

Unveiling Huili's Brand Image: Exploring Causes and Strategies

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Abstract. Huili is a well-known footwear brand in China, and its brand image has declined significantly in recent years compared to before. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the unknown reasons causing Huili's brand image damage. This paper applies the approach of marketing mix theory to help Huili identify its problems in product and promotion. According to the results of the applied research, Huili faced huge accusations in terms of product design, product hazards, and ineffective promotional strategies. These problems have piled up one after the other and have created a huge problem of declining brand impressions of Huili. Therefore, it is highly recommended and necessary to conduct a detailed study on the deficiencies of Huili in all aspects of marketing mix theory. This paper suggests that Huili hires insightful designers to create more original designs, conduct deeper investigations to enhance the quality of its products, and customize its promotional strategies according to market segments. Feasible methods are then developed accordingly so that Huili can recover from the damage to its brand image and further prosper and survive in today's market with a greater competitive advantage.

Keywords: Huili, Brand image, Marketing mix theory, Fashion brand.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In today's society, it is worth noting that the brand Huili, which had gained significant recognition in the past, experienced a resurgence in popularity among clients belonging to the post-90s and post-00s generations. These individuals were frequently observed donning vibrant Adidas and Nike sneakers as they traversed college campuses, streets, and alleys. Huili is widely recognized as a Chinese brand that originated in Shanghai in 1935 and holds a prominent position as China's leading choice for high-quality athletic footwear. Nevertheless, the year 2019 began on a negative trajectory, characterized by a downturn in the Chinese market due to the onset of a pandemic. This unfortunate circumstance hindered the progress of outdoor activities and impeded the sales performance of several brands. In early 2020, the boycott of Xin Jiang cotton resulted in a downturn and sales challenges for the relevant industry. Notably, H&M, Zara, Nike, and other multinational brands operating in China were among the affected entities [1]. Consequently, there emerged a collective emphasis among the branding community on fashion brands that had initially emerged during China's national surge.

The action really turned the public's attention to purchasing China's own fashion brands, where the brand Huili, also known as Warrior, brought more attention to the people as being one of the oldest Chinese sneaker brands. However, during this period of attention, Huili had a huge problem with its branding that led consumers to question the originality and quality of the Warrior shoes with serious supporting documentation [2]. Customers have attacked Huili items' quality in addition to accusing this brand of plagiarizing others' product designs.

Furthermore, in recent years, as Chinese national brands have gained increasing prominence, several academic scholars have delved into the intricacies of Warrior, examining its pivotal transformations and the factors underpinning its remarkable resilience, like Yixin Hu talked about the adaptation of Huili and an analysis of its past hardships [3]. Chang Chen focused on Huili's historical culture in the old days of Shanghai [4]. Also, Wen Cheng and Lili Su propose the initial problems of Huili and give valuable suggestions in accordance [5].

1.2. Research Gap

Despite the fact that many scholars have written and debated Huili's role in the growth of the national trend in China, few have examined Huili's path from high demand to abandonment by many of its customers, as well as the causes and remedies for the harm to Huili's brand image.

While many people are focusing on the Chinese national wave brand from 2019 to 2021, Hui Li has had a number of legal problems as well as quality and plagiarism difficulties, which have resulted in a reduction in brand perception. It's important to consider what specific reasons and events sparked consumer outrage and public concerns about the company. However, some observations and suggestions can be made to change the brand's strategy and market understanding, with the hope that the brand can return to the battlefield and even thrive in the long run.

Hence, the research value and significance of this paper lie in exploring the factors affecting the change in the brand image and the factors affecting the consumer's purchasing behavior so as to make an effective redeeming proposal. Hoping Huili to regain its momentum and overcome its current challenges, it becomes crucial to identify the key factors that have contributed to the decline in its brand perception and to outline the subsequent strategic actions that should be taken.

Therefore, this paper will take Huili as a case study, analyze the reasons that affect its brand image by combining relevant phenomena, data, and strategic policies from 2019 to 2023, and give reasonable opinions and suggestions based on the reasons analyzed.

