

Analyzing on The Impact of Celebrity Endorsements in Non-professional Fields on Brand Image

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Abstract. Jia Ling, a renowned actress and director in China, showcased her pursuit of a healthy lifestyle over the course of a year during the preparation for the movie “Yolo.” During the film’s promotional events, she frequently wore Lululemon’s clothing line. This summer, Lululemon officially announced Jia Ling as its brand ambassador. The study’s goal was to investigate how celebrity endorsements in non-professional fields influence brand image reshaping. This research uses Jia Ling’s appointment as Lululemon’s new brand ambassador as a case study, analyzing it through the lens of social identity theory and brand repositioning theory. The study discovered that celebrity endorsements in non-professional fields can effectively increase brand awareness and acceptance, enabling Lululemon to produce more environmentally friendly products. Furthermore, endorsements can influence brand image diversification and repositioning. At this point, Lululemon can cooperate with a Chinese local brand. Finally, Lululemon can enhance its emotional connection with consumers by choosing specific locations for brand events, thereby strengthening its relationship with potential customers.

Keywords: Lululemon; Endorsement; Brand awareness; Repositioning; Emotional connection.

1. Introduction

Brands increasingly favor celebrity endorsements in non-professional fields due to the development of social media and changes in consumer habits. According to the Digital 2023 Global Overview Report, people spend more than 2.5 hours a day on social media platforms. Young people aged 16 to 34 are more likely to visit social networks for brand information rather than using search engines. Social media platforms have become important channels for consumers to obtain information and make purchasing decisions. Celebrities like themselves have a massive following on social media platforms; brands are more and more inclined to use celebrity endorsements to attract consumers and improve brand image. After the pandemic, people’s focus on health and fitness is increasing, leading to a growing demand for sports brands. In addition to some well-known sports brands, many emerging sports brands are also rapidly developing. Many sports brands are actively undergoing digital transformation, interacting with consumers through e-commerce platforms and social media. They tend to collaborate with athletes and celebrities to enhance brand image.

Founded in 1998, Lululemon began its journey with yoga products. It is popular in the Chinese market and often chooses figures who are professionals in sports fields as its endorsement. This year, the founder made controversial remarks that damaged the brand image. On June 20th, Lululemon officially announced Jia Ling as its brand ambassador, who is famous in China and lost 100 kilograms for her role in the movie ‘Yolo.’

There have been a large number of studies on Lululemon. Dodds et al. conducted research on Lululemon using a novel-phased approach that combined transformative advertising research and positive psychology. They examined well-being messaging on Instagram to understand the components of transformative social media advertising and its potential to enhance consumers’ lives [1]. Atram and Ashok use secondary data and case research to examine how Lululemon used a narrow functional advantage to become a major brand [2]. Du and Che have also studied Lululemon, but they focused more on the reasons for Lululemon’s success in the Chinese market using the 4P marketing



model [3]. Xu used the SWOT model and Porter's five forces to analyze Lululemon's successful marketing strategy in terms of brand positioning, brand image, and brand community culture [4].

Although there is a lot of research on Lululemon, most of it focuses on its long-standing marketing strategies. The fact that Jia Ling serves as a brand ambassador for Lululemon is relatively new. Jia Ling's image does not align well with the professional ambassadors in the sports field. As far as it is known to all, no previous research has investigated Lululemon's new strategy's influence. The aim of this work is to explore how celebrity endorsements from non-professional fields can influence the reshaping of brand image and understand the role and effectiveness of celebrity endorsements from non-professional fields in brand marketing, especially in their performance during brand crises. This work's key contribution is the solution it provides to help brands develop effective marketing strategies when facing image crises, particularly in selecting suitable endorsers to achieve brand image reshaping. Also, this work provides profound insights on how to effectively leverage celebrity endorsements in the Chinese market, especially targeting emerging celebrities from non-professional fields.

