Research on the Innovation of Nike's Marketing Management Model in the Digital Era

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Manuscript received August 21, 2026; accepted October 22, 2026; published November 19, 2026.

***Abstract*—With the popularization of big data, artificial intelligence, and the mobile internet, consumers' information-seeking behavior and shopping logic have undergone fundamental changes, and traditional product-centric mass marketing is gradually losing its competitiveness. This paper focuses on Nike, a leading global sportswear brand, to explore the innovative pathways of its digital marketing management model against the backdrop of digitalization. Drawing upon theories of digital marketing, content marketing, data-driven marketing, and integrated marketing, this paper employs literature reviews, case studies, and comparative analysis to examine Nike's strategic transition from product orientation to user orientation across four dimensions: marketing concept, content, channel and technology. The study finds that Nike has built an integrated online and offline digital operation system by leveraging membership data and an omnichannel strategy/layout, but it still faces challenges such as unbalanced regional digital development, consumer privacy risks, inconsistent cross-channel experiences, and homogenized content creation. Corresponding optimization measures are proposed to address these issues, providing valuable references for the digital transformation of domestic sports retail brands.**

***Keywords*—digital marketing, marketing model innovation, omnichannel retail, Nike**

I. Introduction

With the advancement of technologies including the internet, mobile devices, big data, and artificial intelligence, consumers' shopping behaviors and information-seeking methods have undergone dramatic changes. Consumers no longer passively accept advertisements released by enterprises, instead, they can actively learn about products, express opinions and participate in brand interactions through social media, brand applications and e-commerce platforms. In this context, traditional marketing models dependent on TV commercials, physical stores and one-way promotion are facing considerable challenges (Li, 2020).

As a global sports brand, Nike has long established its brand influence primarily through product innovation, celebrity endorsements and sports event promotions. In the digital age, Nike has gradually embraced brand apps, social media, membership systems, and online-offline integrated sales channels to strengthen interactions with consumers. Meanwhile, Nike is among the earliest brands in the industry to pioneer digital transformation with a highly sophisticated system. Its transformation pathway and the problems emerging during the process are highly typical, making it an ideal case study for this research.

This paper first analyzes the differences between traditional marketing models and digital marketing models, and then introduces relevant theories of digital marketing. On this basis, taking Nike as a case study, this paper analyzes its innovation pathways across four dimensions: philosophy, content, channels, and technology. It further summarizes the challenges in Nike's digital marketing and puts forward corresponding strategic recommendations. By examining Nike's digital marketing practices, this research can provide references for other sports brands and retail enterprises, helping companies optimize consumer communication, improve marketing efficiency and strengthen brand competitiveness.

II. Theoretical Foundations

A. Digital Marketing Theory

Digital marketing is a new marketing paradigm that takes digital technologies—including the internet, mobile devices, big data, and artificial intelligence—as carriers to accomplish brand communication, user interaction, and transactions (Chen & Cong, 2021). Compared with traditional offline one-way marketing models, digital marketing features four core characteristics: strong interactivity, precise audience targeting, rapid communication speed and quantifiable marketing outcomes. Traditional TV commercials and outdoor advertisements cannot accurately track audience conversion effects, whereas digital marketing can record full-journey user behavior data covering browsing, adding items to carts, interaction, and order placement. Enterprises are therefore able to dynamically adjust their marketing placement strategies according to real-time feedback. This theory constitutes the underlying theoretical foundation for Nike to construct its omni-channel digital operation system, and elaborates the basic logic behind the brand's refined user operations through mobile applications, online communities and short-video platforms.

B. Content Marketing Theory

Content marketing centers on providing target groups with original content that holds emotional and practical value, downplaying hard-selling product promotion, and building long-term, stable emotional connections with the brand (Zhang & Yu, 2019). For the sportswear industry, high-quality marketing content is not limited to functional product introductions about fabrics, cuts, and other attributes. It also covers a wide range of themes, such as athletes' growth stories, fitness education, offline community sports events, and athletic records from ordinary consumers. Nike has long applied content marketing theory to shape its brand ethos and symbolic identity. It guides users to actively generate UGC through short videos, live streaming, and community discussions, thereby shifting

doi:10.18178/joebm.2026.14.4.971

brand communication from "one-way corporate output" to "spontaneous user-driven diffusion".

