

Strategies to Attract and Retain Male Consumers: A Case Study of Lululemon in the Athletic Apparel Market

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Abstract: The COVID-19 epidemic has transformed the sports brand industry, with a greater emphasis on health and fitness, resulting in increased demand for sports brands such as Lululemon. Lululemon, on the other hand, faces difficulties in acquiring and retaining male customers. Lululemon's gendered image has historically turned off male customers. As a result, the purpose of this case study is to investigate techniques for preserving and improving male consumers' purchasing willingness. Rebranding efforts highlighting positive male experiences, as well as cooperation with male sports figures, are required to address this. Inconsistent product quality control has also affected Lululemon's reputation. Strengthening supply chain management, internal quality control, and consumer feedback mechanisms is essential. Lululemon's lack of male-specific product designs and limited size options are other obstacles. Understanding male preferences and introducing styles that cater to their needs and diverse sizes will attract male consumers. By addressing these challenges, Lululemon can thrive in the male market, strengthen brand loyalty, and drive growth. Practical recommendations will provide insights for Lululemon and other companies seeking to expand in the male market.

Keywords: Lululemon, product design, brand image, male consumers

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on China and international sports brand markets, reshaping the overall market environment in multiple aspects. One of the most significant effects is the heightened focus on health and fitness, leading to a substantial increase in people's fitness awareness. With a deeper understanding of the importance of physical well-being, fitness has gained greater prominence across various age groups and genders, resulting in an increased demand for sports brands. According to the data recorded in Lauren M. LaPorte's reports, the activewear market has experienced significant growth in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, building upon its consistent upward trend in recent years [1]. For instance, Ameri Trade reports a remarkable 300% growth in the spring of 2020 for the popular activewear brand Lululemon. Furthermore, citing a report by the McKinsey Group, although the sportswear industry initially witnessed a decline in sales during the early months of the pandemic, it quickly rebounded and outperformed other segments of the retail market [1].

Another major development during the pandemic was the rapid rise of online retail platforms and e-commerce. As physical store restrictions and closures reduced people's physical mobility, not only sports brands but also businesses across industries actively expanded their online sales channels and invested more in e-commerce to meet market demands and adapt to changing consumer shopping habits. Furthermore, as many nations and regions begin to recover economically following the pandemic, the market is quickly regaining vitality.

Lululemon has progressively become the symbol of a new form of sport in recent years. Lululemon is a fitness-focused sportswear business that stresses the integration of fitness into daily life. Originally, the firm was known for its unique fitness clothing made exclusively for women's yoga. However, Lululemon has subsequently expanded its product line to offer a varied assortment of workout gear and accessories for both men and women [2]. It is worth noting that, following the outbreak, Lululemon has risen fast in the Chinese market. In the financial report released on September 9, 2021, Lululemon disclosed its second quarter results for the year. The company expects to achieve its revenue target for 2023 ahead of schedule, possibly by the end of this year [3]. According to the earnings report, there was a notable year-on-year increase in net revenue, which reached US\$1.5 billion in the second quarter of 2021, reflecting a growth rate of 61% [3]. This growth can be attributed to the significant recovery in offline spending at directly operated shops, as evidenced by a remarkable 142% increase in net revenue, totaling US\$695.1 million [3]. Lululemon's strong growth momentum was observed across its various markets, with a 63% rise in net revenue in North America and a 49% increase in international markets [3].

In the field of academic research, many scholars have also begun to pay attention to Lululemon as a brand and have used it as an opportunity to conduct relevant academic research. For instance, Stokes and Adams used Lululemon as the subject of their study to research the topics that Lululemon Athletica exemplifies in the incorporation of health ideologies into corporate success within contemporary North American capitalist culture [4]. In 2021, Hanna Kosbab evaluated Lululemon's current position and offered suggestions for its future strategies [2]. And Smith et al. used the rise of athleisure as a subject to integrate the reason why Lululemon has experienced a decrease in sales during the mentioned period, despising the increasing popularity of athleisure [5].