This paper will first introduce the relevant events surrounding the collaboration between Lululemon and Jia Ling as a brand ambassador. It will then further analyze how celebrity endorsements influence Lululemon's efforts to reshape its brand image, utilizing theoretical frameworks and data analysis. Finally, this paper will provide reasonable opinions and suggestions on how Lululemon can enhance its marketing strategies to further improve brand loyalty and brand image, based on the analyzed reasons.

2. Case Description

Chip Wilson founded Lululemon in Vancouver in 1998, specializing in the design and production of high-quality athletic clothing and accessories. The company started with yoga products, initially targeting female consumers who were less price-sensitive. It has since expanded its product line to cover multiple sports fields. It is committed to conveying the philosophy of 'the sweatlife' as originally intended. Lululemon first entered the Chinese market in 2013, and with the increasing health awareness among the public and the significant potential in the activewear market, it has developed rapidly. By the end of 2023, China had the highest number of new store openings, with a net increase of 28 stores among all countries. Lululemon mainly invited authoritative figures from the community to serve as brand ambassadors, such as yoga instructors, runners, athletes, and entrepreneurs. On June 20th, 2024, Lululemon officially announced Jia Ling as the brand ambassador across all Chinese platforms, as well as on Instagram and YouTube, which sparked heated discussions.

Jia Ling is a famous Chinese actress, scriptwriter, and director. She is also the highest-grossing female director globally with the film 'Hi, Mom'. Compared to previous Chinese brand ambassadors, Jia Ling has a higher level of popularity. In 2024, she lost 100 kilograms for her role in the 'movie'Yolo' through over a year's exercise; the movie has set a box office record for Chinese New Year domestic films. In the movie'Yolo,' the role Jia Ling played undergoes a transformation from a homebody to a boxer, which ignited a nationwide fitness craze and pursuit of a healthy lifestyle. TikTok's data indicates that Yolo's release during the spring festival of 2024 led to a 299% year-on-year increase in the search index for the keyword "boxing", and a 91% increase in sports product sales compared to the previous period. The healthy and positive image she portrayed inside and outside the movie highly aligns with Lululemon's brand philosophy, "Be all in." Before the official collaboration, Jia Ling was often seen wearing Lululemon apparel; the post titled "Wear Jia Ling's outfit of the day" on Lululemon's official Xiaohongshu account received 24000 more likes, generating significantly more discussions compared to the same period. Furthermore, summer is the peak season for fitness and sports activities, and Jia Ling, as a spokesperson, has widespread recognition, facilitating the collaboration. Alongside the announcement, Lululemon released a short film featuring Jia Ling wearing Lululemon apparel and exercising alongside store ambassadors and coaches. This film collectively launched the "Summer Sweat Games" initiative, aimed at encouraging and promoting

public participation in sports activities through a series of sporting events. After the announcement, the brand exposure rapidly increased.

The Table 1 below illustrates the shift in the number of likes on official accounts across the three major Chinese social media platforms before and after the announcement, indicating a significant increase. Additionally, the announcement has received both positive and negative comments. Some comments suggest that Jia Ling’s image differs significantly from previous brand ambassadors, raising questions about the brand’s professionalism.

Table 1. Average like accounts in 2024 before and after the announcement

Platform	Before	Number of publish work	After	Number of publish work	Growth rate
Weibo	113	174	432	176	282.30%
Xiaohongshu	1225	38	1261	39	2.94%
TikTok	3181	31	3340	32	5.00%

(Data Source: www.weibo.com <https://www.xiaohongshu.com/>. www.douyin.com)

3. Analysis on the problem

3.1. Effectiveness on Elevating the Level of Brand Awareness and Brand Acceptance

After Lululemon officially appointed Jia Ling as its brand ambassador, Lululemon's brand awareness and brand acceptance increased.

Compared with previous brand ambassadors, who have a certain level of popularity in their professional fields, Jia Ling’s popularity is higher, and she has a larger fan base; her followers count on Weibo has exceeded 20 million. Jia Ling's endorsement helps Lululemon reach a wider range of potential customers in non-professional sports sectors, particularly Lululemon's non-traditional target consumers. Within a week of the day of the official announcement, the search index for the keyword ‘Lululemon’ on the Baidu platform (Chinese search engine) has grown by 38% compared to the same period last year and 31% compared to the previous period [5].

