

Emotional Branding Strategies and Effects in the U.S Market

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Abstract: The traditional branding methods of emphasizing the material effects of the products have been proved unsuccessful in today's U.S marketing environment. Consumers are exposed to an increased amount of information on digital media platforms. Emotional branding is a marketing technique that can generate demands in this ever-changing market environment. Emotional branding appeals to consumers' emotions and therefore stimulates their purchasing behaviors. There are various strategies within the concept of emotional branding. The three frequently discussed emotional branding strategies are forming brand communities, attaching prosocial aspects to the products, and providing customized services. Those strategies are employed by successful brands in the United States. This paper will analyze those strategies and their applications in detail. Psychological theories are helpful in explaining the effect of emotional branding. Maslow's model of human needs evaluates the factors that meet consumer needs and expectations during the branding process. Each emotional branding strategy mentioned in this paper can target a need from the top levels of Maslow's model, including social, esteem, and self-actualization needs. In this paper, case studies in the market in the United States are used to address the application of both branding strategies and Maslow's theory. With the consideration of consumer expectations, emotional branding strategies are effective in forming bonds between brands and consumers and increasing brand loyalties.

Keywords: Emotional branding, Consumer behaviors

1. Introduction

With the development of digital media platforms, information travel rapidly and efficiently. The number of information consumers acquire has increased along with this technological change. They can have access to countless choices before they make the purchasing decision. In order to promote products, brands cannot wait for the consumers to come to them. It is crucial for them to employ effective branding strategies to actively approach their consumers.

In recent days, digital media has empowered consumers with freedom of selection. With infinite products to satisfy their needs, consumers may not stick to one brand as they traditionally do [1]. Brands need to use strategies to increase consumers' brand loyalties. In order to succeed in this new market, it is important for brands to create inspiration for new lifestyles, positive emotions and generate motivations to purchase. They need to associate each product with a new meaning that meets consumers' elevated expectations and bonds them with the brand. For example, a pair of

leggings is not only about comfort and beauty but about a healthy lifestyle; a phone case is not about protection but about realizing one's artistic idea and stimulating creativity. The ever-changing digital media world forces brands to appeal to consumers' emotions and aspirations to form brand loyalty and success [1].

Marc Gobe argues in his book that the world is transitioning into a people-driven economy. Branding in this new era is not about the product; it is about people. A well-designed product is not enough to differentiate itself from competitors. The emotional aspect that is attached to the product is the determining force of consumer purchasing behaviors and the price of the product. The connections between brands and their consumers are keys to success. Emotional branding is the way to build bridges between brands and consumers. It uses strategies to satisfy both the consumer's material want and their emotional needs [1]. During this process, a bond between the business and its consumers is formed, and they are emotionally connected.

This paper connects the concept of emotional branding to Maslow's theory of human needs to analyze strategies to stimulate consumer purchasing behaviors. It utilizes successful branding cases from the United States market to provide clear demonstrations of the connections. After analyzing both the theory and real-life brand examples, the paper suggests that emotional branding strategies are effective in fulfilling consumers' needs and strengthening their loyalties toward the brands.

2. Literature Review

Emotional branding is strategies that appeal to consumers' emotional needs to form brand loyalty and generate profits. As shown in Figure 1, the model of emotional branding suggests three useful strategies: forming brand communities, promoting prosocial goods, and creating customizing products and activities [3]. Those three strategies are based on the understanding of consumer purchasing behavior.

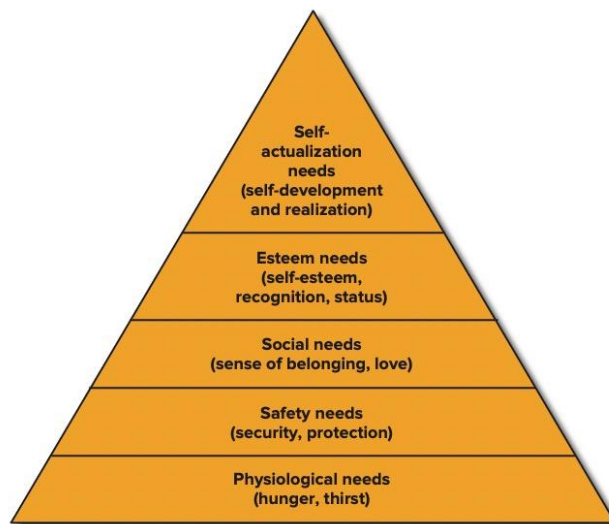


Figure 1: Maslow's model of human needs [2].

