ‘activities (store information, sponsor, competition cooperation)’ is the second most published topic, with 31 blog posts, accounting for 20%. The rest of the topics are about ‘the fall 2021 show’, ‘holiday greetings’, ‘lucky draw’ and ‘influencer’, which have similar frequency. The number of blog posts is 9% ($n = 15$), 8.8% ($n = 14$), 8.2% ($n = 13$) and 6% ($n = 10$) respectively. It can be seen from the above that Li Ning’s content output on Sina Weibo, a social media platform, mainly focuses on product introduction and publicity, supplemented by related activities for cooperative publicity, and at the same time makes the content more diversified by inviting Influencer, sweepstakes, holiday greetings and costume shows (Liang and Qin, 2019). And annual performance of the company will be released, which will allow the outside world to supervise its own business conditions while reflecting and making progress (Guyt and Gijbrecchts, 2014).

Table 2 records top 10 total reports, comments and likes of Li Ning’s official Weibo account from January to June 2021. It can be seen from the table that the top three blog posts with the most interaction are all about influencers, and the influencers in the specific content are Xiao Zhan (the first and third) and Hua Chenyu (the second). The most interactive one is about ‘Xiao Zhan has become the global spokesperson of Li Ning’s fashion products’, accounting for 69% ($n = 7,029,000$) of the total interactions in the first ten blog posts. The second and third interactive contents are about ‘Hua Chenyu becoming the brand spokesperson’ and ‘Xiao Zhan promoting the autumn/winter show in 2021’, which account for 15% ($n = 1,487,000$) and 9% ($n = 945,000$) respectively, but there is a big gap between them and the top blog post. The amount of interaction about ‘the fall 2021 show’ theme is second only to that of ‘influencer’ theme. They are ranked fourth (China Li Ning Autumn and Winter 2021 Fashion Show Video), fifth (backstage video-China Li Ning Autumn and Winter 2021 Fashion Show), eighth (cooperation guests-China Li Ning autumn and winter 2021 fashion show) and ninth (new product-China Li Ning autumn and winter 2021 fashion show). They account for 1.9% ($n = 188,500$), 1.6% ($n = 164,500$), 0.5% ($n = 42,200$) and 0.4% ($n = 25,700$) in the top ten articles respectively. The blog posts ranked sixth and seventh are about activities (a cooperative shop between China Li Ning and Hajime Sorayama) and lucky draw (the name of the lucky draw winner announced), accounting for 1.3% ($n = 128,300$) and 1% ($n = 99,600$) respectively. The blog post with the tenth interactive volume is New Shoe Design Concept-Integrate Young People’s Sports (skateboarding, skiing, outdoor camping), and its theme is product introduction and promotion, accounting for 0.3% ($n = 23,800$). Through the above information, it is found that the interactive amount (reports, comments and likes) of the blog content about Xiao Zhan, an Influencer, has a fault gap compared with other blog content (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020). The number one blog post is about Xiao Zhan (69%) accounts for more than half of the top ten. However, the proportion of blog posts from the fourth to the tenth is stable within 1.9%. It can be seen that in Li Ning’s Sina Weibo official account, Influencer, represented by Xiao Zhan, has played a huge role in improving the interaction volume (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020). When we focus on specific reports, we can find that among the top three blog posts about Influencer, the number of comments and likes is far greater than that of reports. Among the four blog posts (the fourth, fifth, eighth and ninth) on the theme of the fall 2021 show, the number of reports and likes is far greater than the number of comments. The remaining three blog posts on activities, lucky draw and product introduction and promotion have far more likes than reports and comments. Combining these, we can know that the blog posts related to influencer can stimulate the audience’s

comments and emotions more. When faced with blog posts related to the fall 2021 show, viewers prefer to collect and save the created account videos and emotional expressions instead of verbal interaction. The likes interactive blog posts are, the more interactive blog posts are, rather than reports and comments (Higgins, 2013). The more interactive a blog post is, the more comments it will have on the premise that all kinds of interactive data are high (Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018).

