

Research on Sports Brands' Integrated Communication Marketing Strategy in the Age of New Media: A Case Study of Lululemon

Xinyi Song^{1, a, *}

¹ *China University of Mining and Technology – Beijing 11 College Road Ding, Haidian District, Beijing*

a. sherrysong0825@163.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: This paper focuses on the application of intergrated marketing communication in sports brands. And take Luluemon as an example to investigate the marketing strategy. With the development of the consumers' consumption behavior, sports brands need to change their marketing concepts and innovate their marketing thinking. By prioritizing consumers, integrating various communication channels as well as setting new guidelines for different marketing, Lululemon has already achieved success in marketing by implementing integrated marketing communication. Also, the application of Internet media technology and thinking is essential to establish brand image, transmit brand connotation, and enhance the influence of the brand. This paper provides an important reference for sports brands to implement integrated marketing communication in the new media era.

Keywords: Integrated Marketing Communication, Sports Brands, New Media, Sports Marketing

1. Introduction

In the process of science and technology innovation, the variability of media communication forms becomes more prominent and the importance of an integrated marketing strategy is particularly prominent, which also gives enterprises a new development perspective and opportunity. Chinese sports brands and overseas sports brands have entered a new round of rapid development under the joint promotion of the national institutional dividend and the consumption dividend brought by the national fitness wave after the COVID-19 epidemic. Canadian brand Lululemon has developed rapidly since it entered the market in 2013, successfully making China an important market for its brand. The brand has widely used the Internet medium, deeply cultivated the Chinese sports brand market, presented the new characteristics of integrated marketing communication(IMC) strategy in the aspects of experience marketing, targeted marketing, and so on, and formed a new practice and theoretical summary of sports brand integrated marketing. Through the analysis of Lululemon's marketing strategy in China from the perspective of integrated marketing, this paper summarizes the new practice of integrated marketing of sports brands in the era of new media and the Internet, hoping to provide reference for the development strategy of similar sports brand enterprises.

The full text is organized as follows: The second part explains the development of IMC in China. The third part focuses on the analysis of Lululemon's integrated marketing strategy in China. The fourth part analyses the existing problems of IMC. Finally, the fifth part summarizes.

2. Chinese Development of IMC in the Age of New Media

The innovation of new technology has promoted the rapid development of the media industry, which has not only injected fresh blood into the media environment but also changed the whole media environment. The prevalence of new media not only diverts the audience from traditional media but also changes the traditional one-way communication mode and the strategy communication of enterprise. The competition of old and new media complicate the current communication environment. Because of the fragmented communication brought about by new media, brand communication must change its traditional communication mode, and IMC emerges.

2.1. The Mode of Integrated Marketing Communication

IMC, proposed by Don Schulz of Northwestern University, is a process of unifying all communication activities related to marketing carried out by enterprises. IMC integrates all communication activities, such as advertising, promotion, public relations, direct selling, packaging, and news media, into marketing activities, enabling enterprises to convey unified communication information to customers. IMC is a marketing concept that expands and changes with the times to convey the brand concept to the public with integrated information. Its central idea is to determine the unified market strategy of the enterprise, coordinate the use of various communication means, and give play to the advantages of different communication tools so that the enterprise can realize the low cost of promotion and form a sales promotion climax with high impact [1].

IMC involves two marketing methods, 4C and 4P. The 4P theory refers to Product, Price, Place, and Promotion in the marketing process, which is put forward under a single social form, focuses on strategic means, and is suitable for the social environment where demand exceeds supply. As this marketing model is too traditional and does not conform to the mass market of media communication, Professor Robert Laupenter put forward the 4C marketing theory in 1990. 4C includes four key elements: Consumer, Cost, Convenience, and Communication. 4C is proposed in view of the diversified social forms, diversified and personalized customer demands, and segmented media communication. Macroscopically, the 4C theory emphasizes customer-centeredness. With 4P as the core foundation, 4C acts horizontally on 4P from the perspective of customers to form a feedback mechanism. The two are not contradictory but show a two-way relationship. IMC is developed on the basis of two theories, with integration as the core. The purpose of IMC is to enable enterprises to achieve synergy effects through clear division of labor and cooperation through channels so that brand marketing strategies can achieve the effect of "1+1>2".

