

The Revolution of Affordable Brand Communication in the New Consumption Era after the Epidemic-- Analysis of Uniqlo as an Example

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Abstract: Throughout the epidemic, the whole world gradually stepped into the fourth consumption era. People's consumption preferences and behaviors changed drastically. Brands need to respond to changes in a different way. Consumers of the clothing industry indicate signs of personalization and become mature in their consumption thinking. In this paper, literature research, investigation, and case study will be used to conduct an in-depth analysis of the spread of affordable brands after the epidemic. Uniqlo, one of the leading fast-fashion brands, demonstrates its brand value, service, and social responsibility in response to the change in consumers' mindset and behavior. Through analyzing its problems that exist in the product market, this essay can propose an optimized strategy for brand communication. The goals include providing theoretical and practical references to other clothing brands and adjusting marketing strategy that is more suitable for Uniqlo's future development.

1. Introduction

Brand communication has always been a powerful tool to meet consumer demand and cultivate their loyalty. However, against the background of the new consumption era after the epidemic, namely the fourth consumption era, the concept of rationality, simplicity, and parity rises. Covid-19 impacted the global economy in a wide range, and consumption habits rebranded significantly. Enterprises need to use new strategies for brand promotion and communication.

Nielsen's "Tracking Novel Coronavirus COVID-19's Impact on FNG, Retail, and Media" report [1] explores the changes from consumer attitudes to their behaviors before and after the epidemic: Firstly, consumers focused more on technology and sought high-tech solutions to fulfill daily needs. For example, if online shopping platforms use AR or VR technology to display products, they will attract more consumers' attention and earn more potential profit. Secondly, consumers tend to choose brands with high-quality products and sustainable services after entering the fourth consumption era. In other words, people are no longer self-oriented consumers who simply buy goods that satisfy themselves, instead, they turn their consumption behavior into a medium for searching for a better lifestyle.

For the garment industry, consumers' shopping experience got further improved in the post-epidemic era, which is related to brand innovation and construction. Uniqlo, which has been leading the industry in digital marketing and retail, combined the latest insights into consumers' consumption habits during the epidemic to enrich digital brand communication strategies, and to convey brand values to consumers.

There is still a gap existing in the research on the spread of affordable brands after the epidemic. This paper will take literature research, case analysis, and comparative analysis as a basis to analyze the brand communication of Uniqlo. The challenge brought by the epidemic accelerates the digitization comprehensively. Uniqlo must consider how to use the digital advantage to rebuild brand competitiveness and realize the combination of clothing display with elements like art, science, and technology.

2. Methodology

The epidemic has led to changes in consumers' consumption behavior for affordable brands,

which urged brands from focusing on offline sales to e-commerce and live streaming. Based on the current situation and existing problems of Uniqlo's brand communication strategy during the epidemic, this paper proposes countermeasures for improvement. The logical framework is constructed through the following research methods.

(1) Literature research method: This paper USES online and library resources to search journal paper data, relevant literature and materials, and sorts out the specific situation of affordable brand communication through internal and external data to lay a foundation for targeted improvement countermeasures.

(2) Investigation and research method: This paper mainly USES the Internet searching engine to find relevant researches done by predecessors, the analysis reports of the apparel industry over the years, and official data of Uniqlo, to understand the current situation of low-cost brand communication and provide a basis for formulating feasible strategies. In the form of an online survey, data lag and sample deviation that is caused by interference factors cannot be controlled manually.

(3) Case study method: This paper takes Uniqlo as the main research object, analyzes the changes in the environment, finds out the problems and deficiencies of brand communication based on the current situation, and makes corresponding improvements.

3. Result

The 2020 Healthy Living Report [2] (Hereinafter Referred to as the Report) Released Five Major Changes from Consumption Attitude to Consumption Behavior Before and after the Epidemic:

(1) Regain a sense of autonomy: After the epidemic, consumers bought more comfortable clothes that allow them to move “anytime, anywhere.” How to make consumers buy comfortable products and maintain physical and mental health is a major topic for the brand development of the garment industry after the epidemic.

(2) The desire for a sense of belonging: After the epidemic, consumers are more willing to buy products with community labels and eager to enter physical stores. Therefore, how to display products with AR or VR technology on online shopping platforms in the apparel industry will become the key to win more consumers' favor.