Table 3 is about key words and sentences that appear more frequently in the comment section. From the table, we can find that the proportion of words with positive meanings is evenly distributed, which is roughly concentrated between 12% and 24%. The notion or emotion that a phrase evokes by extending its precise meaning is known as connotation. Also, a phrase that conjures up pleasant feelings or ideas is said to have a positive meaning; conversely, a term conjuring up unpleasant feelings or ideas is said to have a poor undertone. A good implication is a connection that a term has with something favourable or positive. In the environment in which it is employed, the meaning renders the term sound positive or pleasurable. The reverse is a notion that is unfavourable. However, the proportion of words with negative meanings is unevenly distributed, and the proportion of key words and sentences that appear most frequently is as high as 42%, which is 2 to 20 times that of other negative words. Generally speaking, there are more positive key words than negative key words in the comment area. Among the positive key words, 'fashion' appears most frequently, which accounts for 24% of the total ranking (n = 109,100), and the remaining words with more frequent occurrences are 'brand', 'creativity', 'Xiao zhan', 'Chinese culture' and 'sense of design'. They are 17% (n = 77,500), 16% (n = 71,300), 15.7% (n = 69,700), 15.3% (n = 68,800) and 12% (n = 54,500). Among the negative key words, 'customer service is not perfect' appears 2,700 times, accounting for 42%. The remaining words which appear frequently are mainly 'slow delivery time', 'excessive hunger marketing', 'the associated app is loading slowly', 'the secondary market is overpriced', 'uncomfortably dressed' accounts for 25% (n = 1,600), 14% (n = 900), 9% (n = 600), 8% (n = 500) and 2% (n = 200) respectively. Combined with this information, we can know that the audience's positive evaluation is mainly about product innovation, cultural development and star propaganda, while the negative evaluation is mainly about after-sales service and product premium caused by hunger marketing (Hati et al., 2020).

For keywords and sentences that appear frequently in comment areas, the understanding process is also worth exploring. Table 4 is my analysis process of coding (topic analysis) and understanding data.

It can be found from Table 4 that keywords with the same attributes or characteristics screened from a large number of blog posts are all in the same column, and all point to the macro category concept words to which they belong to, for example, blog posts related to 'store information', 'sponsor' and 'competition' are classified as 'activities'. Activities have the characteristics of targeting, planning and multi-person participation (Brown et al., 2022). 'Store information', 'sponsor' and 'competition' are all planned with Li Ning brand as the main body (implementer, funder and partner), supported by venues and audience (online and offline), and all are aimed at brand promotion and promotion. Therefore, sentences and blog posts containing the above keywords are coded as 'activities'. The cultural mode and ideology behind discourse that restrict the realisation of a specific language are its own characteristics (Rohde and Horton, 2014).

Table 4 Topic analysis and coding process of blog content

| <i>Criteria for classification</i> | <i>Classified categories</i> | <i>Examples</i> |
|--|---|--|
| Store information (Concept store, store address) Sponsor (The brand icon appears on the background board of the sponsored game) Competition (Cooperative sneakers with designers) | Activities | A cooperative shop between China Li Ning and Hajime Sorayama |
| Words expression ('The new shoes launched this spring are...It adopts shock absorption technology...') | Product introduction and promotion | New shoe design concept – integrate young people's sports (skateboarding, skiing, outdoor camping) |
| Product advertisement poster (Including product pictures, release time, purchase channels and preferential information) | | |
| Person name (Xiao Zhan, Hua Chenyu) + 'spokesperson' keyword | Influencer | Xiao Zhan – global spokesperson of Li Ning fashion products Hua Chenyu – global spokesperson of Li Ning sports and fashion products |
| Words expression ('Lucky users...will get sent by the platform...gift') | Lucky draw | The name of the lucky draw winner announced (prize – the new type of running shoes) |
| Festival name keywords (Spring Festival, Lantern Festival, Mother's Day) | Holiday greetings | Li Ning wishes Weibo users a happy Spring Festival |
| Proportion of keywords (In addition to observing whether there are keywords of '2021 Autumn and Winter Show', it depends on whether the proportion of relevant content is sufficient. If the main content is focused on 'new product introduction', it is not considered as the former.) | The fall 2021 show | Cooperation guests – China Li Ning autumn and winter 2021 fashion show |
| Keywords ('financial report') | Annual Performance of the company in 2020 | Annual performance of the company in 2020 |

Source: Sina (2021)

Discourse analysis explains hidden meanings in language by observing language expression, communicative functions and cognitive features of language users (Kirkwood, 2017). Language is a social symbol with potential significance, and symbolic theory emphasises situational context (Paterson and O'Hanlon, 2015). In this study, the researcher makes a textual analysis of the content of the comment area, as shown in Table 5. By observing the organisational characteristics of language, and exploring the use characteristics and situational context of language, we can find out the true emotions contained in it. For example, 'adjustable + object' indicates negative emotion, 'excessive hunger marketing, overpriced secondary market, uncomfortable dressed' and other

negative combinations, 'support Xiao Zhan's eternal', which has a positive existence context. Comments are the direct reaction of commentators to the products, services and publicity contents of Li Ning brand. The chart shows that network users are dissatisfied with the online software, after-sales service and product quality of Li Ning brand, and express satisfaction and support for its design innovation, spokesperson selection and cultural stories.