C. Data-Driven Marketing Theory

Data-driven marketing theory proposes that enterprises should utilize comprehensive user behavioral data as the core basis for marketing decision-making. Companies integrate users' browsing history, consumption records, sports preferences and membership interaction data to explore differentiated consumer demands and roll out personalized recommendations and customized services (Jiang & Dong, 2022). This theory clearly defines the compliance boundaries of data utilization: enterprises must follow three principles of legality, minimum necessity and transparent notification when collecting user information. encrypted storage systems must be established to prevent privacy breach risks. Nike's strategic initiatives to acquire data analytics companies and build a global membership database represent practical applications of this theory in the retail sector.

D. Integrated Marketing Theory

Integrated Marketing Theory requires brands to maintain a unified brand image, pricing system, membership benefits and service standards across all online and offline channels to eliminate data silos among different channels (Guo & Yang, 2020). In the digital landscape, integrated marketing removes the fragmentation between physical stores, brand apps, e-commerce platforms and social media. It enables seamless connectivity regarding user accounts, product inventories, and after-sales policies. Consumers can discover products online, try items on in offline shops, place orders via the internet and pick up purchases at physical stores, creating a seamless and continuous consumption experience. Nike's integrated online-offline membership system and omnichannel synchronized inventory management are primarily guided by integrated marketing theory.

III. Nike Innovation Paths of Digital Marketing Management Models

A. Innovation of Marketing Concept: A Comprehensive Shift from Product Orientation to User Orientation

Nike's traditional marketing followed a typical product-oriented model, whose complete operational logic was "new product research and development—celebrity athlete endorsement—distribution via dealers—mass advertising placement". The ultimate goal of all marketing activities was merely to drive one-off product transactions. The brand focused solely on short-term sales performance and ceased to maintain user relationships after transactions were completed, leaving only a one-time buyer-seller connection between the company and consumers.

The digital wave forced Nike to restructure its underlying marketing philosophy and transition into a user-oriented model centered on long-term user value (Du & Jiang, 2023). The brand independently developed multiple digital tools, including the Nike App, the SNKRS sneaker release platform, the Nike Run Club running app, and the Nike Training Club fitness course app. It collects data such as users' sports types, size preferences, consumption frequencies and course participation records across all channels, consolidating these data into global Nike membership accounts to build a comprehensive, multi-dimensional user profiling system. Relying on massive user data, the brand no longer pursues short-term sales volume alone. Instead, it provides customized products, exclusive courses, member events, early access to limited-edition goods and other long-term services throughout users' sports lifecycles, upgrading one-time transaction relationships into sustainable customer relationships.

The commercial value of this conceptual shift can be directly verified through operational data. According to Nike's public SEC filings for the 2024 fiscal year, its global membership base exceeded 200 million that year. Members accounted for more than 50 percent of sales through Nike's direct-to-consumer online channels, with the average annual spending per member reaching over three times that of non-members, alongside a markedly higher repurchase frequency than casual shoppers. The membership system is no longer a simple loyalty points redemption tool, but the core carrier for the brand's transition to user orientation. Nevertheless, this model relies heavily on established brand influence and a large user base, making it difficult for small and medium-sized sports brands to replicate directly, which limits its universality.

B. Innovation of Marketing Content: Three-Dimensional Upgrade of Emotionalization, Diversification and Personalization

First, content creation focuses on conveying emotional values rather than aggressive hard selling of products. Nike's short videos, offline events, and social media campaigns rarely introduce product functions such as fabrics and cushioning performance in isolation. Instead, they mostly narrate stories centering on the sporting spirit, including persistence, breakthroughs, and self-challenge. These stories cover not only the struggles of elite professional athletes in competitions, but also the daily exercise experiences of ordinary office workers, students, and elderly fitness enthusiasts. Regular national fitness challenges are launched on Douyin and Xiaohongshu. By drawing on real sports stories of ordinary people to arouse public emotional resonance, the brand enables users to voluntarily identify with its values and share the content, breaking the one-way communication dilemma of traditional advertising where enterprises talk and audiences only listen.

Second content presentation has achieved full diversification covering all media scenarios. Traditional marketing only relied on static, single-format content, such as TV commercials, offline posters and event billboards. In the digital era, Nike has expanded to diverse carriers including short videos, live-streaming sales, online fitness broadcasts, graphic posts, offline community activities, and UGC content. The brand grants users content-publishing access on its platforms, allowing consumers to upload running data, fitness check-ins and sneaker styling posts, turning them into co-creators of brand content. Such two-way interactive communication is unachievable under traditional marketing models.

Third, content delivery achieves personalized matching,

often referred to as tailoring content for diverse user segments. Nike classifies user groups based on its membership database. It pushes running shoe reviews and marathon training courses to running enthusiasts, strength training gear and home workout videos to fitness lovers, and releases previews of limited-edition sneakers as well as matching guides to sneaker trend followers. Precise content recommendations significantly enhance users' willingness to click and interact. However, long-term homogeneous targeted delivery tends to create information cocoons, restricting users from accessing diverse brand content.