This behavior is the result of different motives. They are called consumer motivations. Those motivations can stimulate consumer purchases and form enduring brand loyalty. It is important for marketers to understand consumers' motives to promote their products. Abraham Maslow's model of human motivation explained this concept, the Hierarchy of Needs [2].

There are five levels of needs arranged in respect to their importance: physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization needs [2]. Physiological and safety needs are satisfied by

meeting the primary requirement of human life, including food, water, hygiene, and physical safety. Social needs are the needs for acceptance and belonging in society. Esteem needs include the need for confidence, beauty, and respect from others. Moving toward the top of the hierarchy, self-actualization needs are about the realization of one's potential and goal [2].

In many developed and developing countries, the two basic levels of needs are met. In the process of product development and promotions, marketers need to find ways to satisfy higher levels of needs to generate consumer motivations [2].

Maslow's model is helpful in understanding the methods of emotional branding. Based on the model of emotional branding, three strategies are used to enhance brand loyalty and generate profits: building brand communities, creating prosocial goods, and introducing customizing activities [3]. The basic needs of physiological and safety are met by products themselves, whereas the three emotional branding strategies are used to satisfy higher levels of the hierarchy, including needs for social, esteem, and self-actualization [2]. Case studies and specific examples are used in this paper to further prove the relationship between the Hierarchy of Needs and the methods of emotional branding.

In developed countries like the United States, two basic mentioned in Maslow's model of human needs are easily met. Emotional branding strategies are used to target the three elevated needs of social, esteem, and self-actualization. The relationship between three emotional strategies and those upper-level needs will be discussed in this paper accordingly.

3. Emotional Branding Strategies and their Applications in the U.S Market

3.1. Business Creates Brand Communities to Target Consumers' Social Needs

A strategy of emotional branding is to tell stories and create brand communities to form bonds with consumers and enhance brand loyalty [3]. This strategy generates consumption motives by targeting consumers' social needs. According to Maslow's model, social needs include needs for social acceptance and a sense of belonging. This can be satisfied when people engage themselves in a community [2]. Brand communities can meet consumers' social needs. Consumers can find their senses of belongings by participating in brand communities virtually and physically. The brand itself becomes bonds that hold communities together.

The brand communities are formed by storytelling advertisements on televisions and digital media platforms that include users' experiences and celebrity stories [3]. Consumers relate themselves to the character in the storytelling ads and imagine themselves using the brand's product. This can appeal to consumers' emotions and stimulate purchasing behaviors [4]. A brand community is formed when people hold collective consciousness and idea toward the brand [5].

In the United States, there are two types of brand communities: virtual and physical communities. Two representative physical and virtual cases of Lululemon and Nike, respectively, are analyzed to address this method.

Nike forms a virtual brand community by telling stories of famous athletes. On Nike's U.S website, a column called "Athletes" is created in the Nike journal. This contains pictures of the athlete and their stories and feelings toward the sports they play. Inspiring languages are highlighted to be more obvious [6]. According to Consoli, storytelling can appeal to consumers' emotions through textual forms. Languages reveal brand culture and value and can attract customers who hold the same value as the brand [7]. In Nike's case, athletes' personal stories of their persistence and love for sports can attract consumers who share similar feelings and encourage them to buy Nike's products. A brand community of people who hold collective beliefs about sports can be formed as a result. Consumers who participate in the community tend to form a deep bond with the brand [5].

Other than Virtual communities formed by Nike, physical brand communities also exist in the U.S. Lululemon, a yoga and sportswear brand, which has more than 40% awareness in the U.S, has created in-store studios to enable consumers to connect with each other and form the brand community [8]. Take the Lululemon store in Soho, New York, for example, it has both the shop and the studio. There are weekly yoga classes initiated by the brand with local yoga teachers and trainers. Consumers can book the classes on the Lululemon website [9]. In this way, Lululemon not only introduces the technical effects of its products but also tries to help its consumers to create a healthy lifestyle through yoga practices. As a result, consumers connect a healthy lifestyle with the brand, which can enhance their brand loyalty [8].

