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Article

Cross-Border Brand Collaborations and Cultural Integration: Li-Ning's Expansion into European and Southeast Asian Markets

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Abstract: This paper examines how cross-border brand collaborations function as mechanisms of cultural integration in the internationalization of Chinese sportswear brands, using Li-Ning's expansion into European and Southeast Asian markets as a theoretically informed case study. Rather than treating international growth as a simple process of geographic scaling, the study conceptualizes overseas expansion as a relational process in which symbolic capital, local cultural translation, and channel adaptation jointly shape market legitimacy. Drawing on scholarship on brand globalization, cultural hybridity, consumer nationalism, and collaborative branding, the paper develops an analytical framework that explains how Li-Ning mobilizes domestic heritage while selectively rearticulating it through partnerships, design narratives, and market-specific retail strategies. The analysis shows that Europe and Southeast Asia represent distinct but complementary terrains of integration. In Europe, legitimacy depends more strongly on design credibility, fashion mediation, and the ability to enter highly curated urban consumption spaces. In Southeast Asia, by contrast, shared cultural familiarity, price sensitivity, youth demographics, and the growth of digital commerce create a more accessible but still competitive environment. The paper argues that cross-border collaborations become effective when they do not erase origin, but instead translate origin into intelligible and desirable forms for local audiences. Li-Ning's experience suggests that cultural integration is neither assimilation nor symbolic standardization. It is a selective and iterative process in which collaboration links brand heritage with localized meaning-making. The study contributes to research on emerging-market multinationals by showing how brand expansion increasingly depends on cultural intermediation rather than on production capacity alone.

Keywords: brand internationalization; cultural integration; cross-border collaboration; emerging markets; sportswear industry

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1. Introduction

The internationalization of consumer brands from emerging economies has become one of the most significant developments in contemporary global business. For much of the late twentieth century, the dominant analytical concern was how Western brands adapted themselves to non-Western markets through standardization, localization, or glocalization [1]. In recent years, however, the direction of attention has broadened. Brands originating in Asia, Latin America, and other emerging regions increasingly seek not only export sales but also symbolic legitimacy in mature and culturally heterogeneous overseas markets. Their challenge is not limited to distribution. It concerns whether they can transform national recognition at home into cultural relevance abroad.

Within this broader shift, Chinese sportswear companies offer a particularly revealing field of inquiry. China possesses strong manufacturing capabilities, large domestic demand, and rapidly improving design and marketing capacity. Yet international recognition of Chinese apparel brands has historically lagged behind their production power. Consumers in Europe often read Chinese firms through the lens of manufacturing rather than creative authorship, while consumers in Southeast Asia may be more familiar with Chinese products but still distinguish between low-cost functionality and aspirational brand value. In both contexts, overseas expansion depends on more than the movement of goods. It requires the movement and reinterpretation of meanings.

Li-Ning occupies an especially important position in this transformation. Established by the former Olympic gymnast Li Ning and long identified with national sporting identity in China, the company has gradually repositioned itself from a domestic sportswear label into a fashion-oriented and culturally expressive brand. High-profile runway appearances, sports-fashion hybrids, and collaboration-based product lines have allowed Li-Ning to present itself as a representative of what is often described as China chic or a new generation of Chinese design confidence. These developments make the company an instructive case for analyzing how brand origin can be reworked rather than hidden in internationalization strategies.

This paper argues that cross-border brand collaborations serve as institutional and cultural bridges in that process. Collaborations with designers, retailers, artists, local distributors, event platforms, and lifestyle communities create channels through which an emerging-market brand can translate its symbolic resources into forms legible to external audiences [2]. Such collaborations may provide aesthetic credibility, access to curated retail spaces, influencer visibility, or local interpretive frames. They also reduce the risk that a foreign brand will be perceived as culturally distant, strategically opaque, or merely opportunistic.

