Branding Strategies of "Asset-Light" Global Brand and Consumer Engagement on Social Media

Xingxing Zhang[1,a,#], Yuhan Xie[1,b,#], Ruinan Zhao[1,c,*]

[1]*School of Foreign Languages, Guangzhou Maritime University, Guangzhou, China*
[a]*anita9663@163.com,* [b]*irenexie0329@gmail.com,* [c]*zhaoruinan@gzmtu.edu.cn*
[#]*Co-first author*
*Corresponding author

Abstract: In the context of global industrial-chain reconfiguration and deepening digital integration, this study examines Winona's overseas communication strategy through the lens of three-dimensional Brand Image Theory. Drawing on 201 valid Instagram posts and 156 user comments from 2021 to 2025, the study employs systematic coding and statistical analysis to develop an innovative analytical framework comprising attribute classification, interaction analysis, and trend tracking. The findings reveal that Winona adopts a "functional core supplemented by emotional communication" positioning strategy, with functional content accounting for more than 74% of its posts. A notable "quantity–quality imbalance" is also observed: although emotional content represents only 4.98% of posts, it generates the highest levels of audience interaction. The study contributes to the literature by enriching theories of brand communication in the digital era, extending the application of Brand Image Theory to cross-border, asset-light branding practices, and offering a replicable social media communication framework to support the global expansion of similar brands.

1. Introduction

The asset-light model, favored for low cost and high flexibility, gradually replaces traditional heavy-asset expansion as Chinese enterprises pursue high-quality overseas development. Social media, with advantages of low-cost reach, cross-regional interaction and real-time feedback, aligns with asset-light brands' operational logic but faces dilemmas like over-reliance on functional content and misaligned brand positioning.

Winona, a representative Chinese dermatological skincare brand adhering to the "R&D + Brand" asset-light model, has carried out in-depth promotion on Instagram. It provides a typical case to explore two core research questions: how asset-light brands construct brand images via social media overseas, and what differences exist in audience response to different image dimensions.

This study fills three research gaps: insufficient exploration of social media's role in transmitting asset-light brands' intangible assets, lack of attention to cosmetics industry social media promotion, and scarce systematic analysis of Winona's overseas social media strategies. It proposes three innovations: the aforementioned analytical framework, revelation of content "quantity-quality

imbalance", and filling Winona's overseas social media research gap. The paper follows a coherent structure to address the research questions.

2. Literature Review

This section systematically organizes literature on asset-light overseas expansion, brand social media promotion, audience response, and Winona's brand practices, identifies research gaps, and lays a theoretical foundation for the study.

2.1 Winona and Light-Asset Overseas Expansion

Traditional heavy-asset overseas expansion models face obvious challenges due to high capital input, high risk exposure, and low market responsiveness. The light-asset overseas expansion model emerged as a corresponding solution, centered on enterprises focusing on high-value-added segments such as R&D, branding, and customer relations, while outsourcing non-core functions like production and logistics[1]. This approach enables them to cope with overseas market uncertainties with lower costs and greater flexibility, and the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative has further empowered China's asset-light enterprises in their overseas expansion[2].

The resource-based view serves as the core explanatory framework for the asset-light model, with intangible assets such as patents and brands being vital for sustainable competitive advantages[3]. Gao et al.[4] note that social media can convert intangible assets into interactive relationships, consolidating brand trust overseas. Operationally, asset-light strategies mitigate cost stickiness[5], and companies like Botanee outsource over 70% of production to focus on R&D and branding[6], leveraging local resources to circumvent trade barriers[5]. The asset-light model is highly compatible with social media[7], as brands use customized content and real-time feedback to build awareness and optimize strategies[6–8].

