



The concept of brand image building for athletes and the impact on consumers

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Abstract. With the worldwide popularity of various sports, the commercial value of many athletes is widely recognized. Athletes expand their influence beyond sports by participating in various social and business activities. Unlike traditional stars, athletes carry more cultural significance and ideological value. Their achievements in sports events make them one of the country's symbols. Commercial partnerships between brands and athletes are becoming more widespread. In the marketing activities in which athletes participate, athletes are not only considered as the carriers of advertising or marketing but more importantly, the brand image can be established in the eyes of consumers based on the athletes' own image, fashion sense and personal style. This paper will adopt the quantitative research method to collect young consumers' attitudes towards athletes to explore the concept of athletes' brand image construction and its influence on consumers.

Keywords: Athletes, Brand image, consumer behavior, quantitative research

1 Introduction

With the successful staging of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, the spotlight has been on athletes who have excelled on the field. Some athletes with distinctive personalities have become hot stars for brands to seek commercial cooperation. Following her gold medal in the women's freestyle ski slopestyle final on Feb 15, Gu won a silver medal in the women's freestyle ski slopestyle final with her third jump of 86.23 points. After winning the silver medal, Gu's endorsement was worth around \$2.5 million after taxes. According to this calculation, Gu's final commercial endorsement fee will exceed 200 million yuan.

Commercial partnerships between athletes and brands are win-win behavior. Commercial partnerships can help athletes gain influence outside sports, maximize their earning potential, and build a solid personal brand [1]. For brands, as one of the national symbols, athletes can influence the probability of brand choice, willingness to pay the premium, marketing communication effect and promote positive word of mouth [2]. In addition, the fans attracted by athletes through their performance on the field can also be indirectly transformed into fans of the brand through commercial cooperation, especially those athletes with good appearance, distinctive personalities and fashion sense.

From the marketing perspective, brands hope to enhance product value through marketing strategies to influence consumer behavior. With the rapid development of the economy, consumers have not only considered the function of products when making purchase decisions but also, more and more consumers will consider whether products can meet their spiritual needs. According to Pink (2006), in addition to the essential functions of products, consumers also pursue the sensory image of products, intending to meet specific spiritual needs through products [3]. Most young consumers are willing to pay a premium for products that can meet their spiritual needs because they do not buy products for demand but for popularity, creativity and fashion [4].

In general, athletes who can convey symbolic information can attract more consumers to make purchase decisions [5], which means that brands need to consider the characteristics of athletes when looking for effective spokespersons. This paper will study the influence of athletes' characteristics, including the athlete's performance, appearance, and marketable lifestyle, on consumer behavior.

2 Literature review

2.1 Match-up Theory

Corporate image, product or service image and consumer image positively impact consumer purchasing behavior. Enterprises need to establish their own brand image through marketing means such as advertisement and spokesperson. According to the matching theory, the effectiveness of brand spokespersons is affected by the degree of suitability between brand spokespersons and products (brands). In consumer cognition, the higher the degree of matching between spokespersons and products or brands, the higher the evaluation of their products or brands may be. According to McDaniel (1999), the degree of perceived matching between brand attributes and spokesperson attributes will affect consumers' response to such marketing communication [6]. Spokespersons can provide strong brand equity for enterprises and help enterprises improve customer loyalty and trust [7]. Therefore, the brand marketing team should explore the brand image factors that may affect consumers' purchasing decisions and select spokespersons that match the brand image based on the brand's characteristics when selecting brand spokespersons.

2.2 Impact of Brand Image on Consumer Behavior

As productivity has increased, the functional differences between brands' offerings to consumers have become minimal. Consumers' purchasing decisions increasingly depend on brand image rather than product functionality. Brand image is a crucial driver of brand equity and impacts consumer behavior [8]. According to Keller (2003), brands deepen consumers' cognition and memory of brands through marketing activities, and consumers make purchase decisions based on sufficient understanding and trust in brand image [9].

Prema & Gnanamoni (2018) divided the source of consumers' identity with brand image into five aspects [10]. First, brand products can meet the needs of consumers for

product functions. Second, consumers can buy products to enhance their social image or status. Third, consumers' emotional dependence on brands. Fourth is the balance between brand value and function. Fifth, consumers' trust in the brand includes the after-sales service and humanistic care provided by the brand for consumers. In addition, when the brand image is consistent with consumers' self-image cognition, consumers will have preferences for it [11].