The central research question is how Li-Ning's cross-border collaborations contribute to cultural integration during expansion into European and Southeast Asian markets. The paper does not treat collaboration as a purely promotional tactic. Instead, it treats collaboration as a mechanism that links brand heritage, market-specific translation, and legitimacy formation [3]. Europe and Southeast Asia are selected because they represent markedly different regional environments. Europe contains mature sportswear and fashion markets with strong gatekeeping institutions, dense symbolic competition, and high demands for design authenticity. Southeast Asia presents faster retail growth, stronger social media interconnection, and in some markets closer cultural familiarity with East Asian popular culture, yet it also features intense price competition and fragmented consumer landscapes.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it develops a conceptual account of cultural integration in brand internationalization that goes beyond simplistic localization narratives. Second, it uses Li-Ning as a theoretically grounded case to show how collaboration can mediate the relationship between domestic symbolic capital and foreign market legitimacy. Third, it offers a comparative interpretation of European and Southeast Asian expansion, showing that cultural integration is shaped by different combinations of symbolic prestige, consumer accessibility, and channel architecture. The remainder of the paper reviews the relevant literature, proposes an analytical framework, compares regional dynamics, discusses implications for strategy and theory, and concludes with reflections on the wider significance of emerging-market brand collaborations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Brand Internationalization and Emerging-Market Firms

Brand internationalization has traditionally been explained through models that emphasize ownership advantages, market knowledge, and the gradual accumulation of capabilities across borders. In that literature, brand expansion often appears as an

extension of preexisting competitive strength [2]. Yet such assumptions fit imperfectly when the firm originates in an emerging economy and confronts markets in which consumers assign higher symbolic value to Western design histories, luxury traditions, or established sportswear lineages. Emerging-market firms may possess manufacturing capacity, operational scale, and domestic reach, while still lacking recognition as legitimate creators of style, taste, or cultural innovation.

This gap has prompted increased scholarly attention to the distinctive pathways available to emerging-market multinationals. Rather than relying solely on proprietary technology or premium heritage, such firms often pursue accelerated branding strategies involving acquisition, sponsorship, celebrity alignment, or platform-based visibility. Internationalization therefore becomes a process of symbolic upgrading as much as organizational expansion. Success depends on whether the brand can move from being known as a producer to being valued as a meaning-bearing actor [4]. The transition is especially difficult in apparel and sportswear, where consumption is strongly shaped by aesthetics, lifestyle identity, and peer-mediated recognition.

For Chinese brands in particular, internationalization intersects with geopolitical narratives, changing perceptions of Chinese creativity, and the rise of domestic consumer nationalism. A brand may derive strength from national symbolism in its home market while discovering that the same symbolism generates uncertainty or exoticization abroad. The problem is not simply whether to display national identity or suppress it. The problem is how to convert origin into a credible narrative that can circulate beyond the domestic field without losing coherence [2]. This challenge makes emerging-market brand expansion inseparable from the politics of representation.

2.2. Cultural Hybridity, Translation, and Market Legitimacy

A second body of scholarship addresses how brands travel culturally. Rather than assuming that brands carry fixed meanings across space, this research emphasizes hybridization, translation, mediation, and reinterpretation. Cultural globalization is not a one-way diffusion of dominant forms. It also involves the recombination of local and transnational symbols into new assemblages. Brands become effective when they can anchor themselves in multiple semiotic worlds at once. In practice, this means that a firm entering a foreign market must balance recognizability with adaptability [5]. Excessive standardization can create distance, while excessive localization can dilute distinctiveness.

The concept of cultural integration is useful because it captures this balance more precisely than the vocabulary of adaptation alone. Integration refers to the ability of a brand to enter existing cultural circuits without disappearing into them [6]. It involves creating points of resonance between the brand's inherited identity and the interpretive frameworks of target consumers, media intermediaries, retailers, and communities. Cultural integration is thus relational. It depends not only on the message a firm sends but also on the institutions and actors that authorize particular readings of that message.

Market legitimacy is a central outcome of this process. Legitimacy is achieved when a brand is regarded as appropriate, credible, and worthy of attention within a given environment. In fashion and sportswear markets, legitimacy is distributed through editorial platforms, collaborations, celebrity endorsements, pop-cultural associations, retail settings, and digital communities. Because these channels are socially filtered, cultural translation is rarely something a firm can perform alone. It usually requires intermediaries that provide narrative credibility and contextual fit [3].