Additionally, on the day of the official announcement, sales of Jia Ling's matching sportswear in a short video on the TikTok platform reached between 10000 and 25000 yuan, attracting temporary fans [6]. The increased search index and sales indicated that consumers’ attention and interest in the brand increased.

Hou and Zhao conducted an experiment and found that consumers often select products that strongly represent their community membership identity [7]. In this case, fans choose to familiarize themselves with and purchase Lululemon's products, endorsed by Jia Ling, to enhance their social identity. They use the brand to set themselves apart from others, which shapes their perceptions of the brand and contributes to the formation of their brand image [7]. Nandan asserts that a brand's image and identity are crucial to its success, and they are interdependent [8]. Jia Ling’s endorsement makes the brand identity unique, helping consumers form brand perceptions [8]. Thus, the social identity of Jia Ling’s fans can influence the establishment of brand awareness and brand image.

3.2. Effectiveness on Brand Image Diversification and Repositioning

Jia Ling, as a nonprofessional celebrity, also endows the brand with a diverse image, enabling Lululemon to expand from a specialized field to a broader market and enhancing brand inclusiveness.

Lululemon has traditionally focused on high-end athletic apparel, but through its collaboration with Jia Ling, its brand image has gradually expanded from a professional sports focus to a more accessible and fashionable domain. Figure 1 shows the distribution of Jia Ling's fans' interests on TikTok, which covered a wide range of fields, not just sports. Except for sports, the highest proportion of fans are interested in entertainment. The second are interested in life. The number of fans who are interested

in health and education is the fewest. These fans have the potential to spread awareness about Lululemon through their social circles. Also, though Lululemon has made product innovation, the most famous series of products are still its yoga products; some customers consider themselves unprofessional in sports. Jia Ling’s endorsement conveys to the public that not only slim and slender bodies can wear Lululemon products, but it also conveys the concept of prioritizing health.

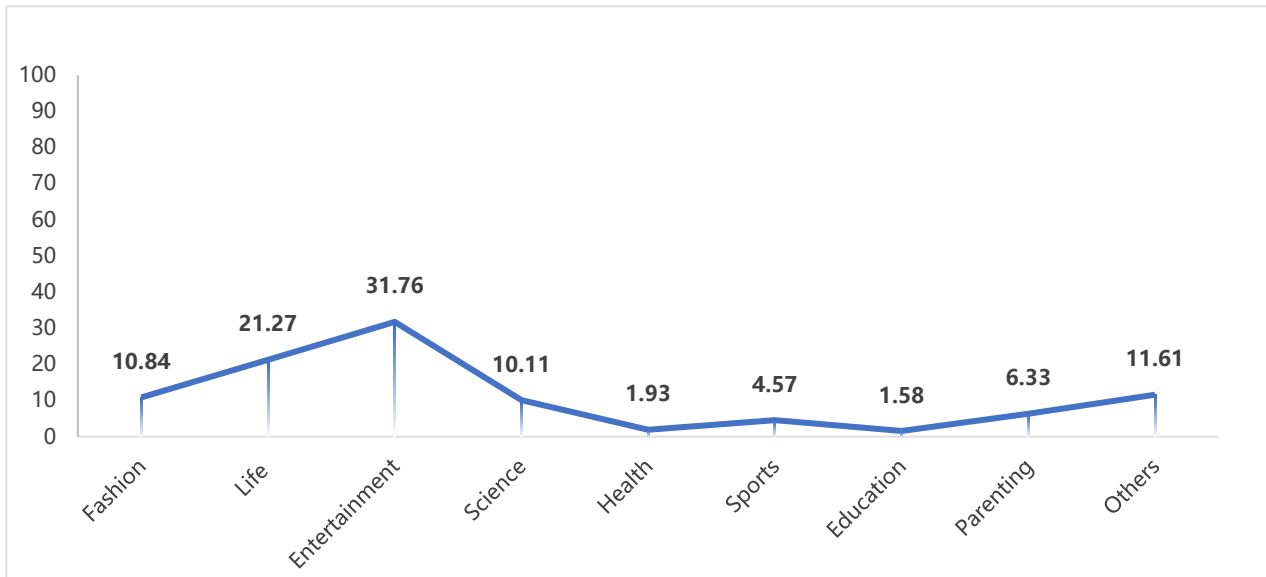


Figure 1. Distribution of Jia Ling’s fans’ interests

(Data Source: <https://trendinsight.oceanengine.com/>)