2. Case Description

Huili, also known as Warrior, is a Chinese-originated footwear brand from Shanghai that was popular in the nineteen sixties and seventies as a higher-end fashion product and has now become a classic in the retro fashion trend for younger generations [6]. Huili has been considered the top choice by young adults and athletes in the post-1900 era but has now been considered a shame to buy its shoes. Customers have recently complained about Huili shoes, and numerous social media posts have used comparison charts to criticize its theft of ideas from other brands and raise doubts among many people that Huili is not creative and original.

One of Huili's cases was found to have utilized "Mocmoc's" artwork for its products illegally, without the applicant's consent or payment of a reward, according to one of the copyright ownership and violation complaints filed in 2019 [2]. Consumers have also criticized the quality of Huili's items, in addition to accusations of product design theft [2]. Then, in January 2020, the State Administration for Market Supervision and Regulation revealed that the sample of WZ-9047 children's shoes made by Huili Shoes contained unqualified chemicals [7]. This news was then rapidly spread in the media in China, which yielded controversial conversations discussing this specific event that can seriously affect the health of Warrior's consumers and especially dealing with the harm it could have to children. The adverse publicity surrounding the event triggered a perceptible erosion of the trust and confidence that consumers had previously vested in Warrior shoes.

This diminished purchase intent could force tangible reductions in sales and market share for Huili. The gravity of the situation underscores the urgent need for Huili to take proactive measures to address the concerns of plagiarism and health hazards raised by the public and media. To save the brand's reputation, prompt and open communication is essential, along with specific steps to address any potential issues [7]. A strategic response that not only addresses the immediate aftermath of the incident but also demonstrates a guarantee of long-term product safety and consumer well-being is needed for Huili's recovery. Solving and improving from this incident can also play a role in proving Huili's ability to regain its place and adapt to the rapidly growing society with all it has come through throughout its previous years. Therefore, it is crucial for Huili to once again recognize the potential threats that can result from its quality and originality issues, as well as to comprehend the market segment of its consumers, who are young people, and to take effective action to restore the brand image and continue to grow as a reliable fashion brand in China.

3. Analysis on Problem

Product, price, place, and promotion are the four main components of marketing that make up the marketing mix theory of the 4Ps. The 4Ps' concept was originally developed by E. Jerme McCarthy in 1960 and was said to have an essential dynamic with each other [8]. Products are generally known as the goods and services marketed toward customers [8]. The price is the actual cost of the goods and services that the firm is providing to their audiences at a competitive amount. Place is where an institution sells its products and services and what channels it uses to distribute them. Promotion is the method that businesses utilize to sell their products or services by analyzing the best way to communicate with their consumers [8]. All four concepts are the key that providers should consider analyzing and looking into seriously in each and every area in order to build a more considerate business and the key to building their ways to making progress.

Many scholarly studies have also been done based on the marketing mix theory of the 4Ps, such as those by Niazi and others, which analyze the connection between the marketing mix theory and brand equity [9]. Furthermore, Asdi and Putra talked about the influences on the buying decisions of customers by product, price, place, and promotion of the brand [10]. Furthermore, Zeng Zhiyi has also mentioned the 4 Ps of marketing in its analysis of fast fashion [11]. Hence, based on the known phenomenon of Huili and the collected information, this paper will analyze how the product and promotion perspectives of the marketing mix theory affect Huili's brand image in the market.

3.1. Reasons for Product Design

According to the marketing mix hypothesis, the Warrior shoes' brand image has been harmed due to a product design issue. Huili has been dubbed the "light of national products" with the growth of the "national trend" [2]. However, the voices disputing the product design plagiarism underlying it are equally numerous.

According to the Peng Pai News, the product design plagiarized what was marketed in the market, and the product design was perceived as a shadow of many other firms' designs [5]. When searching for Huili on Chinese social media sites such as Little Red Book, Chinese TikTok, and Weibo, numerous netizens and influencers have created comparison charts of Huili and businesses to illustrate Huili's copying and lack of originality in its product designs. Many netizens are also involved in the Warrior shoe product design plagiarism issue on social media. Moreover, one of the copyright ownership and infringement disputes filed in 2019 showed that Hui Li Shoes had illegally utilized the "Mocmoc" artwork for its infringing products without the plaintiff's permission or authorization and without paying remuneration [2].