2.3. Collaborative Branding as Strategic Intermediation

Collaborative branding has emerged as one of the most visible tools through which firms generate novelty, borrow legitimacy, and access adjacent audiences. Collaborations may involve luxury designers, streetwear labels, athletes, artists, entertainment franchises, or regional retailers [7]. Their strategic value lies not simply in producing limited-edition products. Collaborations redistribute attention and interpretive authority. By associating with a trusted or fashionable partner, a brand may partially overcome the liabilities of

unfamiliarity and gain entrance into communities that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

The literature often highlights several functions of collaboration [7]. First, it creates symbolic spillovers by linking the cultural capital of one actor to another. Second, it facilitates segmentation by allowing brands to speak to niche audiences without fully redesigning their core identity. Third, it offers temporal intensity through launches, drops, and event-based publicity. Fourth, it can support learning, since collaboration exposes firms to new design vocabularies, retail expectations, and consumer feedback mechanisms. These features are particularly relevant for brands from emerging markets, which may need rapid pathways into symbolic fields shaped by long-standing hierarchies.

At the same time, collaboration is not automatically beneficial. Poorly matched partnerships may appear opportunistic, confuse brand positioning, or reduce authenticity. If a collaboration is perceived as cosmetic rather than meaningful, it may intensify skepticism rather than resolve it. The key issue is therefore not collaboration per se but the alignment between partner choice, narrative framing, product design, and regional market conditions. This paper builds on that insight by considering collaborations as a form of strategic intermediation through which Li-Ning negotiates distinct patterns of cultural integration in Europe and Southeast Asia [8] (As shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Key Analytical Themes in the Literature on Cross-Border Brand Expansion

Theme	Core concern	Relevance to Li-Ning	Implication for market entry
Emerging-market brand internationalization	How firms overcome symbolic inferiority in advanced markets	Explains why overseas expansion requires legitimacy beyond production strength	Market entry depends on reputation transfer and capability upgrading
Cultural translation and hybridity	How meanings are adapted without losing distinctiveness	Clarifies how Chinese brand identity can be rearticulated abroad	Successful expansion requires selective localization rather than identity erasure
Collaborative branding	How partnerships create novelty and credibility	Shows why partner choice becomes a mechanism of intermediation	Collaborations can open access to communities, channels, and interpretive frames
Market legitimacy	How consumers and intermediaries judge appropriateness	Illuminates why recognition differs across Europe and Southeast Asia	Legitimacy must be produced through regionalized narratives and channels

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper proposes a three-part framework for understanding how cross-border collaborations support cultural integration in Li-Ning's international expansion. The first component is brand heritage and symbolic capital. Li-Ning enters foreign markets with

resources that include sporting authenticity, founder recognition, and association with China's growing cultural self-confidence. These resources are valuable, but they are not universally legible. Their meaning changes across regional contexts. Symbolic capital must therefore be translated before it can produce legitimacy outside the domestic market.

The second component is collaboration as a mechanism of translation. Collaborations connect the brand to actors who already possess relevance in target markets. These actors may be fashion gatekeepers, local retailers, designers, artists, community organizers, or digital influencers. Through them, Li-Ning can position its products within styles and conversations that local consumers already understand. Translation here is not mere linguistic adaptation. It involves recoding design cues, pricing signals, retail experiences, and campaign narratives so that the brand appears neither alien nor derivative.

The third component is market-specific legitimacy formation. Cultural integration is achieved when translated brand meanings are stabilized through repeated interaction with local channels and audiences. This includes placement in appropriate retail environments, circulation through digital communities, endorsement by credible intermediaries, and reinforcement through consumer experience. Legitimacy is thus cumulative. One successful collaboration may create visibility, but sustained integration requires that visibility to be converted into repeatable trust and recognizability [9].