C. Innovation of Marketing Channels: Omnichannel Integration of Online and Offline Scenarios

Physical offline stores, official brand websites, and dealer-run e-commerce platforms were managed by separate departments with no channel data integration, leading to obvious discontinuities in consumers' online and offline shopping experiences. In the digital era, Nike restructured its channel system based on Integrated Marketing Theory. It connected the full channel links covering mobile applications, e-commerce platforms, short-video live streaming rooms, offline direct stores and dealer outlets to realize the two-way flow of online and offline resources.

Consumers can check real-time in-store inventory, reserve fitting sessions and join online member activities via the official brand App. Physical offline stores provide integrated services, including online ordering with in-store pickup and on-site product trials followed by online purchases. Short-video live streaming rooms are linked to store inventory in real time, so orders placed during live streams can be shipped from the nearest physical stores, greatly reducing friction in consumers' shopping journeys. User data accumulated from online channels is synchronously fed back to offline stores, which adjust product displays and activity types according to the sports preferences of surrounding members. Such mutual empowerment between different channels effectively improves customer retention.

D. Innovation of Marketing Technology: Transition from Experience-Driven to Data-Driven Model

Digital technologies have reconstructed Nike's logic of marketing decision-making, allowing the brand to thoroughly abandon the traditional mode of relying on practitioners' experience to judge market conditions and fully transition toward data-driven operations (Wang & Liu, 2022). The brand integrates multi-dimensional data covering members' browsing history, wishlist additions, purchase records, course participation and community interactions. It automatically analyzes regional consumption preferences, best-selling products and user churn points, so as to adjust product recommendations, event planning and new product launch schedules in a targeted way. Furthermore, digital tools can quantify the exposure, interaction and conversion data of each marketing campaign, clearly distinguishing highly attractive content from inefficient promotional materials and continuously optimizing the efficiency of marketing investment.

To reinforce its core data analysis capabilities, Nike acquired Celect, a machine learning forecasting platform, in 2019. Supported by algorithms, this platform predicts consumer demand for apparel styles and sizes in different cities and seasons, which in turn informs inventory preparation for global stores and supply chain production plans. This effectively addresses two prominent retail pain points: stock shortages of popular items and overstock of slow-selling goods. It directly serves Nike's core DTC (Direct-to-Consumer) strategy and empowers the back-end supply chain driven by front-end consumer data.

However, the application of data technology has obvious limits. Brands are prohibited from unrestrictedly collecting or abusing users' personal information. In its data operations, Nike strictly separates general consumption data from sensitive data concerning health status and personal identity, and builds independent encrypted storage systems. At the same time, the brand simplifies the wording of privacy policies and explains the purposes of data collection to users in plain language to reduce consumers' privacy concerns. Objectively, data technology merely boosts operational efficiency in marketing, which constitutes optimization at the tool level. Nike's real model innovation is rooted in the structural reconstruction of its marketing philosophy and omnichannel system.

IV. Existing Problems and Optimization Countermeasures of Nike's Digital Marketing

A. Unbalanced Regional Digital Development and Weak Operation in Lower-Tier Markets

First-tier and second-tier cities in China boast sound Internet infrastructure, where consumers are proficient in using digital tools such as brand apps, online membership services and live-streaming e-commerce. Accordingly, member engagement and the proportion of online consumption have long remained high. In contrast,
third- and fourth-tier cities, as well as county-level lower-tier markets, suffer from imperfect network facilities and logistics support systems. A large number of middle-aged and elderly populations and users with low digital accessibility cannot smoothly access online membership, reservation, and delivery services.

In addition, the coverage of Nike's physical stores is insufficient in lower-tier markets, and the penetration of digital services is relatively low. As a result, member engagement and brand loyalty in lower-tier areas are significantly lower than those in core urban areas.

Optimization Countermeasures: Nike should implement differentiated regional digital marketing strategies. For first-tier and second-tier cities, the brand needs to further deepen online live-streaming operations and refined community engagement. For lower-tier markets, it is essential to simplify the App interface and launch user-friendly functions such as one-click ordering and telephone customer-assisted ordering.

Meanwhile, Nike should improve logistics and distribution outlets in county-level areas and set up small community experience stores to retain offline fitting and in-store shopping channels for consumers. For middle-aged and elderly users, the brand can deploy offline promotional materials and provide one-on-one digital guidance through in-store sales associates, thereby narrowing the digital experience gap across different regions.