1.2. Research Gap

Although there have been studies conducted on various aspects of Lululemon's entry into the male market, there is a need to address the specific research gap concerning how Lululemon can effectively maintain and enhance male consumers' purchasing willingness after entering the male market. While Lululemon has traditionally focused on women's athletic apparel and gained recognition in that market, its expansion into the male market presents unique challenges and opportunities. Understanding how Lululemon can cater to the preferences and needs of male consumers and establish brand loyalty in this segment is crucial for its continued success and growth. As a result, there is a research gap that has to be filled in order to investigate the tactics and approaches that Lululemon can use to better sustain male consumers' purchasing willingness and match their expectations within the male market.

In order to fill the gap in this area, this thesis will further explore the issues related to Lululemon's male market. And establish the research question as: How can Lululemon effectively tailor its products, marketing, and customer experience to appeal to male consumers and enhance their purchasing willingness?

Understanding how Lululemon can effectively maintain and enhance male consumers' purchasing willingness is of significant importance for both academia and the industry. This research will provide valuable insights into the dynamics of the male athletic apparel market and shed light on the specific strategies that Lululemon can employ to successfully navigate and thrive in this segment. The findings

will contribute to the existing literature on brand management, consumer behavior, and market segmentation, offering practical recommendations for Lululemon and other companies seeking to expand their presence in the male market. By addressing this research gap, the study aims to assist Lululemon in developing tailored approaches to engage and satisfy male consumers, ultimately driving their purchasing willingness and strengthening their brand loyalty.

1.3. Fill the Gap

The key objective of this case study is to investigate how Lululemon can effectively maintain and enhance male consumers' purchasing willingness after entering the male market. By examining the factors influencing male consumers' buying decisions in the athletic apparel market, The aim of this paper is to provide insights into Lululemon's strategic approach towards product development, marketing, and customer experience for male consumers. This study will conduct a detailed analysis of the male athletic apparel market, taking into account consumer trends, preferences, and habits. To do this, this study will examine the fundamental elements that drive male consumers' purchasing intentions and highlight the specific issues and opportunities that Lululemon faces in this market segment through analysis. In addition, this study will look at successful case studies from other firms that have successfully targeted and engaged male consumers in the athletic gear sector. It can produce significant insights and recommendations for Lululemon's future plans by drawing on these best practices.

In conclusion, understanding and catering to the preferences and needs of male consumers in the athletic apparel market are crucial for Lululemon's continued success and growth. By delving into the factors influencing male consumers' purchasing willingness and identifying effective strategies, this case study aims to assist Lululemon in developing targeted approaches to engage and satisfy male consumers, ultimately strengthening brand loyalty and driving revenue growth.

2. Case Description

Lululemon, a prominent fitness-focused athletic apparel brand, has gained recognition in the market for its specialization in women's yoga attire. However, in recent years, the company has expanded its product range to include a diverse selection of fitness apparel and accessories catering to both men and women. This expansion has marked Lululemon's entry into the male market, presenting unique opportunities and challenges.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the sports brand market experienced significant shifts in consumer behavior and market dynamics [3,6]. The heightened focus on health and fitness, driven by the pandemic's impact on people's well-being, has created a favorable environment for athletic apparel brands like Lululemon. The company has witnessed substantial growth in response to the increased demand for fitness-related products.

However, despite the growing popularity of athleisure, a style of clothing that combines athletic and leisurewear, Lululemon has encountered a decline in sales in recent times. This decline is perplexing considering the overall surge in athleisure's popularity. To maintain its position in the market and capitalize on the growing male consumer segment, Lululemon needs to understand the underlying factors affecting male consumers' purchasing willingness and develop strategies to address their unique preferences and needs.

3. Analysis the Problems

3.1. Feminized Stereotype Impression

Lululemon first acquired fame with its yoga pants, giving the impression that they were largely aimed at female customers. Lululemon's identity, however, lies beneath its link with yoga, frisbee, and other sports in its attention to detail and the notion of being accessible yet high [7]. This has effectively drawn a loyal following of professional women who are sports enthusiasts and appreciate the brand's carefully manufactured items [7]. While Lululemon has been successful in brand positioning and product innovation, its previous stance as a female brand may have had a detrimental influence on appealing to male consumers.

