

Left: Boloni's 5,000-square-foot flagship showroom at Delta House. It targets the high-end residential market. Below: The limited edition Anta x Kyrie Irving Kai Hela Style Roots shoes. PHOTOS: BOLONI, ANTA



Lifestyle brands from China up the stakes for incumbents

As consumer expectations evolve, there is much to learn from new entrants, say observers. BY CORINNE KERK

BOLONI. Anta. Goelia. Beneunder. Not familiar with these names? Perhaps not for long, as more of these lifestyle brands arrive on Singapore's shores from China.

While much has been written about new Chinese food and beverage (F&B) operators taking the Republic by storm, the next wave could well be led by Chinese lifestyle brands.

Over the last few years, several have been setting up shop in prime locations and opening flagship stores here. Apart from providing shoppers with more options, they bring competitive price points and even collaborations with Western experts and celebrity brand ambassadors. Many also tout their products' technological innovations and tick the sustainability box.

A flurry of store openings

For instance, 2023 saw the entry of several Chinese brands, including Neiwai (meaning "inside and outside"), which sells body-positive loungewear, lingerie and athleisure apparel. Founded in 2012, its Raffles City Shopping Centre store is its first outside China.

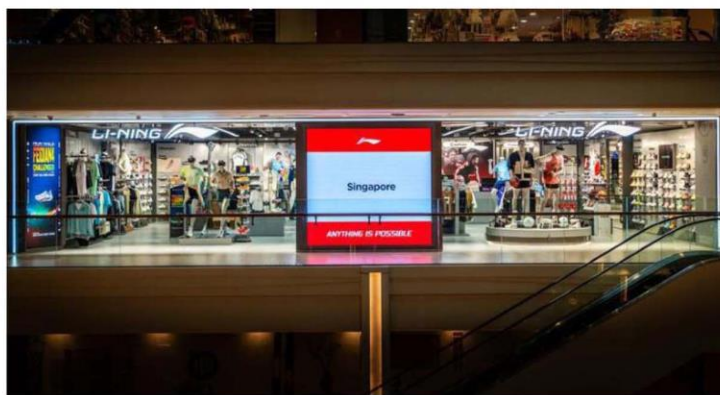
The brand's "No Body is Nobody" campaign promotes body diversity, and it collaborates with the likes of Peter Rabbit, a celebrated British children's book character, to launch co-branded products. It also elevated its image by appointing enigmatic Mandopop diva Faye Wong – notoriously picky about accepting such offers – as its global ambassador.

Similarly, Beneunder (derived from "under the banana leaf") – a leading sun protection lifestyle brand established in 2013 in Hangzhou – planted its first overseas outpost at Westgate mall.

Then you have Goelia, a fashion label from Guangzhou, which launched a total of three flagship stores in Singapore – two in Jewel Changi Airport and one in Wheelock Place.

Meanwhile, Anta, China's biggest sporting goods brand, made its debut with a 3,208-square-foot (sq ft) flagship store in VivoCity in July 2023. Its footprint here has since grown to 12 outlets, with a signature shoe line carrying the name of National Basketball Association (NBA) star Kyrie Irving, the brand's chief creative officer.

Not to be outdone, fellow Chinese sports brand Li-Ning opened its first direct-to-consumer stores at Plaza Singapura and Bugis+ late last year. Over the past decade, the brand has invested more than three billion yuan (\$555.6 million) in



Li-Ning opened its first direct-to-consumer stores at Plaza Singapura and Bugis+ late last year. PHOTO: LI-NING

sports shoe technology and has a lifetime contract with three-time NBA champion Dwyane Wade.

And just last month, Boloni, which offers contemporary modular carpentry and premium interior furnishing solutions, launched its first experience centre here with a spanking new 5,000 sq ft flagship showroom at Delta House.

It targets the high-end residential market and has worked with "top celebrities, high-profile clients and prominent figures" in China.

An important beachhead

Like its F&B counterparts, lifestyle brands from China consider Singapore an attractive destination for its affluent consumer base and strategic position as a regional business and tourism hub.

"Establishing a presence here is a springboard for regional growth, as international brands can leverage the city-

state's high tourist traffic to build brand recognition among visitors from the region," says Wong Xian Yang, Cushman & Wakefield's head of research for Singapore and South-east Asia.