3 Research method

3.1 Quantitative Analysis

There are three main research methods in business research: qualitative, quantitative and mixed. Quantitative research methods focus on realising research objectives from the mathematical dimension. In quantitative research, different variables are represented in the form of data. Researchers obtain research conclusions by studying the statistical characteristics of different variables (such as mean, median, standard deviation, etc.), change trends and potential relationships between variables [12]. Statistical models and mathematical tools are commonly used in quantitative research, so researchers must collect large amounts of data to observe variables. In general, the larger the number of valid samples collected by the researcher, the more minor the discrepancy between the conclusions of the quantified study and the actual situation. Compared with qualitative research methods, quantitative research methods reduce the negative impact of subjective bias and attitude of researchers on the accuracy of research results in qualitative research. Conclusions of quantitative studies are often more objective and credible [13]. However, the shortcoming of quantitative research methods is that not all variables can be presented to researchers in the form of data, and some variables or objective facts are difficult to be described by mathematical models and data, such as national policies and cultural differences. In addition, in order to make the conclusion of quantitative research more accurate, researchers often need to spend a lot of time and economic costs in the data collection process, which is a challenge for individual researchers and researchers with less experience.

3.2 Data Selection

Data types in business research include primary data and secondary data. Researchers must select appropriate data types and sources according to research objectives and research questions. Primary data refers to data collected and collated personally by researchers to achieve specific goals. Secondary data refers to the collected data obtained by researchers from other channels, including industry reports, literature and research results of other researchers [14]. Primary data is highly relevant to the investigator's ongoing study because the investigator dominates the data collection source and the data collection process. However, collecting primary data is a resource-intensive research process, and researchers must bear the time and economic costs of collecting it themselves [15].

This study aims to explore the concept of Athletes' brand image construction and its influence on consumers. Although there are other researchers who completed a similar topic, however, considering the market marketing strategy needs to be based on a real-time attitude of the consumer in order to further reduce those years in the study, secondary data influence on the accuracy of the results, this study will provide data as the main data types. Primary data are usually collected in three ways, including questionnaires, interviews and observations. Questionnaires will be selected as the main means of data collection in this study. Because COVID-19 is still raging, it is still difficult to issue questionnaires offline, so this paper will issue and recycle questionnaires through online channels.

3.3 Sampling Method

The sampling method is an important link in designing business research because it is related to the reliability and validity of research results [16]. Researchers must ensure that the data they collect is reliable. The main sampling methods are probability sampling and non-probability sampling. Among them, non-probability sampling methods include quota sampling, purposive sampling, snowball sampling and convenience sampling [17]. Non-probability sampling refers to the sampling method that is not adopted; everyone in the population has a different probability of entering the sample. Although non-probabilistic sampling is less accurate and representative than probabilistic sampling, it can save researchers a lot of time cost and economic costs. Convenience sampling is one of the most important sampling methods used in non - probability sampling. The researchers followed the principle of convenience in the process of data collection and self-selected individuals to enter the sample. Considering the impact of COVID-19 on the difficulty of data collection, the convenience sampling method will be selected in this study. The author chose a residential community in Shanghai as the research site. The residential community is dominated by young people and has about 4,000 residents. After obtaining authorization from the property management personnel of the residential community, the author entered the online community of owners of the residential community and completed the distribution and recovery of the questionnaire. Considering that some households may refuse to participate in the questionnaire survey or delay the completion of the questionnaire submission, the cycle of this questionnaire survey is one week.

4 Data analysis

In this study, 586 valid questionnaire results were collected, and the questionnaire results will be presented and statistically analysed in this section.

Table 1. Personal information of the sample (produced by author)

Categories	Data	Proportion
Gender		
Male	302	51.54%

Female	284	48.46%
Age		
Under 18	76	12.97%
18-30	374	63.82%
30-45	104	17.75%
Above 45	32	5.46%
Non-essential consumption level (Yuan)		
Under 3000	215	36.69%
3000-5000	278	47.44%
Above 5000	93	15.87%

Table 1 shows the personal information of the samples collected in this questionnaire. As can be seen from the data in the table, the gender distribution of the samples collected in this questionnaire is relatively balanced, with male respondents accounting for 51.54% and female respondents accounting for 48.46%. Therefore, the impact of gender differences on the accuracy of the research conclusions can be ignored. In terms of age distribution, young people (18 to 30 years old) are the main component of the sample, accounting for 63.82%, which is consistent with the information obtained by the researcher from the property management personnel of the residential community. On the consumption level of non-necessities, most of the respondents (47.44%) said they spend about 3,000 to 5,000 yuan per month on non-necessities, which is in line with the consumption ability of young people in Shanghai.