B. Risks of Privacy Leakage and Excessive Pushing in User Data Collection

Data-driven marketing relies on vast amounts of user information. However, sustained targeted content and product recommendations may trigger consumer dissatisfaction. Furthermore, vulnerabilities in data storage and permission management may lead to the leakage of sensitive information, including users' health and fitness data and residential addresses. Most consumers fail to comprehend lengthy and dense legal clauses in privacy policies and cannot clearly understand the scope of data usage, which gradually undermines their trust in the brand.

Optimization Countermeasures: Nike should strictly abide by the data minimization principle and eliminate the collection of user information that is unnecessary for business operations. Health data and personal identity information should be stored with independent encryption, supported by hierarchical employee access permissions and regular data security training.

The brand should revise its privacy policy to include simplified, illustrated explanations and actively inform users of data usage purposes and available channels to disable personalized recommendations via pop-up windows. In addition, an efficient data deletion mechanism should be established to guarantee consumers' independent right to manage and dispose of their personal information.

C. Inconsistent Service and Benefit Experience Across Online and Offline Multi-Channels

At present, Nike's official App, Tmall e-commerce store, brick-and-mortar retail stores and authorized dealers are plagued by unsynchronized inventory, non-interoperable membership benefits and inconsistent return and exchange policies. Some online coupons cannot be redeemed offline, certain items are out of stock in physical stores yet available online, products bought online cannot be returned or exchanged at offline locations. Such channel fragmentation severely impairs the consumer experience and weakens the strengths of the omnichannel model.

Optimization Countermeasures: The group should build a unified omnichannel inventory and membership middle-office platform to connect data across all direct-operated and authorized channels. It is necessary to standardize membership points, coupons, and return and exchange policies across all channels, ensuring that points are universally redeemable online and offline, and allowing for seamless cross-channel returns and exchanges for goods purchased anywhere. Nike should implement standardized service workflows such as "buy online, pick up in store" and "order online after in-store fitting" to eliminate experience gaps between different channels.

D. High Homogenization of Marketing Content and Excessive Reliance on Celebrity and Scarcity Marketing

Nike has long adopted a fixed content narrative model centered on top-tier sports celebrities and the competitive spirit. Competitors in the industry have replicated similar creative strategies, which continuously weakens the brand's differentiated communication advantages. Its marketing content focuses excessively on professional athletes, while narratives concerning public fitness and community sports remain minimal, easily leading to consumer fatigue after long-term exposure.

In addition, the brand frequently adopts scarcity marketing strategies through the launch of limited-edition sneakers. Excessive speculation on product scarcity has triggered undesirable phenomena such as consumer hoarding and scalping, which undermines the public consumption experience.

Optimization Countermeasures: Nike should balance celebrity-oriented content and grassroots content by increasing themes related to mass fitness, community sports events and campus sports, thereby diversifying its content dimensions. The brand needs to reduce frequent limited-release tactics and optimize the product release schedule. Furthermore, it is essential to establish a robust User-Generated Content (UGC) incentive system. Premium user-generated content, such as sports outfits and fitness records, can be rewarded with membership points and exclusive merchandise, encouraging users to organically co-create diversified brand content.

V. Conclusion

This study adopts a single-case research design, which limits the generalizability of its conclusions. Future research can be extended to multi-case comparative studies to analyze variations in the digital transformation paths of sports brands with different firm sizes.

The study demonstrates that digital advancement has reshaped consumers' lifestyles and purchasing behaviors, while also driving shifts in corporate marketing management models. Using Nike as a case study, this paper analyzes the brand's innovations in marketing philosophy, content, channels, and technologies in the digital era. The research finds that Nike is gradually moving away from the traditional product-oriented and mass communication model toward a consumer-centric marketing framework featuring online-offline integration and data-driven operations.

This shift enables Nike to enhance consumer engagement, consolidate brand loyalty, and enhance the precision of its marketing campaigns. Even so, Nike is still confronted with prominent challenges in its digital marketing implementation: uneven regional development, data security hazards, inadequate cross-channel coordination, and content homogenization. Therefore, while advancing its digital marketing initiatives, Nike must strengthen consumer privacy protection, refine the integrated online-offline service system, and foster long-term brand connections through more authentic and diverse content.

Overall, digital marketing does not entirely replace traditional marketing, it acts as a supplement and iterative upgrade to conventional marketing approaches. Enterprises can achieve long-term sustainable development only by organically combining brand values, consumer demands and digital technologies.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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