All evidence showed that Huili has been plagiarizing other products and having an exaggerated impact on its brand image, and it is also being called a "national trend of shame" in a twenty thousand-like video found on the Little Red Book of China published by a fashion brand influencer named MaoMao criticizing Huili's problem of being unoriginal, which has resonated with many more netizens on the platform. Huili's customers may be influenced by the product design and not purchase its products, while Huili needs to perform better and create the possibility of new designs to subvert the current impression of its brand, although this step is risky but worth a try.

3.2. Reasons for Product Quality

Another product issue in the marketing mix theory of Huili shoes is its product quality, which has been found to contain hazardous chemicals.

The amount of phthalate found in Huili children's shoes is identified as having a harmful effect on the health of those children. The quality inspection of WZ-9047 children's shoes produced by Huili Shoes failed; the specification model is 230 (2.5), and the production date is 2019. 7.6, the item number is WZ-904701, and the unqualified item is phthalate [7]. Phthalate can mimic the effects of sex hormones, making it easy for young children to develop excessively and experience early puberty [7].

In addition, the chemical is also known to increase the risk of breast cancer, ovarian cancer, and other malignant tumors [12]. The Warrior employees, however, responded appropriately by stating that customers who have purchased such products can request a refund and that this shipment of products won't ever appear on the market again. Even though Huili has shifted the responsibility to its material supplier, the incident still made it look bad and affected the customers' impressions of the brand.

Naini and Nurul Fitrianis have proved that, according to their findings, client loyalty is likely to be 76.8% affected by product quality, customer satisfaction, and service quality [13]. Thus, it is highly possible that Huili faced a similar outcome in terms of its consumer behavior because customer decisions and their loyalty are excessively reliant on a brand's product quality to help people grasp whether they should trust the company or not.

3.3. Reasons for Promotion Strategy

The promotion strategy has been a major part of marketing and plays an important role in the marketing mix theory, where Huili is not having a great performance.

Huili initially employed nostalgic advertising to tap into its cultural past and elicit consumer nostalgia [5]. However, the elder generation connected with Huili has aged, and newer consumers are less familiar with the brand, making it difficult to connect with them. Furthermore, depending entirely on nostalgia marketing has limitations due to consumers' limited willingness to pay for sentiment [5]. Huili's social media presence on platforms such as Weibo and WeChat are limited, with insufficient new media advertising and consumer contact. This lack of participation makes it difficult to identify consumer preferences and the primary target audience. Huili's social media presence is insufficient, relying primarily on nostalgia. Ineffective promotion might result in a failure to showcase Huili's brand image and develop a communication bridge with its customers.

Santoso et al. discovered that consumer losses caused by promotions may be the fault of business performers who provide incorrect information when advertising their items [14]. Furthermore, Huili lacks a consistent brand ambassador to accurately represent themselves and is ambiguous about who their customers are. The results of a study by Wang and Hariandja indicate that having brand ambassadors is an effective marketing and promotion strategy because they accurately represent the company's image and increase consumer purchasing intent [15]. As a result, Huili has not precisely defined and authorized its target marketing segments in advance, and it lacks a brand spokesman to effectively promote the brand.

4. Suggestions

4.1. Suggestions on Product Design

Based on the analysis of the first reason for the damage to Huili's brand image—product design—this paper suggests that Huili should hire a team of insightful designers to make more original product designs with the idea of national trends that the young population praises and the combination of its retro elements. Huili's designs in the past focused on nostalgic styles and have now begun to try to catch up with fast-paced trends, but mistakes in methodology have led to and been recognized as plagiarism.

To build a better brand impression, Huili needs to analyze its market, Generation Z, and make products that fit their desires and preferences [16]. Therefore, in order to become a favorite brand for young people, it is important to create a unique brand product by empathizing with the customers and not plagiarizing other brands' designs. Huili can look into consumer desires and learn about their customers on a deeper level instead of making consumption of them, and the ideal product setup for maximizing client pleasure can be low-cost and increase product sales [16]. Thus, instead of being too rational and commercialized, Huili should learn to trigger young people's emotions and resonance through brand marketing and product design. It is the brand that can make young people follow it at any cost; that is the real popularity index of the brand and the success of rejuvenation. Even though

Warrior sells its shoes for a comparatively low price compared to other companies, it has to work harder on developing its unique and original product in order to win over more customers.