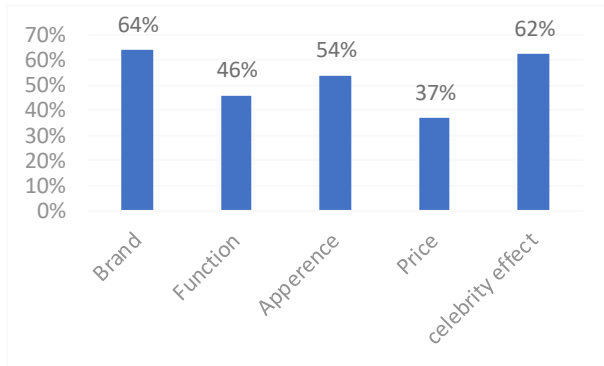


Fig. 1. Consumers pay attention to when purchasing (produced by author)

Figure 1 shows what consumers pay attention to when they buy goods. As can be seen from the data in Figure 1, 64% of the respondents indicated that brand was the key factor guiding their consumption behaviour, and 62% indicated that the Celebrity effect was the key factor guiding their consumption behaviour. It can be seen that most young consumers attach more importance to brands and celebrity effects when making purchasing decisions. Only 46% of respondents indicated that they bought products based on concerns about product functionality, which matches the findings in the literature review. Among the young people interviewed, only 37% of them believe that price is the driving factor affecting their consumption, which means that they are willing to pay

a premium price if the brand can conduct commercial cooperation with celebrities in marketing activities that conform to the young people's aesthetic and values.

This paper selected Gu Ailing as an example of athletes when designing the questionnaire and collected samples about the significance of athletes' performance, appearance, and marketable Lifestyle of Gu Ailing on consumers' willingness to buy its endorsed products. The independent and dependent variables will be quantified through a 5-point Likert scale. For linear regression analysis, SPSS 25 was used to complete the calculation and present the results.

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.709	1.428		1.897	.107
	Performance	-.108	.271	-.141	-.397	.705
	Appearance	.259	.268	.398	.968	.370
	Lifestyle	.131	.331	.169	.397	.705

a. Dependent Variable: Behaviour

Fig. 2. Results of linear regression analysis (produced by author through SPSS)

Figure 2 shows the results of the correlation analysis between the respondents' willingness to buy the products endorsed by Gu Ailing and Gu Ailing's own characteristics obtained through the questionnaire [18]. As can be seen from the results in Figure 2, there is a negative correlation between Gu's performance on the field and consumers' purchase intention, which indicates that the better Gu's performance on the field, the lower consumers' willingness to buy the products endorsed by Gu. This is different from conventional wisdom and may be due to the error caused by the small number of samples. Secondly, there is a significant positive correlation between Gu Ailing's appearance and consumers' purchase intention, with a correlation coefficient of 0.398. This shows that consumer's willingness to buy the products endorsed by Gu Ailing is more because of Gu Ailing's fashionable appearance image and the symbolic significance of women in the new era. Finally, there is a significant positive correlation between Gu Ailing's lifestyle and consumers' purchase intention, with a correlation coefficient of 0.169. This shows that most young consumers accept Gu's lifestyle. As an overseas Chinese can insist on returning to the motherland to fight for the country, this itself is the brand that can be used for hot marketing topics. In addition to being an outstanding athlete, Gu's identity tags as a fashionista, a high-achieving student, and a patriot make up her public persona and resonate strongly with a broad audience, especially young people.

5 Conclusion

This study selected a residential community in Shanghai as the survey population. The questionnaire survey will be used to obtain data on the influencing factors of the products endorsed by athletes on consumer behavior. This study takes Gu Ailing as a

representative of the commercial cooperation of athletes. Data analysis shows that most consumers are driven by their appearance and lifestyle to buy products endorsed by Gu Ailing. This sense of identity among young people builds a cognitive relationship and a sense of trust between consumers and brands. Moreover, for young people, price and product features are less influential in purchasing decisions than brand and celebrity effect. Young consumers may be more willing to pay a premium for a product that goes beyond its functionality because of its brand identity. Therefore, in the future, when choosing athletes as spokespersons, brands need to combine the characteristics of their products and brands and choose athletes whose appearance or lifestyle matches the brand characteristics to improve the marketing efficiency and the value of the brand image.

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