

Women's Sports Branding in the Perspective of Her Economy: Taking Lululemon as an Example

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Abstract: Against the background of the booming "she economy" and the growing demand for female sports consumption, this paper takes Lululemon as an example and explores the strategy of female sports brand. The key to Lululemon's success in building brand symbols is to accurately position the image of "super girl", satisfy functional and spiritual needs through product differentiation, and strengthen consumers' emotional connection through community marketing strategies such as experience centres, opinion leader cultivation, and online community interactions, so as to enhance brand loyalty and market influence. The study shows that women's sports brands need to adapt to the positioning of "she economy", combine experience marketing with women's consumption psychology, realise the precise connection between product innovation and women's needs, promote the interaction between community marketing and women's social attributes, and integrate online and offline strategies to adapt to women's consumption habits, which provides practical inspiration for the industry's innovation.

1 INTRODUCTION

In today's society, the "she-economy" has become an important force driving the development of the consumer market. The "she-economy" refers to the rise in the economic and social status of modern women, which has given women better employment opportunities, more disposable income and the right to make their own choices about consumption. This phenomenon signifies the improvement of women's financial situation, economic status, and consumer power, which has given rise to stronger consumer demand and formed a new economic growth point exclusively for women. In China, the population of fashionable women between the ages of 25 and 40 has reached 290 million, leading more than 70% of household consumption decisions, and the market size will exceed RMB 10 trillion in 2023, which is large enough to constitute the world's seventh-largest consumer market, fully proving the arrival of the era of "Her Economy"(HUATAI SECURITIES, 2024).

In the context of the "she-economy", women's demand for health is becoming more and more

pronounced, and exercise has not only become a means of pursuing health, but has also evolved into a fashion symbol. Women's consumption concepts have changed, placing emphasis on personal comfort and health. Sports fit this need, making sports consumption popular with women(Wang, 2022). Especially after the epidemic, sports brand companies in the male market "comfort zone" has been broken, pay more attention to the female market growth potential to explore.

With the rise of the "she economy" and the prevalence of the concept of equipment first, women's sports brands have also seen rapid development. Personalised women's sports boutiques have sprung up, effectively stimulating significant growth in women's sports consumption. In recent years, many sports brands have actively launched professional sports products and services for women to win more market share. These brands not only focus on women's sports needs, but also incorporate female elements into their designs and marketing to enhance the attractiveness and competitiveness of their products (Brown & Butler, 2019). Whether they are domestic or overseas sports brands, all want to occupy a place in the women's sports market.

According to the financial report, Lululemon 2023 full-year net revenue reached \$9.6 billion, with total global business revenue up 19 per cent year-on-

year and net revenue from its mainland China business up 78 per cent year-on-year. Full-year net profit was \$1.55 billion, up 81.35 per cent year-on-year. By the end of fiscal 2023, Lululemon's shop count in mainland China had reached 127. Compared with 99 shops at the end of fiscal 2022, the brand opened a net 28 new shops in mainland China over the past year. Among them, the expansion was accelerated in the fourth quarter with the opening of 13 new shops, which shows its notable performance achievements (The Beijing News, 2024).

Lululemon's success is not by chance, behind it is the accurate grasp of women's consumer demand and brand symbols cleverly created as well as a series of brand marketing settings around women. By combining theory and practice, this paper explores how Lululemon accurately grasps women's consumption demand to create brand symbols, and at the same time realises the rapid development of the brand through its unique community marketing model. It tries to find a branding path that can be learnt from the wave of "she economy", which can enrich the research content of women's consumption and sports consumption, in order to provide theoretical support and practical guidance for the continuous growth of women's sports brand market.

2 LULULEMON'S BRANDING STRATEGY AND PRACTICE

2.1 Shaping "Her Personality": A Successful Practice of Brand Symbolisation

Brand symbolisation refers to the combination of the brand's own characteristics, logo, name and other elements, as well as the specific substance (product) represented by the brand, with the interpretation of value, culture and identity that the brand conveys to the consumer, to form a complete and unique symbol system. This symbol system not only represents the physical properties of the product, but also carries the emotional needs of consumers, identity and social status and other symbolic meaning.

Brand symbolisation helps to enhance brand recognition and memory, so that consumers can quickly associate the brand and the value it represents when purchasing. At the same time, brand symbolisation can also enhance consumers' brand loyalty and sense of belonging, so that consumers feel a unique identity and value pursuit when buying and using products.

