

Revitalising Tennis in China: Reassessing Brand Challenges and Strategic Opportunities in a Niche Sport

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Abstract. Tennis, long associated with grace and tradition, is increasingly struggling to maintain its market position and cultural relevance in China's rapidly evolving sports and media environment, particularly among younger audiences. This study explores the current branding and marketing challenges facing tennis as a niche sport in China and investigates which strategic approaches may help reactivate its visibility and audience engagement. Based on content analysis and case comparisons drawing from data between 2023 and 2025, the study examines shifts in brand positioning, media practices, and audience behaviour across leading tennis institutions, domestic events, and sponsorships. The analysis employs established frameworks, including the STP model, the marketing mix (4Ps), and brand association theory. Findings suggest that outdated elite branding, limited grassroots promotion, and insufficient localisation in digital storytelling remain significant barriers to audience connection. However, strategies such as lifestyle rebranding, cross-industry collaborations, and integration with domestic social media platforms demonstrate growing potential in revitalising the sport's image. By analysing these trends and offering case-based insights, this study contributes to the existing literature on niche sport marketing and provides practical guidance for repositioning tennis within a more inclusive and digitally responsive cultural context in China.

Keywords: Niche sport branding, Lifestyle rebranding, Digital communication, Marketing mix (4Ps), Sport consumer behavior

1. Introduction

Tennis has long occupied a prestigious position in the global sports arena, with tournaments such as the US Open, Wimbledon, Roland Garros, and the Australian Open serving as cultural landmarks that define international sporting excellence. In China, flagship events including the China Open, Shanghai Masters, and WTA Finals Shenzhen have reinforced the sport's global-local connections, shaping both national visibility and cultural identity. Over the past decade, tennis participation in China has grown steadily, largely stimulated by the success of role models such as Li Na, whose Grand Slam victories inspired unprecedented public interest, and more recently by Zheng Qinwen's emergence on the international stage [1]. Celebrity endorsements and the amplification of tennis-related content on platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu have further broadened its appeal, particularly among younger audiences who are responsive to digital trends and lifestyle

branding [2]. However, sports such as basketball and football remain dominant in China due to their lower costs, easier access to facilities, and stronger mass appeal. Tennis, by contrast, faces challenges of limited accessibility, higher participation costs, and weaker visibility in domestic media. In China's fragmented digital media environment, content recommendations shaped by algorithms tend to prioritize mainstream sports, leaving niche sports like tennis with fewer opportunities for exposure, sponsorship, and digital engagement. The preference of Generation Z for short, fast-paced content also makes it harder for tennis, with its traditional formats, to maintain attention.

Despite these difficulties, tennis is beginning to stand out as an exception among niche sports in China. The emergence of young players, the influence of fashion–sport collaborations, and the integration of tennis content into short-video platforms are expanding its audience base. Positioned between long-standing elite traditions and modern digital relevance, tennis is gradually being redefined as both aspirational and accessible, especially when supported by locally adapted branding and marketing strategies.

What sets this study apart is that it examines tennis as a hybrid case: a sport traditionally regarded as elite, yet increasingly reshaped by China's digital culture and youth-oriented branding. By addressing this underexplored intersection, the study contributes a fresh perspective to the literature on niche sports marketing and cultural adaptation.

The study employs a qualitative approach that integrates literature review, secondary data analysis, and case comparison. The focus lies on China's tennis market between 2023 and 2025, particularly examining the China Open, Shanghai Masters, and the strategies of leading brands such as Li-Ning, Nike, Wilson, and Lacoste. Secondary data are drawn from authoritative industry reports, together with social media metrics from Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo, which provide insight into audience engagement, brand visibility, and consumer interaction. Representative cases are chosen based on their influence in shaping public perception and market positioning, allowing for a systematic evaluation of branding strategies across both domestic and international actors. The analysis combines structural content analysis—highlighting recurring themes in brand communication—with comparative case studies, such as Li-Ning versus Nike, or the digital outreach of the China Open compared with the Chinese Basketball Association.

The study proceeds in three steps: first, it outlines the branding challenges that tennis faces in the digital era; second, it analyses strategies that may stimulate market vitality and broaden audience reach; and third, it offers targeted recommendations for enhancing tennis's competitive standing in China's evolving sports landscape.

2. Finding and analysis

2.1. Cultural rigidity of tennis branding in China

Unlike basketball, which integrates into Chinese urban and youth culture, tennis is perceived as distant from daily life. This is reinforced by weak connections with youth subcultures such as music, fashion, and street culture, which limit symbolic associations [3,4]. For example, basketball courts often double as social spaces where music, streetwear, and peer culture intersect, creating a sense of belonging. Tennis clubs, by contrast, remain isolated from these cultural markers, so the sport lacks resonance with everyday youth lifestyles. Scholars also note that sports with deeper cultural embedding in everyday identity, such as basketball, demonstrate more resilient branding power [5]. This sense of separation is also symbolically reinforced by tennis itself being played “across a net,”

a spatial distance that distinguishes it from sports like basketball, where physical proximity fosters community bonds.