2.2. The Application of Sports Brands Integrated Marketing in the Chinese Market

New media technology, which integrates network theory, multimedia technology, and digital technology, not only shows a very broad information capacity but also improves interactive and real-time information transmission. Therefore, with the development of the new media era, the traditional media can choose more and more information transmission channels, and the overall form of media has diversified with the new technological innovations. This section introduces the traditional communication and marketing modes of sports brands against the backdrop of the new media era, as well as the marketing mode from the perspective of IMC.

2.2.1. Traditional Communication Modes of Sports Brands

The typical method of Chinese sports brand marketing is: first, through sponsorship of sports events such as the Olympic Games; second, by selecting famous sports spokespersons to increase brand awareness and influence through traditional media. Third, build the brand image through the brand slogan so as to enhance the market share. However, with the advent of the information society, consumers turn to new media to obtain information, and these marketing channels have weakened their original information transmission function and audience. In addition, this marketing method is based on the premise of uncertain audience targets and consumer groups, limited to the problems of inaccurate brand positioning, insufficient brand awareness, single marketing means, and other problems, sports brand marketing has not had a good effect. Most sports brands in China appear to have dispersed their publicity power and delayed customer feedback. For example, when Li Ning Company chose NBA star Shaquille O'Neal as its spokesperson, the majority of its advertising was for running shoes, and the influence of star athletes was not thoroughly explored, resulting in a failure to achieve the publicity effect [2]. Li Ning was also unable to get timely feedback from consumers due to technological reasons, which resulted in several brand positioning changes and huge losses to the enterprise at that time [3].

2.2.2. Sports Brands IMC Modes

An integrated marketing strategy refers to a new communication model that combines marketing, public relations, and communication functions into one. From the standpoint of overall development, the relationship between brands and customers is changing, IMC theory is an unavoidable choice for developing marketing theory and guiding practice innovation. According to Jing Yangzi, current sports brand marketing exhibits two trends. First, the way of sports consumption changed from passive watching of entertainment to universal active participation, and on the occasion of the outbreak of COVID-19, a new craze has been manifested under the national home quarantine, which is reflected in the sports substitution blogger led by Liu Genghong[4]. Second, the way of sports communication changed from mass-oriented to mass-oriented and personalized. Among the sports brands represented by Adidas, it has developed its own sub-brands for different audience groups. Similarly, the sportswear behemoth Nike launched customer customization services, putting the customer first and designing products for consumption.

IMC emphasizes the consumer-oriented position. Nowadays, the target consumer of sports brands presents the characteristics of youth, individuation, emphasize sharing, and emphasize socializing. Then, the brand puts pertinence and a sense of experience in a higher position in the product and marketing strategy. For example, international sports brands such as Adidas and Puma follow the trend of young people, sign cooperation contracts with stars and singers, integrate brand and media communication, and target young consumers' demand for "fashion plus sports" more specifically. In addition, consumers pay more attention to experiential consumption. To strengthen their direct connection with consumers, more and more sports brands are turning to the experience-oriented business model, which combines digital transformation and online and offline interactions. In addition to the traditional sponsorship of events and signing of stars, sports brands can further grasp various marketing opportunities and devote themselves to fashion week marketing, etc., to explore other possibilities and emphasize consumers' emotional identification with the brand [5].

2.2.3. The Advantages of IMC in the New Media Era

Compared with the traditional marketing model, the advantages of integrated marketing are more prominent in the current era. On the one hand, IMC emphasizes consumer orientation. In traditional communication mode, consumers are the only audience for brand communication. But under the IMC,

consumers are not only the recipients and users of the brand but also the builders of the brand. Through Internet media, consumers learn about products, choose and review products, and share brand experiences with more customer groups. Customers bring with them new opportunities as well as new challenges for the brand. Especially in the age of word-of-mouth, the communication relies on the advantages of the new media of the network, which are more targeted, spread widely, and infect each other. On the other hand, IMC emphasizes the integrated application of various communication means. Through the application of network technology, sports brands can accurately locate visitor groups and grasp the advertising effect of a certain product in the traffic. These data statistics will be helpful to evaluate the effect of advertising. The network's sports exhibition platform not only allows enterprises to expand the distance between products and the audience, allowing their brand connotation and corporate culture to be organically combined for better communication [6], but also allows enterprises to expand the distance between products and the audience, allowing them to meet the sports preferences and product demands of all kinds of people.