These two cases have demonstrated the formation of virtual and physical brand communities. As a strategy of emotional branding, brand communities are places for people to emotionally engage with the brand and participate in the brand's activities [3]. The consumer-brand relationship endures because it satisfies consumers' social needs, as mentioned in Maslow's model.

With Nike and Lululemon fulfilling consumers' social needs, there are other brands in the U.S market targeting the next level of needs, the needs for esteem.

3.2. Business Promote Prosocial Goods to Meet Esteem Needs for Consumers

Human generates happiness from giving to others. Another emotional branding strategy is to increase profits by selling prosocial goods [3]. According to Maslow's model, the hierarchy of needs, people can meet their esteem needs when they gain respect from others. By spending pro-socially, people can also have a sense of relatedness with others. This can help them to meet their social needs as well. Positive emotions are likely to be generated after people meet their emotional needs of social and esteem [2]. These emotions can lead to potential repetition in prosocial spending [10].

Brands in the United States utilize this emotional branding strategy to promote products that contain benefits for society. Warby Parker and Ivory Ella are two successful U.S brands that connect their products with charity works.

Warby Parker partnered with non-profit organizations to help people who are in need of eyeglasses. The company ensured its consumers that a free pair of glasses would be given to someone in need for every pair of glasses sold. This charity behavior helps the company succeed in its total sales and brand recognition. Besides, when a product is lined up with prosocial meaning, it can reduce consumers' negative emotions related to their purchasing behaviors. For example, some people have shown guilt when purchasing for their own good. Researchers have discovered that if the good has charitable effects, the guilty feelings can be reduced and therefore promote purchasing behaviors [11].

Other than helping people in need, some brands create opportunities for their consumers to participate in animal protection. Ivory Ella, a clothing brand founded in the United States, promotes their products by connecting its consumers' purchasing behaviors with charity works of saving elephants. According to the official website of Ivory Ella, it has cooperated with Save the Elephant, a non-profit organization that works to save elephants, as the name suggests. The clothing brand promises to spend at least ten percent of its profits on elephant protection projects, including elephant protection education and GPS trackers to protect elephants. Based on the website, Ivory Ella has donated around 2 million dollars to the Save the Elephant project and other charity works. The slogan of the brand is "dream big, do good" [12]. This can appeal to people's need for self-esteem and gain respect from others and result in purchasing behaviors.

Warby Parker and Ivory Ella promote their products by connecting them with acts that benefit society. This is a powerful strategy of emotional branding that not only stimulates consumer

purchases but also lead to repetitive behaviors [10]. Consumers are enabled to connect with people and animals in need and satisfy their personal social and esteem needs [2].

3.3. Businesses Provide Customizing Services to Increase Consumers' Chances for Self-Actualization

Brand communities and prosocial goods satisfy consumers' needs for social and esteem respectively. In the following paragraphs, the effect of emotional branding in fulfilling consumers' needs for self-actualization will be discussed. Maslow associated self-actualization need with creativities [2]. When customizing their products, creativities are essential in the design process. Consumers can practice their senses of creativity during this process and potentially become self-actualizing people.

Another strategy used in emotional branding is to provide customizing services to consumers. Product attachments are formed through a customizing process that stimulates purchasing behaviors. The concept of product attachment identifies the emotional bond and feeling consumers form with the product. The customizing process gives consumers opportunities to attach their personal feelings and special meanings to the product. Therefore, consumers will be willing to pay higher prices for customized products, and they will have higher brand loyalty as well [13].

There are many brands in the United States that provide customized services to their consumers. Levi's and Casetify are two brands that use customization to elevate their consumer satisfaction.