2.2. Channel gaps and fragmented participation (STP: targeting)

For tennis, the lack of accessible entry points means visibility does not convert into grassroots growth. In practice, this often means that while spectators may admire international tournaments, they rarely pick up a racket themselves because of high costs and long travel distances to facilities. From an STP perspective, tennis primarily targets urban elites and spectators, overlooking potential segments such as students and families. This narrow segmentation strategy locks tennis into a shrinking audience base, while more inclusive sports have succeeded by diversifying audiences early.

Moreover, without lowering entry barriers, tennis risks remaining a “spectator-only” sport in China, admired but rarely practised. Research on consumer behaviour suggests that when the cost of trial is high, audience enthusiasm seldom translates into regular participation [6]. Compared with sports such as basketball or badminton, which require minimal equipment and are supported by abundant public facilities, tennis demands higher costs for rackets, court rental, and coaching, further discouraging entry-level participation. This highlights the urgency of designing inclusive entry-level programs that can bridge symbolic admiration and actual engagement.

2.3. Market expansion

2.3.1. China's growth path

Another challenge is regional inequality: first-tier cities see more facilities and youth programs, while rural and smaller cities lag. This imbalance prevents tennis from building a nationwide grassroots base. For instance, Beijing and Shanghai frequently host ATP or WTA events and have international academies, but smaller provinces often lack even basic public courts, reinforcing inequality in access. Studies in sports geography suggest that spatial disparities in facilities directly correlate with participation rates [7]. Recent spatial analysis based on the Sixth National Sports Venues Census confirms that sports infrastructure remains concentrated in eastern China's urban centres, reinforcing regional inequality in access [8]. This indicates that without balanced facility distribution, tennis will remain concentrated among wealthy urban elites, making it difficult to achieve inclusive, large-scale participation nationwide.

2.3.2. U.S. growth path

Moreover, U.S. tennis benefits from cultural associations with health, fitness, and lifestyle—narratives that China has not yet developed [9]. Tennis is marketed not only as competition but also as a lifelong wellness activity, often promoted alongside campaigns about active aging and mental health. This widens its appeal beyond elite athletes, positioning the sport as part of daily routines for ordinary citizens.

Such framing broadens the sport's symbolic value, enabling tennis to attract not only aspiring professionals but also families, students, and older adults seeking social or health-oriented activities.

2.3.3. Comparative outlook

China's reliance on urban elites limits its ability to build a nationwide base, while the U.S. approach ensures accessibility across socioeconomic groups. This difference shows why one system scales more effectively: while China creates moments of national pride through individual champions, the U.S. fosters continuous participation by embedding the sport into school curricula and community life. As Bale observes, sports become sustainable when rooted in daily routines rather than prestige-based events [10].

The comparative perspective also underlines a structural difference: whereas the U.S. embeds tennis into educational and community systems, China tends to rely on star-driven publicity campaigns. Such campaigns, while effective in generating short-term attention, do not create stable participation ecosystems. Studies in sport sociology argue that sustainable growth depends on institutional anchoring rather than episodic excitement [11]. Therefore, Section 4 emphasises how branding and promotional strategies can compensate for these structural weaknesses.

3. Strategic pathways for revitalisation

3.1. Brand repositioning pathways – rebuilding image

Long-term revitalisation of tennis in China requires a deliberate repositioning of its brand image. The essential task is to shift tennis away from its entrenched identity as an elite activity and reframe it as a lifestyle practice that emphasises health, simplicity, and inclusivity. Branding research indicates that framing sports as lifestyle practices fosters stronger cultural attachment and consumer loyalty [12]. In the Chinese context, this implies that tennis should emphasise its health benefits, social functions, and everyday accessibility, rather than rely predominantly on prestige. Recasting tennis as a routine element of urban life—comparable to jogging, yoga, or badminton—can enhance its appeal among younger demographics who prioritise both fitness and social belonging.

International evidence reinforces this perspective. Roland Garros in France has cultivated a distinct identity by integrating tennis with national culture, fashion, and gastronomy. In Japan, tennis has been promoted through narratives of discipline, harmony, and community integration [13]. These cases highlight the importance of embedding sport within broader cultural narratives. For China, this means aligning tennis with domestic movements such as Guochao (national fashion) and the expanding wellness economy. By associating tennis with Chinese fashion, music, and sustainability discourses, the sport may develop a hybrid identity that is simultaneously global and local, thereby strengthening its cultural resonance and long-term relevance.

To rebuild its image, tennis needs to tell stories that ordinary people can connect with. Campaigns emphasising “tennis as everyday life” could highlight students playing after school, families engaging in weekend matches, or communities using tennis for wellness. Such narratives not only humanise the sport but also position it as a shared cultural practice. As research suggests, sports that embed themselves in everyday cultural scripts are more successful in achieving sustainable engagement [14].

3.2. Channel expansion strategies – brand place (4Ps)

For tennis in China to build sustainable growth, expanding its distribution channels is critical. Beyond traditional venues and tournaments, the sport needs to create an integrated “tennis lifestyle

ecosystem” that combines events, training, and social spaces. By broadening its presence both online and offline, tennis can become more accessible and relevant to a wider audience.