3. Analysis of Lululemon's Marketing Strategy in China

Lululemon's signature product is breathable and comfortable female yoga pants. In 2013, it entered the Asian market and focused on the Chinese market for commercial expansion. By 2020, the Chinese yoga industry's market size reached 38.7 billion dollars, and it is expected to exceed 50 billion dollars by 2023 [7]. After entering the Chinese market, Lululemon seized the attention of the minority sports audience group in China and made strategic changes suitable for the localization and development of its products. At present, Lululemon has extended from the single yoga field to other sports fields, trying to diversify expansion[8]. This section details Lululemon's marketing strategy in China.

3.1. Precise Positioning to Target Customers and Markets

IMC emphasizes consumption-oriented improvement. Yoga is a small group of sports in China. Lululemon specializes in the field of yoga, and its audience consists mainly of women between 20 and 40 years old, accurately locates its target customers among young, high-income female groups. This group possesses a certain level of power and consumption, as well as a high tolerance for high-priced goods. Compared with the cost-performance ratio, they pay more attention to the fashion and comfort and have higher requirements for the quality. Based on Lululemon's high-quality product design and clear understanding of customers' needs, brand has formulated product marketing strategies suitable for them. Through IMC, it has cultivated customers' high repurchase psychology and brand loyalty.

In addition, stores are also targeted for detailed classification. In the Chinese market, Lululemon divides its stores into general stores, flagship stores, display stores and experimental stores. The flagship store provides consumers with the service of recommending fitness courses and gyms nearby; The main function of the display store is to communicate with customers, organize yoga classes and sell limited-edition products. An experimental shop is a design studio that constantly improves product design by collecting consumer feedback. Accurate store segmentation can better build a bridge of communication between the brand and customers, and help Lululemon to continuously improve its products.

3.2. "Starvation" Marketing, Keeping up with Fast Fashion

With an emphasis on consumer-centricity, Lululemon has designed its yoga trousers to be highly comfortable and functional, while meeting the fashion needs of today's customers, so that they can be worn in a variety of situations, not just for yoga, but also for young women who are looking for "fashion + sport". Lululemon also attracts non-yoga lovers due to its high comfort and fashionable

marketing line. In addition to this, Lululemon has a strong focus on production strategy management and uses the "starvation marketing" strategy usually used by fast fashion brands. The products are updated quickly and new models are created with very low stock levels. This gives consumers a certain degree of urgency to products while capturing their sense of novelty and curiosity, creating a sense of "it's too good to miss" so that they can place orders decisively. In addition to customer-focused strategy, its low-stock, high-rotation model it remains at the forefront of the market.

3.3. Get Closer to Your Customers by Going Online First and Then Offline

IMC emphasizes the use of a combination of different communication tools. Lululemon usually starts with an online campaign to generate sales for offline sales. It proactively seeks out and uses all points of connection with consumers and does not stick to a single marketing tool or communication channel. For example, image ambassador scheme, regionalized resource swaps, community marketing, etc. Firstly, image ambassador scheme helps to communicate culture with precision. Unlike traditional international sports brands such as Nike, Adidas and Puma, which spend hundreds of millions of dollars to invite top sports stars to film commercials and promotional videos for their brands, Lululemon's strategy is to develop an image ambassador scheme. Through hundreds of KOL in professional areas, it extent to locate the surrounding potential consumers in the maximum, which include athletes, trainers, musicians, etc. The videos also feature ordinary consumers, so as to target people who love yoga and spread the word about the sport. Secondly, regionalized resource swaps help to understand consumer demands. Before opening a shop in a new market or city, Lululemon will communicate with local yoga instructors or other fitness instructors and swap business resources, providing them with free clothing and allowing them to collect advice from yoga exercisers through their classes, which will then be fed back to the company. Finally, community marketing helps to increase the stickiness of brand users. Combined with the publicity effects of the brand ambassadors, it uses media and new media platforms such as Red Book and Weibo comprehensively, and then the use of community marketing and community events to expand Lululemon's brand influence. At the same time, Lululemon has developed the WeChat Mini Program "Hot Sweat Community" in the Chinese market, through which it pushes out yoga-related events held in different cities every week, with participants wearing the brand's clothing, which is equivalent to participating in an experiential marketing, attracting a lot of heat and flow. This has increased the number of invisible users while also allowing consumers to deeply experience the product, the brand and the concept, deepening their sense of identity and interaction with the brand.

