

Research on Brand Marketing Strategy in the Era of Sensual Consumption—Taking lululemon as an Example

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Abstract. Taking the era of emotional consumption as the background, this study deeply explores the emotional marketing strategy of the sports brand lululemon, focusing on how the brand conducts marketing through emotional resonance, community operation and DTC mode, aiming to reveal how the brand can transform emotional demand into actual consumption behavior through precise marketing strategies, and to analyze the effectiveness and limitations of these strategies in practical application. This study adopts the literature analysis method to organize and summarize the current relevant information, and combines online and offline case collection to comprehensively analyze the brand's marketing strategy and psychological drivers of consumer. The study results show that lululemon successfully realizes the interchange between consumer behavior and lifestyle identity through the above marketing model, and satisfies customers' needs for functional and emotional aspects. However, the brand is controversial in terms of product quality and cost-effectiveness and faces competition from emerging brands. In the future, enterprises should pay more attention to the balance between emotional and functional values and maintain their existing strengths and features to optimize their marketing strategies.

Keywords: Emotional consumption, emotional marketing, community marketing, brand values, DTC model

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the analysis of brand marketing strategy in the era of emotional consumption. Philip Kotler, the father of modern marketing, created the three-stage theory of consumer behavior, which summarizes consumer behavior into three major stages, namely, quantitative stage, the qualitative stage and emotional stage [1]. With the development of the economy and the enrichment of material life, gradually stepped into the stage of emotional consumption, that is, tend to make purchase decisions based on personal emotional needs, identity and social value and other deep-seated pursuit of the focus of consumption from the “functional value” of the commodity to “emotional value” [2]. As a leader in the field of sportswear, Lululemon is worth studying as a case study for its success in transforming product consumption into lifestyle through emotional resonance, community activities, and brand stories. This study is crucial for both theory and practice: on the theoretical level, it will elucidate the driving force of emotional consumption and improve the theoretical framework of emotional marketing and community

economy; on the practical level, this study will balance the emotional value and commercial return, optimize the marketing strategy for lululemon, and discuss how sports brands can stand out from the crowd in the homogenized apparel industry.

This study focuses on two specific aspects: the driving force of sensual consumption, and the effectiveness and limitations of lululemon's marketing strategy. It aims to reveal the core points and marketing logic of the brand under the trend of sensual consumption. Finding and reading relevant information through the literature analysis method, the advantage of this method is that it can well organize the theoretical framework and refer to the practical implications for this study, which is favorable to the research. At the same time, case collection is carried out online and offline to comprehensively analyze lululemon's marketing strategy and consumer feelings. The final research objective is to analyze how lululemon transforms consumers' emotional needs into actual consumption behaviors through precise marketing strategies, and to explore the effectiveness and limitations of these strategies in practical application. To achieve the objective, extensive literature collection and in-depth case studies were conducted, as well as a comprehensive discussion of future marketing routes and brand comparisons.

2. Literature review

2.1. Lululemon's community marketing strategy research

The brand skillfully utilizes the community marketing strategy in sensual consumer psychology to promote its products. Yufei Zhang and Willy Lu studied how the community marketing model promoted the development of Lululemon in the article "Conceptual Driving and Mode Exploration of Community Marketing for Sports Brands--Based on the Case Study of Lululemon" [3].

This study makes a notable contribution by exploring lululemon's "religious" cultural model. Within this framework, fitness trainers and opinion leaders function as "clerics," disseminating the brand's healthy lifestyle philosophy through lectures. As they engage with the content, experiencers absorb the brand's values, fostering a sense of community [4]. At the same time, the marketing concept of DTC (direct-to-consumer) mentioned in the paper also has a deep impact on this study, and its advantage is that it directly reaches consumers through offline stores or online website and e-commerce platforms and makes timely adjustments based on consumer feedback, which is conducive to the brand's ability to increase user loyalty and repurchase rate [5]. In addition, lululemon honors the needs of its customers by continually improving product performance and building a brand community by cultivating a large number of loyal customers with durable fabrics and simple, fashionable apparel styles. However, prior studies have paid little attention to the long-term impact of brand community marketing strategies and the influence mechanisms at play. This research will explore the role of consumers' emotional needs in decision-making through a case study approach. In doing so, it aims to address the existing research gap and offer insights for enhancing the marketing strategies of sports brand communities.