Figure 1 summarizes the framework developed in this study. It shows how Li-Ning's domestic symbolic assets move through collaboration mechanisms before being interpreted differently in European and Southeast Asian settings. The framework highlights that the same heritage can generate divergent entry pathways depending on whether the target market rewards exclusivity and fashion mediation or accessibility and culturally familiar digital circulation.

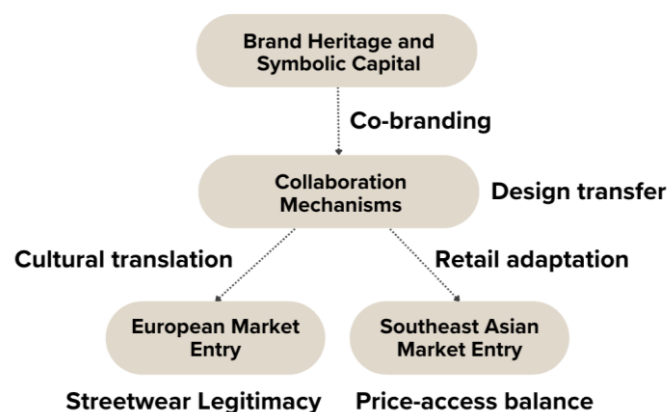


Figure 1. Collaboration as a Bridge between Brand Heritage and Regional Market Entry

The framework further assumes that collaboration works best when it is selective rather than indiscriminate. Not every partnership enhances cultural integration. Effective collaboration should satisfy at least four criteria: symbolic compatibility with the brand's heritage, relevance to the target audience, support for local distribution or visibility, and the capacity to generate narratives that extend beyond a single launch cycle. In this sense, collaboration is best understood as a strategic filter that determines which aspects of the brand are amplified, which are softened, and which are newly created in the process of cross-border expansion.

4. Comparative Analysis: Europe and Southeast Asia

4.1. Li-Ning in Europe: Fashion Legitimacy and Curated Entry

European markets pose both opportunities and constraints for Li-Ning. On one hand, Europe contains influential fashion capitals, established sneaker communities, and a dense ecosystem of multi-brand retailers, media platforms, and cultural tastemakers.

Success in these markets offers symbolic value that extends beyond direct sales. If a brand is acknowledged within Paris, Milan, Berlin, or London, that recognition can circulate globally. On the other hand, these are also spaces in which authenticity is closely scrutinized. Consumers often attach value to long-term brand heritage, technical credibility, and stylistic consistency [6]. New entrants face skepticism unless they can establish why they deserve attention.

Li-Ning's European strategy has therefore depended heavily on aesthetic differentiation and mediated visibility. The brand's runway presentations and fashion-oriented collections have been particularly important because they reposition the firm from a conventional athletic label to a culturally expressive sports-fashion actor. Collaborations in this environment help Li-Ning overcome the assumption that a Chinese sportswear company is merely catching up technologically. By aligning with design discourses and streetwear sensibilities already recognized in European urban markets, the brand can enter conversations about creativity rather than low-cost production.

Yet the pathway remains selective rather than mass-oriented. European consumers who engage with Li-Ning are more likely to encounter the brand through niche retail channels, sneaker commentary, fashion media, or event-oriented launches than through broad mainstream penetration. This means that collaboration in Europe must perform a legitimating function before it performs a scaling function. The partner or platform becomes a certificate of relevance. Without such mediation, the brand's symbolic origin may remain too distant or ambiguous for consumers accustomed to established Western and Japanese players [2].

A further challenge concerns pricing and category perception. Premium or premium-adjacent positioning can enhance desirability, but only if consumers believe the design story and quality proposition are commensurate with price. Collaborations can support that alignment by framing products as culturally curated rather than simply imported. However, if the collaboration appears superficial, the same price architecture may intensify doubt. Europe thus rewards disciplined collaboration that emphasizes design coherence, retail fit, and limited but high-impact visibility (As shown in Table 2).