Table 5 Critical discourse analysis and coding process of comment content

| <i>Fashion, creativity</i> | <i>Adjectives with commendatory meanings</i> | |
|---|--|----------|
| Sense of design, brand, Chinese culture | Exists in specific context and reflects positive meaning ('the appearance of new shoes has a sense of design', 'the brand image is impressive', 'the idea of integrating with Chinese culture is great') | Positive |
| Xiao Zhan | Interaction effect and existence context have positive significance ('support Xiao Zhan's endorsement') | |
| Slow delivery, slowly loading (APP) | 'Adjective + object' indicates negative emotion | Negative |
| Not perfect, excessive hunger marketing, overpriced secondary market, uncomfortable dressed | Words/prefixes with negative meanings | |

Source: Sina (2021)

Influencer endorsement can not only generate consumption conversion rate, but also reduce the promotion cost of defensive channels of products, thus effectively enhancing product awareness and maintaining product reputation (Stubb et al., 2019). Influencer's endorsement belongs to positioning marketing, that is, Influencer is used to establish or maintain the anchor point of products in consumers' minds (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2020). Xiao Zhan's contribution to Li Ning brand can meet the brand's current goal of expanding young consumers in a subtle way (Savci and Aysan, 2017). Compared with the previous push marketing (actively placing a large number of advertisements), pull marketing (consumers actively understand and discuss brands) can be realised by means of the internet (Venkatesan et al., 2015). With the help of Influencer, we can give full play to the effectiveness of fan economy, create topics through consumers' likes or dislikes, and make the brand spread with people's word of mouth, at the same time, it also improves consumers' sense of participation and forms a virtuous circle (Schwemmer and Ziewiecki, 2018). Labeling definition is beneficial to accurately target customers (Kordumova et al., 2016). 'Labeling' is a common way in the internet age (Rohm et al., 2013). Taking stars as keyword tags (#), the spread of products will be much faster and more direct, because the active search for such keywords is basically about attentive customers (Kordumova et al., 2016). To sum up, Li Ning's choice of Sean Xiao has a high degree of conformity with brand characteristics, and Sean Xiao's influence as a star has a high degree of matching with the target audience of the brand (Wetzel et al., 2018). At the same time, the endorsement cost of Influencer is in line with the enterprise budget, and the potential risk of star's current influence on the brand is low (Tuna et al., 2016). Therefore, Li Ning brand chose Xiao and others for brand endorsement, and achieved good results according to the interaction volume of Weibo (Mahan, 2011). Li Ning

refocused its brand positioning and re-established the basic strategy of ‘multiple categories and channels’ (Lee, 2018). As an important part of this strategy, Li Ning fashion show has achieved good influence (Yang et al., 2018). In terms of pre-positioning, Li Ning is the first enterprise in China’s sports brands to put sportswear on the fashion show, striving to make its brand quickly enter consumers’ memory, so as to seize the first position in China’s sports market (Harp et al., 2012). Because under normal circumstances, the first brand to enter the memory of consumers has a much higher long-term market share than the second brand on average, and this relationship is not easy to change (Khan et al., 2014). The product logic of Li Ning’s fashion show marketing is that the version and main design elements must be popular at present or have been proved feasible by the top brands, and at the same time, these products contain a classic Chinese story (Rosca, 2011). Then use timely media resources to convey the Chinese story behind the brand to consumers (Venkatesan et al., 2015). Finally, the popular styles or core styles in the fashion show will be transformed into real business, that is, retail (Khan et al., 2014). Considering that Chinese consumers’ recognition of domestic brands needs the support of the brand’s ‘halo event’, Li Ning has transferred Chinese consumers’ esteem for international top fashion activities to himself by means of ‘exporting to domestic sales’ and ‘gilding fashion shows’, and thus fashion show marketing has also achieved good response (Burton et al., 2019). From the collected Sina Weibo data, we can know that the two major product development paths of Li Ning brand are brand co-branding and new design of ‘Chinese trend’ (Gan and Wang, 2015). Cross-border brand marketing mode has brought ‘spillover’ marketing effect to brand reputation (Yang et al., 2018). By co-branding with designers in other fields, Li Ning realised the linkage brand promotion of sports brand and brand image which has been deeply rooted in consumers’ minds in other fields, provoked the consumption desire of the inherent consumer groups of both brands, and attracted more consumers to participate in and pay attention to other marketing activities and designs of the brand, thus maximising the marketing effect of both parties (Pareek and Harrison, 2020). In terms of new product design, the products of Li Ning brand integrate the elements of Chinese traditional culture, so that the traditional culture and modern fashion are integrated, thus making the products have unique style and fashionable feeling (Orazi et al., 2017). Cultural marketing is consumer-centred, emphasising that material needs to be supported by cultural connotation, and integrating cultural concepts into the whole process of marketing (Hati et al., 2020). Li Ning brand uses traditional cultural concepts to empower products, make the brand ‘conceptualised’ and ‘enriched’, and attract consumers to pursue their unique cultural concepts (Chen, 2011). This process gradually accumulated into a brand equity, which further stimulated consumers’ feelings and attention (Torelli et al., 2012). The blog posts and activities with lottery theme have low cost to get users’ attention (Shukla et al., 2016). It can arouse a lot of attention and interaction in a short time after the activity begins (Shukla et al., 2016). At the same time, how to do a good job in the activity plan can get the long-term attention of some interested people (Kim et al., 2010). However, this kind of marketing means will increase invalid fans or empty account users in a short period of time, and cannot get real and effective interaction (Herold, 2018). User activity and fan viscosity cannot be improved, and a large number of valuable consumers cannot be formed [Tuna et al., (2016), p.56]. The low consumption conversion rate will also reduce brand awareness to a certain extent (Higgins, 2013).