Levi's is a brand that famous for its jeans and clothes. Other than providing its consumers with high-quality products, it has also developed the Levi's Tailor Shop to help consumers during the customizing process. Take New York, for example, they have five Tailor Shops in Manhattan and three in Brooklyn. They are accessible to consumers across the city. Each Levi's Tailor shop can offer different services, including altering sizes to make clothes more fit, repairing damaged products, and enabling consumers to experience hands-on activities to make their own clothes [14]. In order to reflect their idea on the clothes, consumers will need to make better use of their creativity.

During this designing process, consumers can add patches behind their jeans, tint their jackets into different colors, and use stitching machines to create their one-of-a-kind personalized jeans [14]. The customizing activities provided in Levi's Tailor Shop give consumers opportunities to realize their fashion idea and utilize their creativity to design and make their own clothes. This service increases not only consumer satisfaction but also fulfills their needs for self-actualization [2].

While Levi's provides in-person customizing services to their consumers, Casetify offers digital personalization activities where their consumers can design their own phone cases from scratch. Casetify is a brand that is featured in producing artistic phone cases and other technological accessories. On their websites, there are various phone cases designed by different artists that are available to consumers. Besides enjoying products created by professional artists, consumers can use creativity to be artists themselves. Under the customization tab on the brand's U.S website, there are various products that are available for customization, including phone cases, tablet cases, and other accessories. After selecting the type of product to be customized, consumers can start designing every detail of their products. The size, color, and graphics of the product are all subject to customization [15]. Consumers can employ both their senses of art and creativity to make a phone case of their own. The entire process will be offered digitally, so it is accessible and convenient [15]. Every customized phone case designed by consumers is an art object and the result of their creativity. Consumers will form a deeper bond with the product and the brand during this process. It is also helpful for consumers to become self-actualizing people.

The two brands, Levi's and Casetify, have both incorporated customization into their product promotion process to appeal to consumers' emotional expectations. They allocate resources to make

the customizing process available to consumers physically and digitally. As illustrated in the examples, customization is an effective process for consumers to attach emotional values to the products they design and facilitate the formation of bonds between brands and consumers.

4. Conclusion

As stated in the paper, the concept of emotional branding is important to be considered by businesses in order to succeed. People's desires have been elevated by various information provided on digital media platforms. Businesses need to develop emotional values that are agreed upon by their target consumers. Once consumers and businesses hold similar values, it will be easier for consumers to make purchasing decisions. Similarly, a strong relationship between business and consumers is essential in today's people-driven economy. Emotional branding strategies help businesses to push themselves to their target consumers and appeal to the emotional aspects of consumers' desires. This emotional bond can enable future purchases from the business and therefore form brand loyalties. Maslow's model for human needs is helpful for businesses during the product development and promotion process. It leads businesses to realize factors that cause consumers to make their purchasing decisions. By incorporating Maslow's model with emotional branding methods, businesses may succeed in this hazardous market environment.

The emotional branding strategies, including forming brand communities, attracting prosocial effects to products, create customized services, are focused on in this paper, and their effects on meeting human needs of social, esteem, and self-actualization have been analyzed respectively. Those branding strategies precisely fulfill the consumers' elevated needs suggested by Maslow's model and form profound bonds with their consumers. The effect of each strategy has been further proved by two representative branding examples in the U.S market. Each business discussed in the paper has efficiently attach emotional values to their products. They associate inspiring stories, charity purposes, and aspirations for creativity with their products to target human desires and differentiate themselves from their competitors.

This paper is developed based on secondary data. The lack of primary data on consumer perception may lead to possible subjectivities and generalities on the analysis of the applications in the U.S market. Future researches are required to analyze consumer feedbacks on emotional branding strategies. Based on the analysis provided in this paper, it is reasonable to infer that the emotional branding methods can be extended to other markets around the globe, especially in developed countries where consumers' basic physiological and security needs are easily satisfied. In order to prove this inference, future researches are necessary to analyze the utilization of emotional branding in markets other than the U.S market. Due to the differences between each market, cultural and demographical factors are important to consider in the future research process. Besides, with the ever-improving technologies and increasing dimensions of human desires, it might be necessary for future research to consider a more comprehensive model of needs than the one suggested by Maslow. New strategies of emotional branding will also be possible, along with future technological inventions and developments.

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