Table 2. Comparative Entry Dynamics in European and Southeast Asian Markets

Dimension	Europe	Southeast Asia
Primary legitimacy source	Fashion credibility, curated retail, editorial mediation	Cultural familiarity, digital commerce, youth-oriented accessibility
Consumer barrier	Skepticism toward new foreign design actors	High price sensitivity and intense regional competition
Role of collaboration	Certificate of symbolic relevance and taste	Vehicle for social diffusion and local community connection
Channel priority	Selective multi-brand retail, fashion events, sneaker communities	E-commerce platforms, social media ecosystems, regional distributors
Strategic risk	Appearing inauthentic or opportunistic	Becoming overlocalized or losing aspirational distinctiveness

4.2. Li-Ning in Southeast Asia: Accessibility, Familiarity, and Digital Circulation

Southeast Asia presents a distinct environment for brand expansion [10]. The region is highly diverse in language, religion, income level, and retail maturity, yet several common characteristics make it attractive for sportswear brands. Its urban youth populations are large, mobile commerce is deeply embedded in everyday consumption,

and East Asian cultural products circulate widely through music, sport, gaming, and social media. Compared with Europe, Li-Ning may face less cultural distance in symbolic terms, particularly where Chinese or wider Asian popular culture already influences style preferences. This does not eliminate competition, but it changes the conditions under which foreignness is interpreted.

In this context, collaborations can work less as elite certificates and more as mechanisms of diffusion. Partnerships with regional distributors, lifestyle retailers, online platforms, creators, and event organizers help the brand enter existing consumption networks quickly. The objective is not only to signal creativity but also to make products available, discussable, and socially visible at multiple price points. Where Europe rewards scarcity and editorial validation, Southeast Asia often rewards adaptability across channels and communities.

Another important dimension is value perception. Consumers in many Southeast Asian markets balance aspirational consumption with budget constraints. A brand that is too premium may struggle to scale, but a brand that appears merely affordable may fail to distinguish itself from lower-tier competitors. Collaboration can mediate this tension by creating tiered offerings and campaign narratives that preserve brand distinctiveness while keeping the broader portfolio accessible. Local partnerships also help identify which symbols resonate positively and which require recalibration in relation to national identities, sporting preferences, and digital habits.

Li-Ning's cultural integration in Southeast Asia therefore depends on a broader ecosystem of participation. Visibility through influencers, sports communities, live commerce, and regional lifestyle events can embed the brand within youth-oriented circuits of recognition. Unlike Europe, where legitimacy may begin with a smaller circle of tastemakers, legitimacy in Southeast Asia can emerge through scaled social repetition. Collaboration remains central, but its function is more distributive and community-oriented than exclusively curatorial.

Figure 2 depicts the iterative pathway through which cross-border collaboration can convert domestic brand assets into market legitimacy. The process is not strictly linear because successful overseas expansion also feeds back into the global identity of the brand itself. Li-Ning's experience suggests that each regional collaboration can reshape how subsequent audiences understand the firm, thereby influencing future entry opportunities [1, 11].

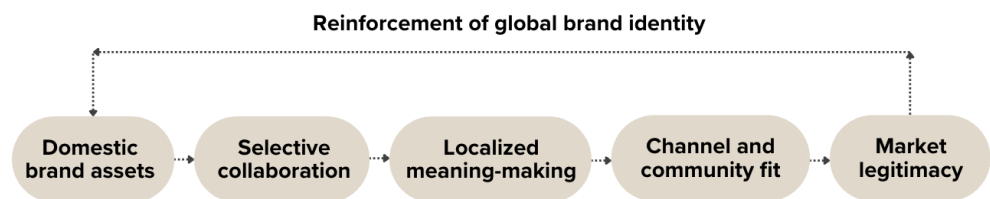


Figure 2. Iterative Pathway from Brand Assets to Market Legitimacy

4.3. Comparative Interpretation

The comparison between Europe and Southeast Asia demonstrates that cultural integration is not a uniform strategy applied across different regions. It is a dynamic process influenced by how regional markets establish legitimacy [12]. In Europe, Li-Ning operates in an environment where symbolic recognition must precede broader market penetration. The brand needs to gain credibility within curated taste systems before achieving widespread acceptance. In Southeast Asia, legitimacy can develop more quickly through digitally mediated repetition, provided the brand maintains a balance between aspirational identity and affordability.