After sufficient warm-up through online, Lululemon opened shops using the direct retail shop system model to communicate directly with consumers and reduce communication costs. For example, some of the retail shops set up product labs to highlight the product process, where consumers can give direct feedback on their needs to the designers and provide after-sales services such as garment alterations. In addition, some offline retail shops have set up yoga classes where customers can purchase yoga products and then learn in the shop's yoga space. It becomes a "community" of yoga enthusiasts to exchange and continue to attract accurate traffic through word-of-mouth communication within a niche circle of customers. By facilitating direct offline communication through online attraction, the company can ensure a high degree of management discretion over product quality, price stability and promotional methods.

3.4. Grasp Customer Mindsets and Improve User Stickiness

IMC emphasizes the importance of building a positive image of the company in the minds of consumers. According to official data, Lululemon has had around 150,000 "shop ambassadors" around the world in recent years. With community marketing, fans and yoga instructors have been

acting as KOLs in social activities, subtly exporting the brand's values, expanding their influence and increasing user stickiness. In the deal with the shop ambassadors, in addition to having new products to try on and give as gifts, additional professional photography benefits are provided. While these photos become free promotional materials for the brand and are used in the shop windows and on social media such as Instagram, WeChat and Weibo, thus creating a rich community culture for the brand itself. Unlike other retailers who wait for customers, Lululemon's 'brand ambassador + consumer' community selling strategy skips the distributor and not only builds customer loyalty, but also gives them more control over pricing, discounts and marketing, ultimately creating a closed marketing loop in which profits are exclusive.

The core of Lululemon was initially "young, independent, sporty and fashionable" and the core of what it wants to convey to consumers to date is that apart from promoting yoga, it is more about a healthy lifestyle and spirit. A proper understanding of IMC and promoting the idea of brand consumption is based on the fact that people have higher level needs. Lululemon covers its product packaging with inspirational slogans and upward life attitude slogans, specializing its products while establishing its sunny brand image and culture. Its unique audience, expensive pricing, high-end and niche brand culture has won the preference of an increasing number of Chinese consumers.

4. Problems of IMC in Promoting Sports Brands

As a result of the new media environment, consumers are actively acquiring information, integrated marketing must be tailored to the characteristics of the new media to achieve niche and personalized communication characteristics. Consumer needs are complicated, consumer choice dominance is increased, and the marketing communication process is more risky. Nowadays, with the emphasis on consumer experience, consumers' media selection and purchase behavior is to some extent no longer for the functional attributes of products, but for the experience and the cultural values behind the products and services. In this sense, IMC is affected by many uncontrollable factors due to the complexity of consumer demand, requiring a new understanding of integrated marketing in the new media environment. As the integrated marketing model requires companies to be able to use a variety of communication methods and resources in an integrated and coordinated manner, mobilize all employees to participate in the enterprise, and consistently communicate a unified corporate or product image to target customers, this requires companies to sometimes break through the original corporate structure, coordinate the interests of different functional departments, and optimize the allocation of internal and external resources around a unified marketing goal to ensure the orderly operation of the enterprise.

Our sports brand companies have the following problems in using IMC:

4.1. Insufficient Brand Awareness, Lack of Brand Culture and Brand Core

Domestic sportswear business operators do not truly understand the connotation of IMC and the essence of brand communication. IMC is based on the condition that the marketing communication plan of the company remains consistent with the guiding ideology of the company itself (changyihang, 2019). Sports brands in China do not have their own style and brand culture in the construction of their own enterprises. The operators of these domestic sports brands are often tired of promoting the same communication theme for a long time, hoping to seek new and changeable ideas, and the concept is still stuck in the "marketing first". However, it is the form of the communication that should be changed, not the content. Updating the communication format can stimulate consumers, prevent aesthetic fatigue, attract their attention and give them a consistent impression of the brand. Yet if the main theme of the brand communication is changed, the audience will only be left with a complex

and changing message which cannot convey the brand culture to the consumers, and the brand image will become more blurred [9].