(3) Seek certainty: Consumers are more likely to buy protective products after the epidemic, so the clothing industry should pay more attention to the quality of clothing products to provide reliable products for consumers.

(4) Away from the sense of deprivation: After the epidemic, consumers are more inclined to buy fashion and creative clothes, at the same time, they are fonder of cultural and creative clothes. Therefore, the garment industry should increase cooperation with some artistic, cultural, and creative IP.

(5) Reverence for the meaning of Life: After the epidemic, consumers are fonder of local brands, regional brands with similar cultures, and national brands. Therefore, affordable brands in the clothing industry should practice social responsibility and establish a good corporate image, while developing clothing product elements that are compatible with local brands.

After the outbreak, social needs were amplified and fed back into the commercial society. For affordable brands, it becomes increasingly important to create an offline and online social atmosphere and enhance the connection between brands and customers. Uniqlo actively responds to the change of consumer behavior under the epidemic through innovation in the fields of brand value, service, social contact, and responsibility [3].

The first keyword is health and vitality. More and more consumers have stronger demands for improvement in overall well-being. They tend to change their outfits in different scenes.

The second keyword is psychological needs. During the epidemic, consumers can browse the Life Wear Brand book, the 2020UT World Cultural and Creative Pioneer Book in Uniqlo's flagship store. Watching the live broadcast in the flagship store allows people to stay away from the pressure and experiences the cultural and creative charm.

The third keyword is social communication. Uniqlo has built its communication platforms,

including social platforms and e-commerce platforms. During the epidemic, Uniqlo conducted a lot of direct communication with consumers, released authoritative epidemic prevention knowledge from government departments, and frequently interacted with consumers on WeChat and Weibo.

The fourth keyword is social responsibility. Uniqlo donated 2.52 million RMB worth of high-function warm clothes and 100,000 pieces of high-function clothes worth more than 7.9 million yuan to medical workers in Wuhan, actively presenting a good corporate image.

4. The Existing Problems

(1) The online shopping platform lacks the visual display of AR or VR technology

The combination of AR and VR technology is a new trend in the future of the retail industry. The Goldman Sachs report shows that the global market demand for VR and AR will reach 1.6 billion USD in 2025. FMCG brands such as Zara offer an interactive AR fitting function. Through using AR or VR technologies to show brand products, brands can increase customer satisfaction and provide customers with unique shopping experiences. Technologies like AR and VR can help online retailers try out digital experiences, allowing customers to visualize branded products in 3D at home or anywhere. Due to the lack of AR fitting rooms, Uniqlo's sales are affected and return costs are increased.

(2) Peace of mind, protection product line research and development, insufficient investment

After the outbreak of the epidemic, people's demand for protective products like masks greatly increased. Uniqlo is now selling respirators for everyday wear in Japan that are breathable, comfortable, and reusable. However, Uniqlo has not yet sold masks in the global market and failed to timely respond to consumers' demands during the epidemic. It has not invested enough in reassuring protective product lines and lacks market sensitivity.

(3) Integration of local brands and cultures

Research shows that the incorporation of Chinese elements can increase demand in the market. Chinese elements are recommended for a global brand to incorporate in their product when entering the Chinese consumer market [4]. As a Japanese brand with global reach, the survey found Uniqlo's products did not blend well with local cultures. Taking the Chinese market as an example, Uniqlo's insufficient integration of Chinese traditional elements fails to create a high sense of community integration for consumers.

5. Discussion

5.1 Improvement Measures

(1) Enhance brand communication awareness and grasp brand positioning

The ultimate purpose of all marketing activities of Uniqlo is to carry out brand communication so that consumers can understand and accept their own brand culture and philosophy. Brand communication is not simply to promote the brand, but before the promotion, to grasp the positioning of the brand. Therefore, Uniqlo should identify the target market group of the brand and develop corresponding publicity strategies for this group to seize the market opportunity. By carrying out various marketing activities in new media channels such as Weibo, WeChat, and social networks, we can enhance the interactive experience with consumers and enable them to participate in the communication with brands. After consumers have recognized the brand, they will also share their interactive experience with their friends around them, either through social platforms or word of mouth, thus generating a spontaneous brand communication effect.