4.2. Suggestions on product quality

This article recommends that Huili perform additional research and carefully pick their suppliers to assure product quality and safety in order to generate a more appealing product and maintain brand reputation. This is based on an examination of the second aspect that contributed to Huili's brand image deterioration: product quality. Because Shaily and Darmoyo's research suggested that product quality and perceived pricing influence purchasing decisions significantly and favorably [17], this move could improve brand image and enhance product sales. As a result, it is critical for Huili to do further research and improve product quality in order to increase sales and advance as a brand overall.

Furthermore, it is unethical for businesses to make things that do immediate harm to society; thus, this is a serious issue that Huili has encountered, and it should do better in its producer selection to have more social responsibility as a corporation. To comprehend the gravity of failing to meet the basic scale of product quality, consider that firms may go bankrupt if they lose all client trust. To avoid such hazards, Huili urgently needs to build its reputation by being cautious, only utilizing qualified materials, regaining the trust of its old clients, and establishing new ones for future customers.

As said, consumer choices are heavily based on product quality, so all corporations should spend time developing this area in particular, and firms that have this problem already, like Huili, need to push harder and perform better to retrieve their brand image.

4.3. Suggestion on Promotion Strategy

Based on the recommendations in this paper, Huili should improve its promotion strategies in terms of understanding the needs and wants of its potential customers and specifically build communication bridges to reach out to them in order to be more targeted in its analysis of the market segments its consumers fall into. This recommendation is based on the analysis of the third reason for the damage to Huili's brand image—ineffective promotion.

It is with ultimately beneficial reasons for Huili to take action on improving the promotion strategies it is using right now in adaption to its customer preferences. The first step to achieving promotion and marketing success is for Huili to understand its consumers, Generation Z. Understanding Generation Z's main consumer base will better grasp Warrior's target market. This generation is continuously utilizing social media to gather information, is more worried about the environment and ethical issues, is interested in creative and new products, and values comfort more than other generations. [18].

As the previous customers of a brand get older and fade out of the range of its customer segments, it is essential to adapt to new ways that a brand should interfere with and promote the newer generation of purchasers. Taking Huili and its Generation Z customers as an example, Huili, as a result, should shift strongly to using social media as a source of marketing, be really aware of being environmentally sustainable, be innovative and fun, and develop a product experience.

In addition, as Huili lacks a constant brand ambassador, Warrior should sign a contract with influencers and celebrities to promote their product, which could strongly influence the behaviors of the younger generations. Doing the basic research and approaches step by step listed above can definitely help Huili understand its customers better and do a better job of promoting its products.

5. Conclusion

This article examines the decline of Huili's brand image in recent years, as it has transitioned from being a revered, time-honored Chinese brand to one that receives minimal attention and inquiries. In the case of Huili, an analysis of the product and promotion components of marketing mix theory is conducted to examine the factors contributing to the deterioration of its brand image as well as devise

strategies aimed at restoring its previous brand prestige. The extensive research conducted reveals that Huili's theory demonstrates several issues pertaining to product design, product quality, and promotion that have contributed to the deterioration of the brand's image. Consequently, this article proposes that Huili commence its efforts by focusing on three key sectors in order to enhance its brand image, with the aspiration that Huili may reverse its fortunes and emerge as a popular national trend among the younger demographic.

As a recap, this paper has highlighted the marketing mixed theory's ability again by proving its essential role in identifying problems with a brand in each and every sector. In addition, the research analysis as a whole provided possible approaches for old brands that are in a similar status as Huili to look into their own product, price, place, and promotion and make possible approaches in these areas in order to progress in the long run.

However, there are some limitations, not to mention the paper's boundlessness due to insufficient scientific statistics and the author's experiences. The limitations of the present studies naturally include possible mistakes of translation and comprehension in analyzing the Chinese document literature as well as shallow ideas of autonomy in giving recommendations for Huili.

In further research, the authors will read more literature in both English and Chinese in order to more accurately understand the concepts conveyed by these scholars. In addition, the authors will conduct more internships in the future to gain more professional experience so that this author can analyze more deeply and make better suggestions for brands as much as possible.

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