According to Lomboan’s research, credibility is the most powerful dimension [9]. And a spokesperson's credibility has a significantly positive impact on consumers’ attitudes towards a brand's advertising [10].

Jia Ling’s public image is positive and optimistic. She successfully lost weight in the movie Yolo, fulfilling the promise she made to the audience. In other words, Jia Ling has high credibility; her endorsement brought the most positive reviews. Ohanian stated that the brand's products will transmit the spokesperson's image through endorsement advertisements [11]. Through Yolo, Jia Ling stepped out of her comfort zone and transformed her social role from comedian to director; the brand reflected this transformation, symbolizing brand repositioning. According to the brand repositioning theory, new spokesman Jia Ling is more in line with consumers’ lifestyles [12]. The Chinese sports brand market is nearing saturation, leading customers to opt for substitutes, thereby losing a segment of potential consumers. The endorsement can keep those consumers.

3.3. Effectiveness on Enhancing Emotional Connection with Consumers

The endorsement can strengthen the emotional bond with customers, particularly when the brand's reputation suffers.

In January 2024, the founder made controversial remarks in an interview with Forbes, which damaged the brand image. Jia Ling is an ambassador; her fitness efforts motivated the public, and her image aligns with the Lululemon's spirits. The behind-the-scenes documentary of the movie 'Yolo' features Jia Ling exercising multiple times while wearing Lululemon products, and the change in her shirt size reflects the effort she has put into her fitness journey. This documentary shows her representation of the ordinary consumer. It also conveys that Lululemon is an inclusive brand, and its products are suitable for consumers of different body shapes. Lululemon doesn't cater to slender physiques, instead promoting the notion of 'sweat life'. Jia Ling began her journey with exercise as a means to achieve a healthier body. Consumers resonate with the brand more easily, thereby helping to restore its image.

According to the Emotional Branding Theory, successful brands build relationships with consumers based on emotions through storytelling, advertisement, and customer experience [13]. According to Niharika and Yadav's study, celebrity endorsements partially mediate emotional branding and purchase intention, while emotional branding directly affects purchase intention [14]. Celebrity endorsements also mediate brand satisfaction and brand loyalty [15].

4. Suggestions

4.1. Suggestions On Elevating the Level of Brand Awareness and Brand Acceptance

Lululemon has seen remarkable expansion in the Chinese market. In 2023, its revenue in China will be \$277 million—a 61% growth year over year, making it one of the world's fastest-growing markets. The potential for the Chinese consumer market is huge [16]. The Canadian delegation for the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics donned Lululemon's red down jackets, which increased the brand's exposure tremendously. Lululemon's product positioning is high-end; prices are often higher than those of other sports companies. However, in recent years, Lululemon has repeatedly had quality concerns. During the 2024 shopping carnival, the discount rate on e-commerce sites fell as low as 50%. Discounts and quality difficulties have harmed the brand's reputation. The misalignment between brand positioning and customer perception affects the brand's image.

Thus, this study advises that Lululemon should focus on quality concerns, maintain its high-end brand positioning and image, and employ environmentally friendly materials to demonstrate Lululemon's commitment to sustainable development in order to retain consumer loyalty. According to the brand equity hypothesis, perceived quality is a necessary component of brand equity [17]. Brand identity influences customer satisfaction, which then influences brand trust, which in turn shapes customer loyalty [18]. Thus, preserving consistency between brand identity and image helps boost brand loyalty.