2.2. The connection between Lululemon and consumers' emotional needs

Brands meet target customers' emotional needs through emotional marketing and drive consumption. In "Exploration of Lululemon's Emotional Brand Construction Strategy in the Era of Emotional Consumption", Jing Zhou explored how Lululemon builds emotional connections with consumers by way of the sensual marketing strategy [2].

This paper provides a new perspective on the development of this study in terms of brand emotion construction. Unlike other sports brands, lululemon has a precise market positioning; it locates itself as a medium- and high-end brand and focuses its target customers on middle- to high-income women aged 20-40, who pursue a healthy lifestyle, value product quality and design, and are willing to pay for the brand's story and values; and who desire a sense of belonging to a community and social image formation. lululemon builds a community through activities, providing a platform for consumers to communicate and interact with each other, which satisfies customers' social needs and pursuit of lifestyle, and then enhances brand loyalty. At the same time, their standard of consumption can assist the brand to maintain its premium image, achieving a complementary marketing effect. Nevertheless, the authors' research on the universality and differences of different consumer groups is insufficient. This paper will delve further into the diverse emotional needs of various consumer groups and supplement the existing research gaps by combining case studies and real-life situations.

2.3. The prioritized experience marketing settings of Lululemon

Experiential marketing is an essential step in perceptual marketing, where brands combine marketing strategies with personalized experiences to fully enhance consumers' engagement and sense of belonging. In her article "Research on Corporate Marketing Strategies Based on Consumer Behavioral Characteristics," Yi Xie examines the role of experiential marketing in attracting consumers and contributes to this study by analyzing the process of experience and evaluating the experience in particular [5].

The paper proposes that brands through creating a special product experience leave positive emotional memories in the purchase process, which stimulates consumers' interest and desire to buy, leading to word-of-mouth communication effect; and posting the experience feelings through social media to attract the attention of potential consumers, bringing both economic and emotional benefits [6]. Lululemon allows instructors and experiencers to wear its products during offline teaching sessions, enabling them to experience the comfort and adaptability of the products while exercising. This strategy aims to foster emotional attachment to the products among users. It should be noted that not all feedback is positive. To address this, the brand needs to respond promptly to negative reviews and build consumer trust through effective after-sales service. However, limited attention has been given to the specific implementation effects. This paper aims to address this gap by examining particular cases and actual feedback, conducting in-depth investigations and research to enrich the current body of knowledge.

3. Case analysis

3.1. Creating brand concept

Lululemon has created a deep emotional connection between the brand and consumers by creating the core concept of "Be in all" and transforming sportswear into lifestyle symbols. The brand promotes its customers' ability to be fully engaged and undaunted, no matter their age or class. For Women's Day 2025, lululemon enlisted 78-year-old Joan MacDonald to shoot the short film "Live Vivid." This fitness expert was able to both lose 70 pounds and break 135 pounds in weightlifting at the age of 70+. The short video aroused a great deal of praise and discussion once it was released, using real-life examples to inspire middle-aged people who are pressed by the realities of life, and make them believe that as long as they keep on exercising and maintain a positive and

youthful mindset, they can also be hale and hearty old ladies at the age of 70. It is a kind of beautiful projection of the present to the future. Since its development, what lululemon sells is not only a simple sports product, but also a self-expression tool; it represents a positive and comfortable lifestyle, realizing the two-way satisfaction of consumers' functional and fine emotional needs [7].

3.2. Build community atmosphere

Lululemon upgrades the single sports scene into a community culture carrier by organizing offline activities to build a strong identity social ecosystem.

Every year from June to August, lululemon organizes the "Summer Fun Challenge" across more than ten cities. The event features various fitness activities including yoga, running, and cycling, where participants complete fundamental physical challenges through obstacle-course competitions. The campaign leverages both online and offline promotion: brand ambassador Jialing presented at the 2024 National Finals to share the aspiring spirit of sports and the brand philosophy, thereby expanding the brand's influence. In addition, several fitness KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) collaborating with the brand joined the competition as participants and shared posts with the hashtag "Hot Sweat Moment" on social media. By sharing their competition experiences, equipment recommendations, and training tips, they helped create a highly interactive community network. This engagement drew the attention of potential users and stimulated the purchasing desire of fans.