In the perspective of "her economy", female consumers pay more attention to the personalisation

and symbolic value of brands. According to the concept of social identity, individuals will actively or passively learn from others' behaviours in the process of growing up, and seek to identify and agree with others. In sports consumption, female consumers not only pay attention to the use value of sports consumer goods themselves, but also to their symbolic value, i.e. the social identity they bring. The body, as a social symbol, represents a person's social class, personal habits and qualities, and for women, sports consumption becomes an important means of shaping the body, catering to social aesthetics and obtaining social identity (Sun, 2022).

2.2 Lululemon's Brand Symbolisation Strategy

2.2.1 User Label

Lululemon positions its users as the "Super Girl" in the new era, i.e. women between 24 and 35 years old who are highly educated, have a decent job, are good at self-media operation, and love to share their life and sports. This precise positioning makes Lululemon stand out in the women's sports market and successfully attracts the attention of the target consumer group. By setting a high price and unique product design, Lululemon highlights the style of "Functional Sports Fashion Trendy Brand", and satisfies female consumers' pursuit of identity and fashion taste.

2.2.2 Product Differentiation

Unlike NIKE, Adidas, Puma and other brands, Lululemon has given up the big and comprehensive brand route and specialised in the field of yoga, making it small but exquisite. As the "Hermes of the yoga industry", Lululemon is known for its comfortable and skinny yoga equipment. At the beginning of the brand, achieved sweat-absorbent and easy-to-wash fabrics, and solved the transparency and camel toe problems brought by sports stretching. Through the sewing technology, the lines of the seams are exposed, realising the harmony between the body and the clothes during long-time exercise. Through tailoring, the clothing style fills the gap between urban leisure and professional sports/outdoor, and becomes the creator and leader of "sports and leisure style", which expands the dressing scene and makes the wearer highlight his/her good figure (Jaworek, Karaszewski & Kuczmarska, 2021). These humanised product designs have solved the pain points of sportswear and made Lululemon both functional and fashionable, achieving category innovation, technological innovation and demand

innovation in one go. So far, Lululemon has formed advantages in fabric, technology, design, and others. It is no longer just a pair of yoga trousers, but a healthy, confident, optimistic and pleasing attitude towards life, a positive, sunny and comfortable lifestyle, realising the two-way satisfaction of consumers' functional and spiritual-emotional needs (Zhou, 2023). At the same time, Lululemon's high pricing, a pair of yoga trousers can be sold for 300-900, which not only reflects its excellent product quality, but also fits the target user group's attitude of pursuing a high-end and exquisite life. These women have a stable source of income and are willing to pay for a high-quality lifestyle. Lululemon's high-pricing strategy coincides with their values, further shaping the brand's uniqueness and sense of belonging.

3 DELIVERING "HER EMOTIONS": LULULEMON'S IN-DEPTH PRACTICE OF COMMUNITY MARKETING

3.1 Community Marketing

Model Community marketing is a business model in which enterprises take advantage of the community economy to establish close ties with consumers through social media and other platforms. It emphasises the "short, flat and fast" model of interaction as communication, service as marketing and community as channel, which enables consumers to take the lead in the design and production of products and satisfy their personalised needs. In community marketing, community operators (e.g. enterprises and merchants) continuously output quality content or products to retain members and satisfy their needs, so as to strengthen the stickiness of the community (He, 2022). At the same time, community members also actively participate in consumption, exchange feedback, and even participate in the design and production of products, creating value together with the brand. In addition, community marketing also relies on social communication platforms and service support platforms, which are usually set up by community operators to provide a platform for brand value output. Through the interaction and communication between community members and community operators and community members, the emotional relationship of the community can be deepened and emotional identity formed, thus improving the cohesion and loyalty of the community.

3.2 Group Emotional Links in Her Economy

The concept of group emotional linkage is rooted in the theory of "emotional contagion" in social psychology. This theory suggests that humans have a psychological mechanism that allows them to observe and simulate the emotional expressions of others, thereby generating corresponding emotional experiences (Zhang, Chen, Yang, Ma, Cheng & Hu, 2023). In a group, the spread of such emotions is like a chain reaction, which can rapidly and profoundly affect the emotional state of group members. In her economy, female consumers often gather due to common aesthetic preferences, lifestyles or values, forming communities with strong emotional resonance. By sharing their shopping experiences and exchanging their feelings about life, members of these communities further strengthen their emotional ties with each other and form a close emotional link.