Despite its small size, the Republic is an ideal test bed for Chinese consumer brands as they orchestrate a global expansion. Moreover, many of these companies have been building their brand narratives based on distinct cultural identities, says Hannah Chang, associate professor of marketing at Singapore Management University (SMU).

"Singapore embraces different cultures including Eastern and Western influences, offering an excellent launch pad for these brands to refine their strategies and broaden their appeal to markets in Singapore and beyond," she says.

Singapore consumers' – especially the younger demographic's – access to Chinese lifestyle trends through platforms

such as Xiaohongshu and TikTok also helps, says Li Jianggan, chief executive officer of consultancy Momentum Works.

In particular, the nation has certain strengths that attract brands with a premium positioning.

"There might be lower entry barriers as the culture and language are similar to China's," says associate professor Li Xiuping from the department of marketing at the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School. "If these brands are successful in China, they are more likely to find customers who have similar tastes and preferences here."

Indeed, Singapore remains a lucrative and strategic market for luxury products and services with its higher-spending populace, strong global appeal and profile.

These traits "can help to springboard premium brands to an international audience" as well as wealthy and ultra-high-net-worth consumers, says Ethan Hsu, head of retail at Knight Frank Singapore.

Premium Chinese brands entering Singapore often favour retail spaces in prime locations such as Orchard Road, Marina Bay Sands, and other upscale malls which offer high footfall, visibility and brand prestige.

"Like international luxury retailers, Chinese high-end brands often opt for sizeable stores to create an immersive experience with premium interiors, VIP lounges, and story-telling elements that can better build their brand story," says Hsu.

Has a gauntlet been thrown?

But while they add vibrancy and interesting new aesthetics to Singapore's merchandising environment, these Chinese entrants compound the jostling in the local retail landscape. Despite an expected full tourism recovery in 2024 – which will boost growth in 2025 – the retail sector remains full of challenges, says Hsu.

"The strong Singapore dollar (and) inflationary pressures have resulted in many local consumers taking their spending to other countries where retail and recreation costs are more affordable," he says, noting that rental growth this year is projected to ease and stabilise within a range of 1 to 3 per cent.

"They will compete for prime retail spaces and locations, market share, brand loyalty and recognition, which will in turn influence sales and pricing strategies."

Hiromi Yamaguchi, research manager at data analytics firm Euromonitor International, says Singapore's offline retail sector has reached its ceiling, with expansion

forecasts remaining modest at a 0.5 per cent compound annual growth rate between 2025 and 2029.

"As a result, competition within offline retail will only intensify, and any new entrants – regardless of origin – will further fuel market saturation," he adds.

So, where does that leave incumbents? Prof Li does not see lifestyle brands from China as direct competitors to local ones as they need time to attract and grow their Singapore customer base. "However, many are digitally savvy and innovative in marketing, which may pressure local business owners to stay agile and be more customer-centric," she notes.

This is especially since, in recent years, Singaporeans have been increasingly choosing Chinese brands not only for their competitive pricing but also their functionality, quality and innovation, says Yamaguchi, adding that physical stores are viewed as experiential spaces.

Indeed, existing players, both local and international, will need to up their game in store design, product appeal and brand story-telling to connect with their target audience, says SMU's Prof Chang.

"They should be cognisant of what these new entrants will bring, and may need to reassess their customer engagement strategies."

And even though competition will increase with new players entering the market, it is also an opportunity for all to innovate and better connect with, engage, and appeal to their customers, she points out.

For instance, in certain categories, leading Chinese brands tend to be quicker in product iteration and omnichannel growth – tactics that brands here could learn and adapt to their operations, says Momentum Works' Li, adding that incumbents should keep building consumer insights.

NUS' Prof Li adds: "They can leverage their local knowledge of customers to uncover their needs; use digital tools to predict market trends and promote products more effectively; and enhance the shopping experience by complementing their physical stores with digital technology, such as by offering customised recommendations."

Which, ultimately, should mean a win for local consumers.

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Goelia opened no fewer than three flagship stores in Singapore. PHOTO: GOELIA