The good interaction between influencer endorsement and fashion show marketing reaction on Li Ning's Weibo account has reference value for Li Ning brand, which shows that these two activities can effectively attract consumers' attention (Iankova et al., 2019). The good interaction of blog posts is linked with fan viscosity and consumption conversion rate, which shows that celebrity endorsement and fashion show marketing can effectively expand marketing effect, enhance brand awareness and brand image, and then increase product sales (Wang et al., 2015). Co-branding and new design are second only to the above two themes in terms of interaction, which shows that novel and creative brand culture stories and cross-border cooperation have a positive impact on enhancing consumers' attention and recognition (Dolan et al., 2019). This is also reflected in the comment area. High-frequency words such as 'fashion, creativity, sense of design, Chinese culture' also reflect that Li Ning's efforts in co-branding and design innovation are effective (Anon, 2015). The overall interactive volume of blog posts such as product promotion and user lottery followed closely (Anon, 2015). These two items are the themes with the largest number of daily operations of Sina Weibo's official Weibo account, and their important functions are mainly reflected in the definition of basic account nature, maintaining the richness of account content, facilitating consumers to receive new product information at any time, etc., which is helpful to maintain the daily stable operation of the account as the basic content (Savci and Aysan, 2017). Weibo has made great efforts in displaying the good image of Li Ning brand, and will also absorb the suggestions of consumers while keeping moving forward (Abeza et al., 2013). For example, the message in the comment area is an effective way for vertical barrier-free communication between the brand and consumers (Nisar et al., 2018). Vertical communication functions best in hierarchically structured organisations. Data flows both upwards or downwards using this method of interaction, which aids in defining corporate responsibilities and previously appeared. From the comments such as 'slow delivery, slow loading, excessive hunger marketing, overpriced secondary market, unsupervised dressed', it can be known that the online software fluency, after-sales service (logistics) and product quality supervision of Li Ning brand need further improvement and perfection (Lekhanya, 2014). This feedback also contributes to the long-term stable promotion of the brand to a certain extent (Liu et al., 2020). If the company handles the above shortcomings in time, it can further increase consumers' goodwill and recognition of the brand (Li et al., 2016).

Through the above content, we can answer research question 1, that is, the reason why Li Ning brand chooses to use Chinese Weibo for brand marketing is that localised social media coverage can cover Chinese target customers more accurately, and the promotion cost is low and the marketing effect of vertical barrier-free communication is good (Gan and Wang, 2015). With regard to research question 2 and research question 3, we can know that the external operation of Li Ning's official Weibo account mainly focuses on blog presentation in the form of pictures and words, supplemented by interaction feedback in blog comment areas of different theme types to adjust the theme content that needs to be focused on and improve the products and services (Burns et al., 2021). The internal operation rules of Li Ning's official Weibo account are mainly reflected in the specific marketing strategy and theory contained in different blog posts, such as 'push marketing' represented by traditional graphic propaganda and lucky draw, and 'pull marketing' represented by celebrity endorsement, brand co-branding and innovative design (cultural marketing) (Venkatesan et al., 2015).