These distinctions indicate that collaboration strategies must be tailored to regional contexts. A collaboration aimed at achieving fashion legitimacy in Europe may underperform in Southeast Asia if it is overly exclusive, excessively priced, or disconnected from digital community practices. Conversely, a high-volume diffusion strategy effective in Southeast Asia may fail in Europe if it lacks aesthetic refinement or editorial credibility. Cross-border collaboration is most successful when it is modular, ensuring the core brand remains recognizable while adapting partnership formats, storytelling approaches, and retail activations to align with local credibility mechanisms.

Figure 3 illustrates this comparison by mapping the relative emphasis of key integration dimensions across the two regions. Europe places greater importance on brand visibility through fashion mediation and cultural resonance within curated style communities, whereas Southeast Asia emphasizes channel fit and price-value acceptance due to its digitally dense and youth-oriented retail landscape.

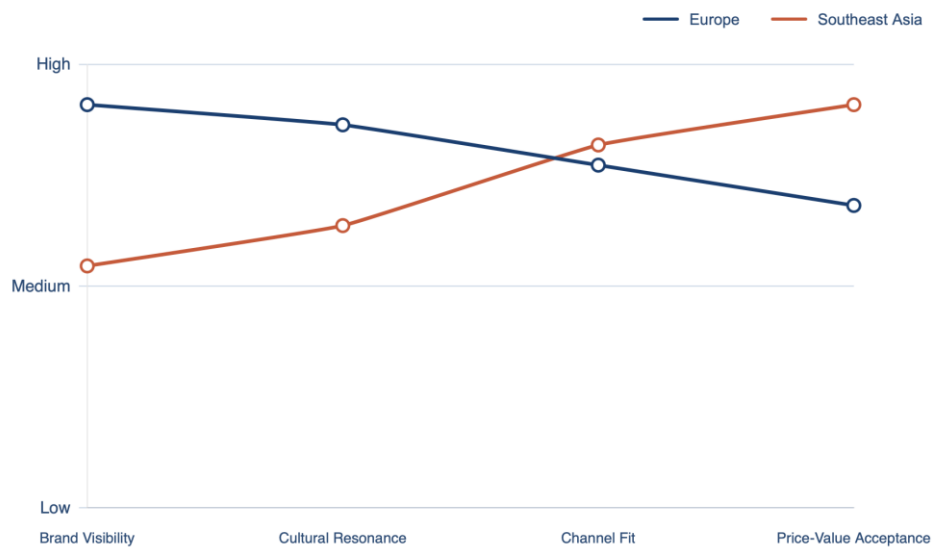


Figure 3. Comparative Emphasis of Integration Dimensions Across the Two Regions

The comparative analysis further suggests that Li-Ning should view regional variation not as a challenge of inconsistency but as an opportunity for strategic differentiation. Tailored collaboration strategies can strengthen a cohesive global identity when anchored in a stable core narrative [13]. This narrative focuses on transforming Chinese sporting heritage into a globally relevant design culture. The closer the alignment between the core narrative and regional adaptations, the more likely collaboration will enhance rather than fragment the brand.

5. Discussion

The findings of this paper have broader implications for understanding how emerging-market brands compete internationally [14]. They suggest that the central obstacle is often not production competence but cultural legibility. Firms such as Li-Ning may have already resolved many operational challenges associated with quality, sourcing, and domestic brand building. What remains difficult is entry into foreign fields structured by taste hierarchies, historical stereotypes, and regionally distinct expectations about authenticity. Cross-border collaboration offers a practical mechanism for bridging that gap because it links the brand to trusted mediators rather than asking consumers to revise their assumptions unaided.