Under the support of this feature, the community marketing model is a fish out of water in the female consumer market. On the one hand, community marketing can accurately locate the target consumer groups, i.e. those female consumers with common needs and emotional resonance. Through in-depth analysis of the emotional needs and consumption habits of community members, companies can develop more targeted marketing strategies to improve marketing effectiveness. On the other hand, community marketing emphasises interaction and participation, which is highly compatible with the psychological needs of female consumers in the pursuit of emotional resonance and social sense of belonging in her economy. Through the interaction, sharing and feedback within the community, enterprises can not only understand the needs and feedback of consumers in real time, but also stimulate the enthusiasm of consumers to participate and enhance brand loyalty.

In addition, community marketing can also leverage the power of group emotional links to achieve rapid dissemination and diffusion of marketing messages. In the community, a positive consumer experience or product evaluation can often quickly trigger the resonance and attention of other members, and then form a viral effect. This type of communication is not only inexpensive, but also effective, and can bring a large number of potential customers and sales growth for the enterprise.

3.3 Practical Path of Lululemon's Social Media Marketing

3.3.1 Build Experience Centres to Gather the Sports Community

The Lululemon brand takes experience centres as the core link of its marketing strategy. Before entering a new market, it sets up experience centres in advance to warm up the market and convenes a KOL team to carry out teaching activities. These experience centres do not undertake sales tasks, but focus on providing customers with course experiences, attracting and gathering local yoga enthusiasts through regular yoga courses, promoting exchanges and strengthening the cohesion of the yoga community, and also covering a variety of sports courses, such as cycling, dancing, running, and others, with the aim of establishing sports communities with their own characteristics. Consumers' participation in these courses and community activities creates brand awareness and value, and through mutual communication and sharing, word-of-mouth spreads, which leads to the continuous expansion of the community and lays the foundation for new marketing promotions. This experience centre marketing model brings significant benefits: on the one hand, the combination of products and free experience courses allows consumers to understand the brand's philosophy, influence their lifestyles, and form brand attachments in community activities, and enhances brand loyalty with the help of product demonstrations; on the other hand, through in-depth contact with potential consumers, the author can observe their living and consumption habits, and collect feedback to optimize the applicability of the products. In terms of community operation, Lululemon understands that community creation is the foundation and operation is the key, and since the establishment of the community, Lululemon has regularly and innovatively organised activities to closely integrate the brand concept with the connotations of healthy life and deliver them to consumers. Nowadays, the communication mode within the community has changed from "information production - information dissemination", which is traditionally led by brand enterprises and media organisations, to "content production - content sharing", which is widely participated by community members, who can express their views and create content within the group, and communicate with community opinion leaders, other members and brand marketing leaders. Members can express their views and create content in the group, and engage in dialogues and exchanges with community opinion leaders, other members and brand marketing managers to satisfy the needs for

emotional communication and self-realization, so that consumers can feel that they are part of the community, form psychological dependence, promote social interaction and strengthen the emotional connection with the brand. This interactive mode full of "participation" keeps consumers highly enthusiastic, forming consumer stickiness and brand attachment (Zhang & Loo, 2023).

3.3.2 Cultivate Opinion Leaders to Lead Community Development

Lululemon's marketing strategy is unique in that it does not rely on traditional mass media such as advertisements and celebrity endorsements, but instead focuses on cultivating a team of opinion leaders through the community to build stronger relationships with consumers. These opinion leaders usually consist of professional yoga, swimming and fitness instructors, as well as professionally trained shop staff. Under the guidance of the brand culture, they further expand the brand's private traffic through daily teaching and fitness activities, and promote the brand through the word-of-mouth effect of professionals, gradually forming a fan circle centred on opinion leaders to continuously expand the brand's influence.

According to statistics, Lululemon has more than 2,000 brand ambassadors around the world, including three categories: global yoga ambassadors, elite ambassadors and shop ambassadors. Whenever the brand enters a new market, it will find well-known local fitness trainers and yoga teachers and invite them to become brand ambassadors. These ambassadors wear Lululemon's newest and classic styles, and build a community-based marketing strategy through social networks, grassroots communities and shop events (Li, 2023). In the era of new media, opinion leaders pay more attention to online brand communication, and have set up accounts on platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Weibo, posting exercise instructional videos to attract community members, thus promoting both brand awareness and sales.