The community atmosphere constructed by lululemon is the consumers' psychological perception of the brand's community management and style characteristics, which contains three dimensions: interaction atmosphere, presence atmosphere, and mutual assistance atmosphere [8]. Theoretically, the interaction atmosphere will enhance consumers' interest in interaction, satisfy their social needs, and increase their sense of well-being. The proximity atmosphere stimulates consumers' spatial proximity, enhances the perceived value, and positive evaluation of the product. The mutual assistance atmosphere enhances consumers' willingness to co-create, stimulates the sense of belonging and identity, and promotes the formation of happiness [9]. While lululemon forms a community by gathering customers with similar interests through values, enhances the perception of the product through offline sports courses and sports challenges, and stimulates brand loyalty through the interaction and communication between KOLs and brand ambassadors and customers; its marketing framework perfectly matches the three dimensions and core elements of constructing a community atmosphere, which is undoubtedly the leading case of community marketing.

3.3. DTC marketing mode

DTC (Direct-to-Consumer) refers to the brand's direct connection with consumers without any third-party platforms or intermediate links, and personally directs the purchase of goods. This marketing model is featured by the fact that the brand tends to focus on the needs of consumers, pay attention to the user experience, and co-create value with consumers [10].

lululemon is a great example of the DTC marketing model. When customers shop at offline stores, store associates can provide one-to-one personalized product recommendations based on the customer's body type, exercise habits, and fashion preferences, enabling the brand to directly capture the customer's needs and preferences and collect timely feedback. Meanwhile, lululemon also actively interacts with users on social media and encourages UGC (User-generated Content) about product experiences. It enables the brand to further understand users' thoughts and turn potential users into real users through real-world stories and experiences.

Under the DTC model, the brand's deep understanding of customers has led to product adjustments that address the physical differences between Asian and international markets. For instance, in pattern cutting, they've widened the waist and reduced the hip circumference of yoga pants to plying up the typical Asian body shape, which often features a longer waist and shorter legs. The international version of the product adopts the waist-length crotch short version of the design, and the size is relatively large, more in line with the European and American body type standards. lululemon through the tailor-made service for the region, established the brand in the various geographic communities to establish personalized relationships, and to pull in the distance with the consumer [11].

4. Discussion

4.1. Lululemon's inspiration to other sports brands

In today's seriously homogenized sports apparel market, lululemon takes the community culture as the core to create the concept of a healthy and active life, which breaks the traditional sports brand's competitive logic of focusing on the functionality of products. lululemon's values-driven brand core strategy is a unique model in the industry. The desirability lies in the marketing theme of “enhancing the brand core by transmitting conceptual beliefs”. At present, some sports brands, such as Adidas and Nike, still follow the marketing program of star effect, the main problem lies in the low degree of connection with the community users, the old concept of community marketing, and single content [12]. The ISOOC model, which is capable of forming a complete community, can provide sports brands with an exemplary sample of community marketing: “I” stands for interest, meaning that the brand's first task is to build a community of people who share the same values and interests; “S” stands for structure, which is to strengthen the brand's positioning through a systematic structure; the first “O” stands for output, which refers to the lifestyle content exported by the brand and the community to ensure the dynamic image of the community; the second “O” stands for operate, which is to maintain the community's long-term development through all-round maintenance and fine operation; and “C” stands for copy, which requires maintaining the unity of core values when expanding globally while flexibly adjusting the strategy according to different cultural backgrounds [13].

4.2. Deficiencies and challenges of Lululemon

Although lululemon has done an outstanding job in values marketing and community operation, it still has some controversy in product quality and cost performance.