The analysis indicates that collaboration should be interpreted as a form of institutional work. Partnerships do not merely add excitement to product portfolios; they help create the social conditions under which a foreign brand can be regarded as

appropriate and desirable. This is especially relevant for firms from countries whose international image is still unevenly distributed across sectors. Li-Ning's case shows that collaboration can counteract reductive perceptions of Chinese firms as manufacturers without creative authority, but only when the collaboration is substantively connected to design, culture, and market channels rather than treated as a superficial publicity device.

The paper highlights the importance of regional sequencing. Not all markets confer the same symbolic rewards, and not all forms of legitimacy are equally transferable. Europe may deliver disproportionate prestige because of its role in global fashion discourse, even if commercial scale is initially limited. Southeast Asia may offer faster diffusion and stronger market learning because of demographic dynamism and digital commerce density [15]. The strategic implication is that firms should view regional expansion as a portfolio of complementary legitimacy environments rather than as a simple map of export destinations.

The comparison complicates any binary opposition between global standardization and local adaptation. Li-Ning's expansion suggests that successful international branding depends on an intermediate mode that can be described as selective cultural integration. The brand does not disappear into local markets, nor does it insist on a fixed symbolic formula. Instead, it preserves a stable narrative core while allowing collaboration to recalibrate the language through which that core becomes meaningful in different places. This insight is relevant not only for sportswear but also for other culture-intensive sectors in which symbolic value and market entry are closely intertwined.

At a theoretical level, the study contributes to debates on emerging-market multinationals by foregrounding intermediation. Existing work often emphasizes resource acquisition, latecomer strategies, or accelerated internationalization. These perspectives remain important, but they understate the social and cultural infrastructures through which brand meaning travels. Cross-border collaboration should be understood as one of those infrastructures [16]. It functions as a mechanism of translation, authorization, and repetition. Through collaboration, symbolic capital becomes circulable across markets that would otherwise interpret the same brand through incompatible frames (As shown in Table 3).

Table 3. Strategic Implications for Li-Ning's Future Cross-Border Collaboration Agenda

Strategic issue	Europe-focused implication	Southeast Asia-focused implication	Shared managerial lesson
Partner selection	Prioritize high-credibility design and retail collaborators	Prioritize digitally connected distributors and community partners	Choose partners that extend meaning, not only reach
Portfolio architecture	Use selective premium capsules to build prestige	Use tiered offerings to widen accessibility without dilution	Maintain a coherent narrative across differentiated product ladders
Channel development	Strengthen presence in curated urban retail ecosystems	Integrate e-commerce, social commerce, and event activation	Align channel strategy with the legitimacy logic of each market
Brand storytelling	Emphasize design authorship and	Emphasize relevance, familiarity, and	Translate origin into locally intelligible

symbolic sophistication	community participation	narratives rather than hiding it
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6. Conclusion

This paper has examined how cross-border brand collaborations support cultural integration in Li-Ning's expansion into European and Southeast Asian markets. It argued that international growth for emerging-market sportswear brands cannot be understood solely in terms of distribution, investment, or product transfer. The more decisive issue is whether domestic symbolic resources can be translated into regionally credible forms of meaning. Collaboration plays a central role in that process because it links the brand to intermediaries, communities, and channels that authorize new interpretations of origin and identity.

The comparative analysis showed that Europe and Southeast Asia present distinct legitimacy environments. Europe rewards curated visibility, aesthetic sharpness, and partner-mediated symbolic elevation. Southeast Asia rewards social diffusion, digital adaptability, and calibrated accessibility. These differences do not weaken the case for a coherent global brand. Instead, they demonstrate that coherence is produced through selective variation. Li-Ning's overseas strategy is most likely to succeed when collaboration is organized as a disciplined process of cultural translation rather than as a sequence of isolated promotional events.

More broadly, the study suggests that the internationalization of Chinese consumer brands should be analyzed through the lens of cultural intermediation. As brands from emerging economies seek recognition in competitive foreign markets, collaboration becomes a key mechanism through which symbolic capital is made mobile across institutional and regional boundaries. Li-Ning's trajectory illustrates that the future of brand expansion may depend less on the replication of standardized global formulas than on the capacity to integrate heritage, creativity, and local meaning-making in a sustained and credible manner.

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