4.2. Suggestions on Enhancing Brand Image Diversification and Repositioning

There are many Lululemon alternatives emerging in the Chinese market, such as VFU, GIGT. Under the trend of domestic consumption, consumers are more inclined to choose brands that are relatively inexpensive but maintain quality. These products are favored by domestic consumers due to their high cost-performance ratio. Lululemon's design lost its uniqueness. In Lululemon's financial report, it is mentioned in its risk warning that the technology of Lululemon products is not entirely owned by the brand. In other words, the products are losing its uniqueness, and consumers are still aware of a limited range of product categories. In terms of enriching brand image diversification, this paper suggest collaboration between Lululemon and other brand to create new products, service, and experiences to enhance brand diversity, bringing freshness and value enhancement to consumers. For example, Lululemon can cooperate with Chinese local brand, incorporating Chinese elements to its products.

The collaboration between Nike and Off-White is considered a highly successful partnership. The collaboration has created a series of highly sought-after limited edition athletic shoes, such as Air Jordan1 and Air Forcev1. The fashion-forward designs have sparked strong enthusiasm among young consumers. The sales of the collaborative edition exceeded terms of thousands.

4.3. Suggestions on Enhancing Emotional Connection with Consumers

Lululemon adopts a unique community marketing model. Lululemon has established interactive communities on social media platforms as well as in its physical stores' community spaces. It also regularly hosts offline events to engage with their customers and create a sense of community, like the activity 'Summer sweat games'. According to the fan demographics on TikTok, consumers between the ages of 21 and 40 have the highest percentage, which is 75.38% [6]. 'Super Girls' remain Lululemon's primary target consumer demographic. The youth market holds significant potential, particularly among college students. The number of young people spending money on fitness has

increased. In terms of the youth market, this paper suggests that Lululemon can make full use of social media to promote and attract more potential consumers with brand stories. It can choose brand event locations near university campuses and organize pop-up store events in second- and third-tier cities, building emotional association between the brand and the young potential consumers.

In 2024, Adidas partnered with the Chinese University Sports Association (CURE) to bring the China University Road Running League to top universities, aiming to provide college students with a new running experience. In the first half of this year, Adidas partnered with CURA to organize 1725 events, with a total of 75856 participants, covering 13 key cities nationwide and 31 prestigious universities across the country. The corporation assists Adidas in enhancing its credibility by leveraging the authority of universities. The event facilitates easier access to the brand concept for the vast population of college students [19].

5. Conclusion

This essay examines Lululemon's endorser selection strategy in the Chinese market against the backdrop of widespread social media development and changes in consumer habits, exploring the impact of celebrity endorsements from non-professional fields on the reshaping of brand image. First, this study examines Lululemon's collaboration with Jia Ling, exploring the brand's development potential in the Chinese market, Jia Ling's personal trending events, and the reasons for selecting her as the brand ambassador. Additionally, it evaluates the market response to this strategy by analyzing data changes on social media platforms. Secondly, this paper conducts an analysis using theoretical frameworks and existing data to examine how celebrity endorsements from non-professional fields influence the reshaping of brand image. Finally, reasonable suggestions are given based on the analyzed reasons.

Recent research and data analysis has demonstrated that celebrity endorsements from non-professional fields can enhance brand recognition and acceptance. It can also have an effect on brand image diversification and repositioning. When the brand image suffers damage, this type of endorsement can strengthen the emotional bond with consumers.

This study categorizes the types of celebrity endorsements in the non-professional field within sports brands' endorsement strategies and examines the effectiveness of such endorsements in brand marketing. Given that the Chinese market is the fastest-growing regional market for Lululemon's revenue, this paper provides insights on how to effectively utilize celebrity endorsements for marketing in the Chinese market.

However, the collaboration between Lululemon and Jia Ling is relatively recent, which limits the analysis of certain data, and the long-term impact of this partnership remains unknown. There is also a subjective influence.

A future study can collect more data to analyze the long-term market response, evaluate, and select suitable non-professional endorsers based on Lululemon's brand philosophy.

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