There is information on the Internet about brands whose quality has been questioned or penalized; in 2022, lululemon was penalized 81,420,000 RMB for passing off “Navigation” men's down jackets as qualified goods when it was found that the down content of the jackets did not comply with national standards. In addition, lululemon was also questioned about greenwashing (Through false advertising or public opinion promotion, making the public believe that an organization's products and policies are environmentally friendly), suspecting that it advertises its products' raw materials and processing procedures to meet regulatory requirements and reduce financing costs.

In the process of searching the social media evaluation, it is not difficult to find that the cost-effectiveness of the product has been dissatisfied by some consumers, that is, the contradiction between the high-end pricing and the quality decline: the brand emphasizes the “tactile science” and

the “naked fabric” cannot match the performance of the product, and in its place, complaints such as stripping and pilling continue to fester. Instead, complaints about unraveling and pilling continue to fester, causing some customers to rethink the value of 1,000RMB yoga pants. It is worth noting that Alo Yoga, a recently emerged brand, has captured the market with a similar design but a lower price (around 20%-30% lower) by hitting the highly price-sensitive customer group.

4.3. Brand optimization ideas

This section mainly provides optimization ideas for the above-mentioned product quality control, cost-effective problems, and potential market competition.

Given the related problems, the brand can develop store features according to the city classification and different prices of styles: such as first-tier cities, consumers there are more inclined to lululemon products and offline activities to show the social status and quality of life, the brand can focus on the introduction of “limited edition co-branded” products, while expanding the store to set up an experience area, provide personalized wear advice and exclusive activities. Consumers in second-tier cities pay attention to personal image enhancement and have higher requirements on product functionality, so they should start from optimizing the comfort and functionality of the products, and launch “professional style” products, which should be suitable for commuting to work and weekend leisure. Consumers in third-tier cities and the following cities pay more attention to the practicality and economy of the products. lululemon can focus on launching “basic” products, which are suitable for daily wear, commuting to work, indoor workouts, and outdoor activities, to meet the needs of consumers for basic and multi-functionality. The launch of core products in the above three types of cities can be tailored to meet the needs of different consumers and satisfy their pursuit the cost performance.

In addition, although lululemon can understand the needs of different groups well, it needs to strengthen the supply chain production and after-sales service system in terms of quality. Establish long-term strategic cooperation with high-quality suppliers to enhance the affinity. Real-time monitoring in raw material procurement, large-scale production, and finished products, leaving the factory to strictly monitor product quality. Guarantee lifetime warranty service with customers and incorporate it into the brand manifesto, providing free repair or replacement services for quality problems (such as cracked seams and pilling) and usage issues (weakened elasticity and damaged zippers) to rebuild users' trust.

5. Conclusion

The result of this study is that lululemon has successfully realized the interchange between consumption behavior and lifestyle identity using emotional resonance, community activities, and experiential marketing, and its products and community activities satisfy the dual needs of customers' function and emotion. However, the quality and cost-effectiveness of brand products are still controversial, and face the pressure of market competition from new brands. Thus, it further concludes that it has accomplished the leap from functional consumption to meaningful consumption through the three core strategies of brand value building, community ecology construction, and DTC mode marketing, and has become a leader in the sportswear field. In the era of emotional consumption, psychological factors (including social needs and identity) are the key to drive modern consumer decision-making, and the core competitiveness of enterprises lies in the ability to balance emotional value and functional value; take product performance as the root to

build pervasive and traffic waves; and use the strengths of emotional marketing as an extension point to strengthen brand tone and enhance customer stickiness.

This study provides valuable references for future research in this field, which mainly influences the optimization and innovation of sports brand emotional marketing, especially the community marketing strategy. It reveals the importance of “focusing interest” and the central theory of “value output” in the ISOOC model, providing a theoretical framework for sports brand community marketing. Meanwhile, the effectiveness of the DTC marketing model is confirmed, providing the industry with a concrete path from forced functional marketing to emotional penetration.

Future research should focus more on the emotional needs and psychological differences of different consumer groups, to achieve more accurate market positioning and stratified emotional marketing logic. lululemon needs to balance product quality, price reasonableness, and the positioning of mid-range and high-end brands. lululemon should continue to maintain the uniqueness of the brand and the core values on which it is built. How to deal with the challenges of the emerging brands effectively will become a key issue in the layout of its brand strategy.

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