Existing research shortcomings include insufficient analysis of social media's role in conveying intangible assets, lack of integration of institutional factors like the Belt and Road Initiative, and limited cross-industry refinement[2]. Winona, focusing on sensitive skin care, adopts a "R&D + Brand" asset-light model with "plant extracts + medical validation" as core competitiveness. Its R&D expenditure exceeds industry average, and over 70% of production is outsourced[6]. Overseas, it relies on "academic endorsement + social media dissemination"[2], appearing at the World Congress of Dermatology and focusing on Instagram with efficacy validation content. Despite extensive domestic research, its overseas social media strategies lack systematic analysis, with content insufficiently integrating emotional and cultural elements and no cross-market audience response comparisons[2,6].

2.2 Product Branding Strategies

Social media platforms act as critical channels for asset-light brands, with interactivity and customization enhancing audience stickiness[9]. Social posts generate greater consumer pleasure than promotional posts[10], and brand image research expands from functional to emotional dimensions[11]. Hankinson proposed a dichotomous model of functional and atmospheric images, and Stojanovic et al. confirmed emotional image as the core driver of user word-of-mouth[12].

For asset-light brands, platform differences matter[4], micro-influencer collaborations offer low cost and high conversion[13], Instagram's storytelling format is cost-effective[14], and UGC is more influential than corporate content[15]. Audience response mechanisms form dual pathways: "cognitive-affective-behavioral" and "market fit"[8], with emerging and developed markets differing in pathway preference[2].

Existing research limitations include failure to integrate social media strategies with resource

constraints, insufficient research on high-involvement industries like cosmetics, and shallow exploration of eWOM and UGC mechanisms[12,13,15].

3. Methodology

This section comprehensively assesses Winona's Instagram brand operation and offers targeted optimization suggestions. Following common research frameworks for Chinese overseas brands, it presents the study's core findings focusing on two dimensions: analyzing the brand's intrinsic strategies (reflected in image composition and promotion adjustments) and exploring consumer engagement with effectiveness evaluated via interaction indicators—a dual-perspective approach widely adopted in overseas brand research.

3.1 Data Collection and Corpus Building

Primary data comes from Winona's official Instagram account (@winona_skincare) (public posts + user comments). Data was collected via Python 3.8+ (requests library), following Instagram's robots.txt and Terms of Use—with browser-emulated headers and randomized delays to avoid blocking. Collected data was stored in Microsoft Excel.

Data covers March 2021–October 2025, including post-level (URL, ID, content, timestamp, likes/comments) and comment-level (ID, content, likes/replies) information. After removing invalid entries (duplicates, spam, incomplete data), the final corpus has 201 valid posts and 156 valid comments.

The corpus uses an Excel relational structure: Post Information Table (primary key: post ID) and Comment Information Table (linked via post ID).

3.2 Analytical Framework

Built on the three-dimensional Brand Image Theory, the framework first classifies posts into 8 types: 3 single-dimensions (Functional: efficacy/services; Emotional: endorsements/origins; Experiential: interaction), 3 two-dimensional combinations (Functional + Emotional, Functional + Experiential, Emotional + Experiential), 1 three-dimensional combination (Functional + Emotional + Experiential), and Other (unrelated content).

For coding and statistical analysis, a single coder handled all posts, with a 20% random subset recoded 2 weeks later (consistency rate ≥90%). Quantitative analysis was conducted via Excel, including distribution analysis (COUNTIF for post proportion per category), engagement analysis (PivotTables to compare likes/comments across attributes), and temporal trend analysis (quarterly categorization + heatmaps to track strategy shifts).

The analysis focuses on three core dimensions: attribute distribution (to clarify communication priorities), audience response (to identify interaction differences across attributes), and temporal trend (to explore dynamic strategy adjustment).

4. Results and Discussion

Based on the data (201 valid posts, 156 valid comments) and analytical framework (three-dimensional Brand Image Theory) in the Methodology chapter, this section presents findings in two parts: Winona's branding strategies on Instagram and corresponding consumer engagement.

4.1 Branding Strategies of Winona

Winona adopts a "functional core supplemented by emotional communication" positioning. As shown in Table 1, Functional posts account for 37.31% (75 posts) and Functional + Emotional posts make up 36.82% (74 posts), together over 74% of total posts. Single Emotional (4.98%), Experiential (1.49%) and Emotional + Experiential (1.49%) posts are in low proportion.