Positioning Entrenchment: Lululemon explicitly positioned its target consumer base as female in its early years, and this positioning may have led a segment of male consumers to believe that the brand was not appropriate for them or did not align with their identity. This solidified positioning may cause male consumers to hold back on the brand or ignore its potential in the male market.

Feminized image: Lululemon's success is closely linked to its brand image and market perception in the female market. However, this feminized image may create a perception bias among male consumers that Lululemon's products are primarily for women, limiting male consumers' interest in and exposure to the brand.

Competitive market pressures: The sportswear market is highly competitive, with many brands competing to attract male consumers. In its past positioning, Lululemon may have missed some opportunities to compete with other brands to attract a share of male consumers. This may have resulted in relatively low brand awareness and market share in the male market.

3.2. Inconsistent Product Quality Control

One of the crucial factors that has helped Lululemon establish a firm foothold in the male market is its inconsistent product quality control. When it comes to selecting sportswear, male consumers prioritize fashion and aesthetics less than their female counterparts. Instead, they place greater emphasis on product quality and comfort.

The main word motivating male consumer behavior is "ease of wear" [7]. While female consumers use Lululemon's yoga pants to highlight their bodies and aesthetic appeal, male buyers definitely respect the utility of Lululemon's products. These sensory feedback components, whether it's sweat absorption or odor resistance, reflect Lululemon's innovation in materials, design, and fabrics [7]. This is critical for retaining brand loyalty among male consumers and gives Lululemon a huge competitive advantage over traditional sportswear manufacturers like Nike and Adidas.

In May 2022, sportswear brand Lululemon was fined 81,000 yuan for selling substandard products and violating product quality regulations [8]. Following the incident, Lululemon issued an apology on their official Weibo account and withdrew the affected batch of products from the market. This was not the first time Lululemon faced penalties for deceptive practices [8]. In 2018 and 2019, the company received three fines totaling over 140,000 yuan for selling substandard products, counterfeit goods, and misrepresenting non-compliant items as qualified products [8]. These incidents have raised concerns about Lululemon's inconsistent product quality control and have had an impact on its reputation in the market. Given that Lululemon sources its products from costly, premium materials, any compelled price reduction may result in a loss of revenue. Conversely, Lululemon's strategy of offering high-quality products at a higher cost places a certain level of pressure on customers [9]. When a consumer purchases their initial clothing item from Lululemon, they immediately recognize the superior quality and comfort it provides. As a result, customers develop a heightened appreciation

for the higher price point and are more inclined to make repeat purchases from Lululemon. This reinforces customer loyalty and further solidifies Lululemon's position in the market [9].

It is also worth highlighting the difficulties Lululemon has had in maintaining consistent product quality control. As indicated by the fines and penalties issued against the brand, the company's devotion to using premium materials and offering exceptional products has been compromised by instances of selling poor merchandise. These occurrences not only raise questions about product reliability, but they also jeopardize Lululemon's reputation. The brand's response to such circumstances, such as apologies, product recalls, and better-quality assurance systems, is critical to regaining consumer trust and retaining their support.

3.3. Male-specific Product Design

Lululemon's lack of male-specific product design is also a barrier to wooing male customers. Men have become more actively involved in fashion and wardrobe choices in recent decades, taking a proactive role in creating their unique style [10]. Lululemon's product designs mostly reflect female consumers' aesthetic preferences, emphasizing softness, skin-friendly materials, and narrow fits. This design approach fails to fully resonate with male consumers' preferences and needs, who frequently desire simple, practical, and sporty aesthetics. As a result, Lululemon struggles to develop designs that appeal to male consumers' specific style and activity needs.

Another vital aspect would be the color selection. The color palettes chosen by Lululemon tend to lean towards bright, soft, and feminine tones. However, this color selection may be perceived as too flashy or lacking masculinity by male consumers. The preference for more subdued, neutral, or darker tones among male consumers poses a challenge for Lululemon in offering suitable color options that align with their tastes and everyday athletic and leisure styles. When it comes to functional design, male consumers prioritize practicality and functionality in their apparel choices.