6 Conclusions

The purpose of this study is to study the blog content and interactive data of Li Ning's official Weibo account, and to explore how Li Ning brand uses Weibo, a Chinese social media, for brand marketing. The research data comes from 158 blog posts published by Li Ning's official Weibo account from January to June 2021, and the research results are analysed by brand marketing theory. This study found that, Li Ning brand uses Chinese Weibo for brand marketing, which has achieved good attention and interaction (forwarding, praise, comment) for the brand itself, to a certain extent, enhanced the brand image and maintained the long-term development of the brand (Kunkel and Biscaia, 2020). To a certain extent, the interaction volume of blog posts published by Li Ning brand is more related to the theme of blog posts, but less related to the number of blog posts (Strzelecki and Czuba, 2018). Most of the topics with more blog posts are traditional 'push marketing' such as daily product graphic publicity, while those with less blog posts are mainly new 'pull marketing' such as influencer endorsements and fashion shows (Venkatesan et al., 2015). The latter has more attention and interaction than the former in the case of less blog posts, and has achieved better marketing results. Among them, 'influencer marketing' represented by celebrity endorsements and 'cultural marketing' represented by fashion show, joint cooperation and new design of national tide are the main parts of the overall blog interaction (Ulver and Laurell, 2020). At the same time, the interaction between sweepstakes and daily product graphic publicity accounts for a small part of the overall blog post, although the number of blog posts published is more. The interactive data corresponding to these marketing methods reflect that modern network users show more enthusiasm and recognition for 'pull marketing' represented by 'influencer marketing' and 'cultural marketing' (Stubb et al., 2019). At the same time, it is also a microcosm of social development and a portrayal of social ideology, that is, China's internet era has spawned a more creative marketing platform and more attractive marketing means, and internet users in the new era also welcome products full of creativity and stories (Maree, 2013).

Like all studies, this study has limitations. First of all, when selecting samples, in order to be closer to the latest blog activities and marketing trends, and to avoid the operation process obstacles caused by excessive data information, the researchers selected a total of 158 blog posts in Li Ning's official Weibo account from January to June 2021 for research (Parker, 2020). The selected sample can only represent the brand marketing activities carried out by Li Ning brand in the selected time period, and cannot cover the brand marketing activities in all time periods since the establishment of the whole brand, so it is a research of continuous maturity, and the representative scope of the sample has limitations (Parker, 2020). Secondly, it remains to be discussed whether the results of this study can provide value reference and experience for other corporate brands to use other social media for brand marketing (Mahan, 2011). Although Li Ning brand has made good achievements in China and international markets, this research cannot be guaranteed to be applicable to brands in other fields, because the selected research scope is limited to Li Ning, a Chinese sports brand, and Weibo, a Chinese social media. Therefore, this study cannot make a strong cultural background comparison between other brands and social media (Mahan, 2011). Third, the evaluation mechanism of research results needs to be more careful and perfect (Hammond et al., 2018). For example, in this study, the interaction amount (forwarding, praise, comment) and comment content of blog posts are used as the standard to measure the brand marketing

effect of Li Ning brand using Weibo, ignoring the influence of sales and profit changes on the evaluation of marketing results (Hammond et al., 2018). Although the changes in sales and profits are reflected in the annual financial report published by Li Ning in Weibo, they are only briefly mentioned by the simple growth value (Hammond et al., 2018). In order to pursue more rigorous research results, the consumption data such as sales corresponding to the selected time period should be included in the scope of evaluation criteria (Hammond et al., 2018). Fourthly, in this study, only the methods of reviewing social media posts and manually recording data are used (Stepnowsky et al., 2013). Compared with triangulation using multiple data sources and data collection methods, the limited method used in this study has limited effect of mutual confirmation, which increases the possibility of deviation (Stepnowsky et al., 2013).

Based on the above conclusions and shortcomings, the future research direction will be extended to some different topics to increase the rigor and comprehensiveness of the research in this field. First, future research may focus on other countries or types of social media platforms except Weibo, China. This research is mainly based on the social media platform which exists in China and takes text and images as its main expression. With the popularity of short video platform represented by Tik Tok, we may focus on how brands use short video platform for brand marketing in the future. Secondly, another research direction is the influence of brand display and performance on social media platforms, and what benefits can be gained by both brands and social media. Specifically, the future research may try to explore what kind of activities the brand carries out on social media, which will make the platform settle in more users and get more satisfaction in experience, thus obtaining greater consumption conversion rate. Third, future research can try diversified brands and enterprise samples to improve the universal value of research results. For example, future research can try to cover brands from different countries and cultural backgrounds and explore the relationship between cultural background and brand marketing activities on social media; Or try to collect samples of brands that are different from other different fields in the sports industry and brands with different fan bases, which will further expand the reference value of the research results. Finally, the future research can interview the brand and its marketing team, collect, analyse and concisely. Summarise its social media marketing strategy, and make a more in-depth study on the strategy.

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Data availability

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in the manuscript.

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