Table 1 Distribution of Winona's Brand Image Attributes

Attribute Type	Post Count	Proportion (%)
Functional	75	37.31
Functional + Emotional	74	36.82
Functional + Experiential	15	7.46
Other	11	5.47
Emotional	10	4.98
Functional + Emotional + Experiential	10	4.98
Emotional + Experiential	3	1.49
Experiential	3	1.49

Winona consolidates consumers' cognition of its professional skincare attributes by adjusting quarterly brand promotion focus, prioritizing Functional and Functional + Emotional attributes while treating other attributes as supplements. Specifically, Emotional, Experiential and their combined attributes serve as supplements, with their promotion proportion remaining below 10% in most quarters. The brand's adjustment is reflected in the varying proportions of posts with different attributes: the promotion proportion of Functional + Emotional attribute hit 100% in 2021Q1, 2022Q1, 2023Q3-2023Q4 and 2025Q1 (Figure 1), which indicates it attached special importance to integrating function and emotion during these key periods (e.g., new product launch, seasonal skin care peaks). In addition, the promotion proportion of Functional attribute exceeded 60% in 2021Q2-2021Q4 and 2022Q3 (Figure 1), helping the brand strengthen functional value transmission in specific stages to reinforce the aforementioned cognition.

Quarterly Attribute Promotion Matrix

Attribute Type	2021Q1	2021Q2	2021Q3	2021Q4	2022Q1	2022Q3	2022Q4	2023Q1	2023Q2	2023Q3	2023Q4	2025Q1	2025Q2	2025Q3	2025Q4
Emotional	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.4	4.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.4	2.5	9.1
Emotional+Experiential	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.8	0.0	9.1
Experiential	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.7	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.8	0.0	0.0
Functional	0.0	75.0	66.7	75.0	0.0	75.0	29.7	23.8	33.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	28.3	42.5	27.3
Functional+Emotional	100.0	25.0	0.0	25.0	100.0	15.0	48.6	61.9	66.7	100.0	100.0	100.0	35.8	22.5	27.3
Functional+Emotional+Experiential	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.4	4.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.5	7.5	0.0
Functional+Experiential	0.0	0.0	33.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.7	4.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.8	17.5	27.3
Other	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.0	5.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.5	7.5	0.0

Figure 1 Quarterly Attribute Promotion Matrix of Winona

4.2 Consumer Engagement on Instagram

Winona analyzes Instagram consumer engagement to assess its brand communication effectiveness and capture core factors affecting audience response. This is because consumer engagement on the platform directly reflects its communication effect, with obvious engagement differences among posts of different brand image attributes. It conducts the analysis from three dimensions: overall interaction volume, high-interaction post ratio, and light-asset association ratio.
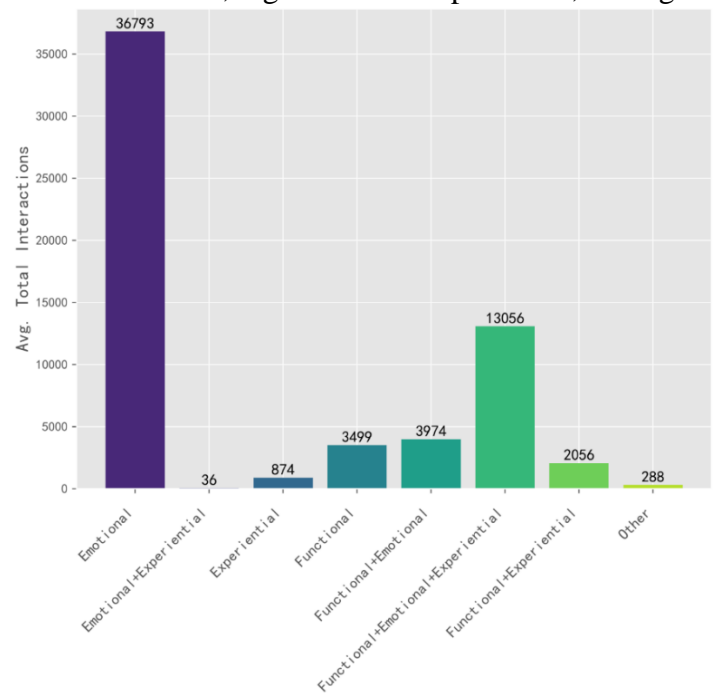