(2) Add AR or VR technology to enhance consumers' visual effects

The Goldman Sachs report shows that the global market demand for VR and AR will reach 1.6 billion USD in 2025. Low-cost brands, such as Uniqlo, should add AR or VR, which can better help consumers understand their consumption interests and display Uniqlo products. For example, if AR fitting room is launched, consumers can intuitively understand the effect of their own body, so as to reduce the increase in the frequency of returning goods caused by the improper dressing. Such a

unique shopping experience can also attract more consumers to find their favorite items in AR fitting rooms, and the sales amount will increase accordingly. [1]

While developing their official website, brand, other new media platforms, and applications, garment enterprises should take cooperation and response with physical stores into account. They should not develop online or offline in a single line. The two complement each other. From the case of Uniqlo, it can even be said that the brand application software is more like an adhesive tool to increase consumers' consumption in stores. It can not only surge the sales of offline stores but also expand the brand's communication power and influence.

(3) To strengthen the integration of affordable brands and local culture

At the same time, affordable brands represented by Uniqlo can also cooperate with local designer brands to reflect the integration of local culture in design. In China, for example, consumers prefer clothes with a sense of community integration. Therefore, Uniqlo can integrate elements or symbols of Traditional Chinese clothing into its clothing design, so as to promote the integration of brand and culture, stimulate consumers' buying desire, and increase sales.

(4) Grasp the market opportunity of protective equipment to meet the safety needs of consumers

There has been a steady increase in demand for protective products after the epidemic. Affordable clothing brands, such as Uniqlo, can use previously comfortable clothing fabrics to produce protective appliances such as masks. Uniqlo should not only sell masks in the Japanese market but also increase the production and market sales scope of masks and other protective products, so as to gain a higher market share and increase profits worldwide.

(5) Interactive media advertising connects virtual life with real-life to shorten the distance with consumers

Through interactive media advertising into the life of consumers and consumers form a good interaction. In the online marketing of Uniqlo, APP marketing has been unanimously praised by the industry, but Chinese consumers do not seem to buy it. Only 2.3 percent of respondents knew about the Uniqlo brand from the APP. Less than 10 percent said the APP's campaign promotion would make them want to buy. At present, mobile Internet is the marketing trend, Uniqlo should increase the promotion of APP, optimize APP functions, and better deliver the core value to consumers, in order to truly connect with consumers' lives.

(6) Sponsorship and public welfare activities: To convey the power of Clothing

Each year, Uniqlo increases its sponsorship through scholarships. The donation of clothes to the disaster area, the public welfare activities of recycling and reuse, and the establishment of the love fund, etc. These activities can be themed with "clothing", highlighting "the power of clothing". Through consumers' recognition of Uniqlo's values, the brand equity of Uniqlo can be increased invisibly.

5.2 Limitations of the Study

(1) This study only takes Uniqlo as the case for data collection and analysis. Although the selected enterprises are representative to some extent, they are not universally applicable.

(2) During the epidemic period, it is impossible to conduct a field survey on consumers, so the data used in this paper are all online data. Although the data used are all official and authoritative second-hand data, there is a certain error in the analysis results due to the lack of first-hand field survey data.

6. Future Research Direction or Prospect

Outlook: Taking Zara, Netease, and other affordable consumer brands as the main body, and further study the affordable brand communication ways and channels. Based on data acquisition on the Internet, a large number of data samples can be obtained through online and offline investigations, which makes the analysis results more universal.

7. Conclusion

Before and after the epidemic, people's consumption attitude and behavior changed significantly, especially in the clothing industry. If the online platform USES AR or VR technology to display products, it will win more consumers' favor. To Uniqlo as a case study, this article, in the process of research found that Uniqlo lack of AR/application of VR technology, the fusion of local cultural elements and protection products in production, so this article puts forward the appropriate blend in AR/VR technology can stimulate the demand of the buyer, at the same time some fashion can merge with local cultural elements, to further increase the production of protective products, so as to adapt to the consumer shift to Uniqlo impact after the outbreak. In the future, brand communication in the clothing industry should put consumers' needs first, use platforms such as new media software and social network to conduct interactive experience marketing and relationship marketing, shorten the distance between consumers and deepen the brand culture in the hearts of the people.

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