3.3.3 Brand Business Expansion: Online Community Attraction Strategy

When Lululemon entered the Chinese market at a time when the mobile Internet was booming, the company adopted an online and offline marketing strategy. Through the WeChat platform, which is widely used by the country's people, Lululemon built an online community and comprehensively covered its online business in its WeChat public number. Consumers can not only directly link to the online store to shop for products, but also book offline

classes in their cities. The online community provides consumers with a more convenient channel to learn about Lululemon, facilitates online interaction between consumers and the brand, which in turn enhances user familiarity and activity, and also positively impacts offline community interaction.

In the process of continuous interaction between online and offline communities, the cultural and health concepts advocated by the brand are closely integrated with consumers' health, sports and life, and penetrate into their daily lives. When the brand's cultural and health concepts inspire consumers' personal lives, the community's participation and activity naturally increase, and purchasing the brand's products becomes a natural choice for consumers. Through the Internet, online and offline communities can be closely integrated, thus more effectively integrating brands into consumers' lives (Zhang & Lu, 2023). Currently, media platforms have become an important stage for brands to display their products, and Lululemon also uses these popular platforms (e.g., Shake, Xiaohongshu, Weibo) to display its products and promote its marketing, inviting opinion leaders to release professional and practical courses, and attracting consumers by means of product reviews and wearing suggestions, as well as establishing instant social interactions with consumers.

All in all, Lululemon pays special attention to the emotional link with consumers in the process of brand building. Through the way of community marketing, Lululemon has successfully transformed consumers into loyal fans of the brand. Whether it is offline experience showroom or online opinion leader guidance, Lululemon is committed to creating a vibrant and sense of belonging community environment for consumers. This emotional marketing strategy not only strengthens consumer loyalty to the brand, but also brings the brand a sustainable market growth momentum.

4 IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN'S SPORTS BRANDS

Based on the above theories and Lululemon case study, the proposed development path for women's sports brands can be expanded in the following aspects.

First of all, women's sports brands need to achieve accurate brand positioning in line with the trend of "her economy". Lululemon's success lies in the fact that its brand positioning coincides with women's self-expression and pursuit of individuality in her economy. Based on the core concept of 'her economy' theory, women's sports brands need to deeply analyse

the multi-level needs of female consumers for quality life and personal growth, so as to create a brand image that matches women's values and has emotional resonance, and then achieve long-term brand development.

Secondly, it is also crucial for experiential marketing to be closely aligned with female consumer psychology. Female consumers are more inclined to establish a connection with a brand through experience, and Lululemon's experiential showrooms and courses capitalise on the importance female consumers place on experience and meet their needs for social interaction and self-improvement. Women's sports brands should design experiential activities that are in line with women's consumer psychology and strengthen the emotional bond between the brand and female consumers.

Moreover, the precise connection between product innovation and women's needs should not be neglected. In her economy, female consumers have higher requirements for the functionality, comfort and aesthetics of products, and Lululemon's product innovation is precisely centred on these needs, so women's sports brands should pay attention to the specific needs of female consumers and meet their expectations through product innovation.

Finally, the mutual promotion of community marketing and women's social characteristics is also key. Female consumers tend to be more willing to share and communicate in the community, Lululemon through community marketing, not only established the brand community, but also took advantage of the social characteristics of female consumers, so that the brand message spread rapidly in the female group. Female sports brands should build a community environment that is conducive to female communication and sharing.

5 CONCLUSION

This paper discusses the strategy of female sports brand building in the perspective of "her economy", taking Lululemon as an example, and reveals how the brand has successfully captured and led the new trend of female sports market through precise positioning, innovative design, high-end experience and community marketing. The study points out that Lululemon's success lies not only in its deep insight into women's consumption needs, but also in its close integration of brand symbolisation with women's individuality, creating unique brand values and emotional links. Social marketing, as one of its core strategies, has effectively enhanced brand loyalty and market influence by building experience centres,

cultivating opinion leaders and online community interaction.

The contribution of this paper is that, theoretically, it enriches the theoretical framework of emotional marketing and women's brand management, emphasising the key role of symbolic brand image in enhancing consumers' emotional identity; practically, it provides practical examples for the development of women's sports brands. It inspires other female sports brands to further optimise consumer interaction by digging deeper into the potential of community operation and using digital tools. The limitation of this paper is that it takes a single brand Lululemon as an example, and its generalisability needs to be improved. In the future, researchers can expand the number of cases, study the differences between different markets, and analyse women's sports consumption behaviours with the help of digital technology, so as to improve the theory and practice.

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