Rather than existing only in exclusive clubs or professional tournaments, tennis should embed itself in multiple touchpoints of daily life. This includes not only traditional facilities but also schools, universities, shopping centres, and community parks. Research on sport participation emphasises that access to diverse and convenient venues is a significant factor in sustaining engagement [15]. Establishing a blended network of physical training spaces and digital platforms would allow tennis to connect with audiences across different contexts, forming a cohesive lifestyle ecosystem.

New technologies also provide opportunities to enhance the tennis experience. The U.S. Open has pioneered immersive broadcasting through multi-angle streaming, real-time data integration, and augmented reality features that enhance viewer interaction. Studies on sports media innovation suggest that AR/VR and interactive broadcasts increase audience engagement by creating more personalised and immersive experiences [16]. For tennis in China, introducing similar innovations—such as VR training simulations, AR overlays in livestreams, or interactive commentary—could transform both spectator experiences and participant training. These technologies can also lower psychological barriers: for example, VR simulations allow beginners to experience the sport before committing to costly lessons, making participation less intimidating.

These innovations are not merely technological gimmicks; they function as trust-building mechanisms. By allowing beginners to experiment virtually, they reduce uncertainty and encourage first contact with the sport. In China, where many families weigh return on investment before committing to extracurricular activities, such low-risk introductions could be decisive in attracting new participants [17].

The most effective channel strategies will combine the strengths of digital and physical spaces. For example, online communities built on platforms like Douyin or WeChat could be linked directly to offline events such as local tournaments or social gatherings. This integration not only broadens exposure but also deepens community belonging, ensuring that tennis is experienced as both a sport and a lifestyle.

3.3. Audience activation mechanisms – brand promotion (4Ps)

The sustainable growth of tennis in China will depend on its ability to move beyond visibility and actively activate audiences. While star players and professional events generate media attention, they rarely translate into broad and lasting participation. A stronger focus on promotional strategies that encourage active involvement is required to reposition tennis as a shared cultural practice rather than an elite spectacle.

An effective pathway is to create a three-level promotion structure connecting cities, universities, and communities. Cities can host major tournaments and branded campaigns to enhance visibility, universities can nurture talent and enthusiasm through intercollegiate competitions, and communities can provide low-cost opportunities for families and beginners. Research on sport development systems suggests that multi-level promotion linking elite and grassroots levels is most effective for expanding participation [18].

Tennis in China continues to be burdened by its image as a high-cost, high-status sport. To attract wider audiences, promotional strategies must reduce both financial and psychological barriers. Subsidised beginner programs, casual “try-out” sessions, and family-oriented activities can highlight tennis as accessible to all age groups. Studies of sport-for-all policies show that inclusive initiatives and reduced entry costs significantly increase youth and community engagement [19]. Such

initiatives are especially effective for students and young professionals, who often want flexible, low-commitment opportunities before deciding whether to pursue a sport long-term.

Japan provides a useful model, where tennis has been integrated into schools, public facilities, and community programs. This “tennis for all” approach normalises participation and ensures that the sport is not confined to private clubs. For China, adopting similar strategies would mean embedding tennis in everyday contexts—school curricula, community parks, and cultural festivals—so that it becomes visible and playable across different social settings.

Equally important is how tennis is narrated. Instead of framing it as a luxury pursuit, campaigns should portray it as a social equaliser that promotes health, education, and community values. When marketing aligns with broader social goals—such as public health or youth development—it gains legitimacy and appeals to both policymakers and citizens [20]. This framing strengthens tennis as a candidate for state support and social investment, sustaining its growth beyond short-term market fluctuations.

4. Conclusion

This study explored the branding challenges and potential revitalisation pathways for tennis in China by focusing on two key questions: how to assess its current positioning, and how to identify strategies that integrate domestic practices with international perspectives. The analysis identified three main barriers—an entrenched elitist image, weak grassroots infrastructure, and fragmented digital communication—while also highlighting emerging opportunities. Reframing tennis as a lifestyle activity that emphasises health, inclusivity, and cultural relevance can help the sport move beyond its exclusive image. Expanding access through schools, communities, and digital platforms further lowers participation barriers, while technologies such as VR/AR reduce both financial and psychological costs for beginners. In addition, connecting elite tournaments with community initiatives creates sustainable pathways for wider engagement. This study positions tennis as a hybrid case, where traditional elite culture intersects with China’s digital youth trends, offering new insights into niche sport branding. Together, these strategies suggest that tennis in China can rebuild its brand image, enhance cultural relevance, and secure long-term growth in a competitive sports market.

This study is limited by its reliance on secondary data, which may not fully reflect regional differences or the lived experiences of Chinese participants. Furthermore, the scarcity of peer-reviewed studies on tennis branding in China required drawing on related research in sport management and marketing. Future research should adopt more localised and participant-focused methods, while also situating Chinese tennis within broader global trends such as wellness culture, digital innovation, and sustainable sport branding.

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