4.2. Vague Brand Positioning and Lack of Innovation

Some of China's sports enterprises, in the absence of product technology and brand influence, do not have a clear positioning of their brands, nor do they have a fixed target audience, lacking relevance. Without their own main products in marketing, and with serious homogenization of product design and copying of some first-tier brands, they are unable to gain the recognition of consumers.

4.3. Single and Fragmented Brand Marketing Tool

Some sports companies in China do not manage their brands properly, and the heads of their departments lack knowledge of other departments so they rely more on the media they have more contact with. However, such blind trust is often not based on rational analysis and judgement and is not beneficial for the company's own interests. In this case, companies do not choose to leave the execution of their marketing communication tasks to professional advertising agencies to plan and design comprehensive integrated marketing programmes for them. They would rather have an inefficient marketing communication than to leave the IMC sub-channel to different companies for division of labor, so the communication effect is not ideal.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

IMC helps companies to build their brands, create a brand culture, gain a foothold in a large market and capture the consumer base. This paper introduces IMC models, and theoretically explains the effects of traditional communication strategies and the effects of IMC on companies and markets, as well as their mechanisms of action. IMC has good marketing effects in the new media and Internet era, and has more advantages of enriching brand culture expression and establishing quality brand image. It can both enhance the core competitiveness of the brand and become the leader in the field, and gain loyalty in the brand culture and consumer emotion "believers", which has an important role in enhancing the marketing power of the brand and developing the market. Subsequently, taking the overseas brand Lululemon as an example, it analyzed in detail its brand marketing strategy and marketing methods, its precise market positioning and product segmentation, its strong innovative design capability in line with the two themes of "sports" and "fashion" in the era, as well as its positive brand culture and unique marketing methods. Lululemon has become a successful sports brand due to its precise market positioning and product segmentation, its strong innovative design capability in line with the two themes of "sports" and "fashion", its positive brand culture and its unique community system. This paper finds that the Chinese sports market is still on the rise and that national brands need to be able to use their own innovative capabilities, innovative corporate marketing concepts and integrated use of various marketing tools when targeting the global market. Brands need to seize opportunities, be sensitive to market trends and changes in consumer psychology. They also need to dare to innovate their marketing concepts and adjust their strategies and products at the right time in order to establish and maintain good relationships with consumers in a two-way interaction.

References

- [1] [US] Don E. Schultz et al: *Integrated Marketing Communication: Five Key Steps to Creating Corporate Value*, Wang Zhuo and Gu Jie, Tsinghua University Press, 2013.
- [2] Ni Yun. *Research on the marketing strategy of Chinese sports brands [D]*. Huazhong Normal University, 2019.
- [3] Chang Yihang. *Comparative study on integrated marketing communication of sports brands [D]*. Jilin University, 2019.

- [4] Chun Chao. *Marketing strategies of home fitness wave and fitness brands in the new media era--an analysis based on the phenomenon of Liu Weihong*[J/OL]. *Sports and Science*,2022(05):19-25[2022-11-05].DOI:10.13598/j.issn1004-4590.2022.05.003.
- [5] Wang Mingjie,Xie Xiran. *New ideas of integrated marketing communication for sports brands: a perspective based on the comparison of Chinese and foreign sports brands* [J]. *Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China)*,2021,43(11):136-141.DOI:10.19997/j.cnki.xdcb.2021.11.024.
- [6] Jing Yangzi. *Research on innovation of sports product marketing model in the era of networking* [J]. *Modern Marketing (Lower Journal)*, 2019(08):74-75. doi:10.19932/j.cnki.22-1256/f.2019.08.041.
- [7] *Research report on the development trend of China's yoga industry* [C]//. *Avery Consulting Series Research Report* (No. 10, 2021). [publisher unknown],2021:661-713.
- [8] Chen Xi. *Lululemon, the road to niche brand leapfrogging* [J]. *Business School*,2021(07):59-64.
- [9] Shou Zhongqiu, Bai Yabing. *Research analysis of domestic sports brand communication* [J]. *Science Popular (Science Education)*, 2011(05):160. doi:10.16728/j.cnki.kxdz.2011.05.147.