4. Suggestions

4.1. Rebranding & Market Positioning

In order to attract more male consumers, Lululemon needs to undergo rebranding and repositioning. Firstly, efforts should be made to eliminate the inherent perception of Lululemon as a predominantly female brand. This can be achieved by reshaping the brand's image and marketing strategies. Lululemon can showcase the positive experiences of male consumers with their products in advertisements, promotional materials, and social media platforms, emphasizing their health and vitality. Additionally, collaborations with renowned male sports stars, athletes, or fitness trainers can increase male consumers' identification with the brand.

Secondly, Lululemon needs to expand its marketing efforts targeting male consumers. Advertisements can be placed at sports events, fitness activities, and male-oriented social media platforms to increase brand exposure among male consumers. Furthermore, partnerships can be established with male fitness clubs, gyms, and trainers to showcase Lululemon's products and brand advantages to male consumers.

Lastly, Lululemon should focus on product innovation and diversification. They should introduce more product lines specifically tailored for male consumers, including male-specific styles and designs. These products should meet the practicality, functionality, and style preferences of male consumers. Moreover, Lululemon should expand the color selection for male product lines to cater to their preference for more subdued, neutral, or darker tones.

4.2. Enhancing Product Quality Control

Lululemon needs to strengthen its product quality control to ensure consistency and reliability. Several measures can be implemented to address product quality issues.

To start with, Lululemon should improve its supply chain management and monitoring. Close collaboration with suppliers should be created to ensure that the whole manufacturing process, from raw materials to finished goods, meets high quality requirements. Establishing supplier audits and quality control systems can help with this.

Secondly, Lululemon should improve its internal quality control and testing procedures. They can improve the frequency and rigor of quality checks to verify that items fulfill design and specification specifications. Third-party certifications or quality standards can also be used to certify product quality.

Lastly, Lululemon should improve communication and feedback mechanisms with consumers. They can establish a feedback platform where consumers can report product quality issues, and they can timely respond and resolve these issues. Furthermore, Lululemon can instill consumer confidence in product quality through warranty policies and efficient return and exchange procedures.

4.3. Male-Specific Product Design and Size Diversity

To attract more male consumers, Lululemon should strengthen the design and development of male-specific products. They should conduct research on male consumers' preferences and needs and introduce styles and designs that cater to male consumers accordingly. This includes looser cuts, practical, functional designs, and color choices preferred by male consumers.

Additionally, Lululemon should pay attention to size diversity for male consumers. They should expand the size range, including offering larger size options, to accommodate the diverse body proportions of male consumers. This can be achieved through research and feedback from male consumers regarding their size preferences and adjusting product sizing accordingly.

Lastly, Lululemon should actively engage with male consumers for feedback and suggestions. They can gather opinions from male consumers through social media, online surveys, and important events, and incorporate these insights into product improvements and innovations. This kind of involvement can enhance male consumers' identification with the brand and foster long-term brand loyalty. In conclusion, through rebranding and market positioning, enhancing product quality control, and strengthening male-specific product design and size diversity, Lululemon can better attract and retain male consumers. These recommendations will help Lululemon gain a competitive edge in the male market and expand its market share.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the COVID-19 epidemic has caused considerable changes in the sports brand industry, raising health and fitness consciousness and increasing demand for athletic apparel. Lululemon, a well-known fitness-focused business, has seized on this trend, but it is having difficulty recruiting and retaining male customers. Lululemon must undergo rebranding and market positioning initiatives to highlight positive male experiences and collaborations with male sports personalities in order to address the issue of its feminine image. This will help break gender barriers and widen its appeal in the male market. Improving product quality control is critical to the company's brand and consumer trust. Strengthening supply chain management, internal quality control, and consumer feedback mechanisms will enhance product consistency and reliability.

Lululemon's success in the male market also hinges on the development of male-specific product designs and offering more size options. Understanding male preferences and introducing styles that cater to their needs will increase the brand's attractiveness to male consumers. By addressing these

challenges and implementing the recommended strategies, Lululemon can position itself competitively in the male athletic apparel market. This case study provides valuable insights for Lululemon and other companies seeking to expand their presence in the male consumer segment. Understanding and catering to the preferences and needs of male consumers will be pivotal for Lululemon's continued growth, customer loyalty, and market success.

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