Figure 2 Average Total Interactions of Winona's Posts by Attribute

Figure 3 High-Interaction Emotional Attribute Post

Emotional attribute posts (4.98% of total) have the highest average interaction (36,792.7 times), nearly 10 times that of Functional (3,498.88 times) and Functional + Emotional (3,973.95 times) posts (Figure 2). A typical emotional post highlighting Winona's "Dermatology + Botanical Science" brand DNA gained 38k likes (Figure 3).

Winona has a "quantity-quality imbalance" in its Instagram content strategy, concluded by combining post count (see Table 2) and the aforementioned interaction indicators. Functional and Functional + Emotional attribute posts make up over 70% of the total (149 posts in all), with stable but unremarkable interaction performance—they serve as the foundational content for daily brand communication. Emotional attribute posts, though only 10 posts in total, deliver excellent interaction volume and quality, making them the key to breaking through interaction bottlenecks. Functional + Emotional + Experiential attribute posts boast good interaction quality but lack sufficient quantity, leaving ample room for expansion.

Table 2 Consumer Engagement Indicators of Winona's Posts by Attribute

Attribute Type	Post Count	Average Number of Likes	Average Number of Comments	Average Total Interactions	Light-asset Ratio	High Interaction Ratio
Emotional	10	36743.7	4.9	36792.7	0.1	50
Emotional + Experiential	3	25.67	1	35.67	0.33	0
Experiential	3	867	0.67	873.67	0	33.33
Functional	75	3490.08	0.88	3498.88	0.12	13.33
Functional + Emotional	74	3968	0.59	3973.95	0.04	24.32
Functional + Emotional+Experiential	10	13048.6	0.7	13055.6	0.2	40
Functional + Experiential	15	2050.27	0.53	2055.6	0	13.33
Other	11	286.73	0.09	287.64	0.09	9.09

To optimize, Winona should maintain functional-related content at around 70% to stabilize professional positioning, increase emotional content to 15%-20% to boost overall interaction, and expand multi-attribute content to 10%-15% to enhance light-asset value transmission, while adjusting quarterly strategies and conducting localization adaptation.

5. Conclusions

This study enriches the theoretical system of brand communication in the digital era by adapting the three-dimensional Brand Image Theory to the context of asset-light brands' cross-border social media practices. Through the construction of an "attribute classification–interaction analysis–trend tracking" framework, it addresses the research gap in Winona's overseas social media communication and clarifies the mechanism linking content attributes, audience interaction, and brand image formation.

Drawing on 201 Instagram posts (March 2021–October 2025) and 156 user comments, the mixed-methods analysis identifies a consistent "function-dominant with emotional supplementation" positioning strategy, with functional content accounting for more than 74% of all posts. The study further reveals quarterly adjustments in Winona's content strategy and a pronounced "quantity–quality imbalance": emotional posts represent only 4.98% of content yet achieve the highest interaction levels, including an average of 36,792.7 interactions and a 50% high-interaction rate. Additionally, multi-attribute content demonstrates a 37.5% association with asset-light brand characteristics. These findings support the proposed practical recommendations—optimizing content composition (approximately 70% functional, 15–20% emotional, and 10–15% multi-attribute content), refining quarterly strategies, and enhancing localization efforts for overseas markets.

Several limitations should be acknowledged, including the reliance on a single platform (Instagram), a relatively modest dataset, the emphasis on quantitative engagement indicators, and the

absence of cross-market comparative analysis. Future research may extend this work by conducting multi-platform or cross-brand comparisons, incorporating localized audience insights, and applying the analytical framework to other asset-light industries.

Acknowledgements

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