

Digitalization and Brand Identity Construction: A Comparative Analysis of Marketing Strategies in Zara, Supreme, and Prada

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Abstract. This research investigates the impact of digitalization on the formation of brand image and consumer behavior in the global apparel sector, using a comparative analysis of three representative brands: Zara, Supreme, and Prada. Zara thrives due to its fast-fashion model that prioritizes speed, data-informed production, and omnichannel integration; however, sustainability continues to be a significant issue. Supreme constructs its brand image by leveraging scarcity, collaboration, and subcultural capital, which transforms authenticity into commercial value while risking brand dilution. Prada merges its heritage, celebrity endorsements, and digital marketing strategies to reconcile exclusivity with modernization. However, it faces difficulties in preserving its luxury identity within the context of digital accessibility. This study emphasizes the adaptation of various brand archetypes to the digital age and the consequences for strategic branding by contrasting their unique marketing logics—speed, scarcity, and heritage. The results help to comprehend the changing processes of fashion branding and provide practical guidance for maintaining brand identity in a competitive online context.

Keywords: Digitalization, brand image, fashion marketing, consumer behavior, branding strategy.

1. Introduction

Digitalization and consumers' behaviors are experiencing significant changes in the apparel industry worldwide. It is a highly competitive and distinctive industry. In this age of social media and e-commerce, how to build a brand image is more important than ever for companies in the apparel industry. How to align marketing activities with brand image construction is not only an important commercial issue, but also an important academic issue that affects corporate success and consumers' culture. The above-mentioned situations are reflected in different parts of the fashion market.

For example, the supply chain flexibility and easy adoption of trends enable Zara to construct its brand image. While the streetwear brand Supreme creates a frenzy by producing scarcity, subcultural capital and co-branding [1]. The traditional luxury house Prada also attempts to gain a new image by using digital media and famous persons to appeal to new consumers [2,3]. From the above analysis, it can be found that these three companies have different marketing strategies and different construction ideas of brand image. Therefore, this paper will compare the marketing strategies of Zara, Supreme and Prada, which represent fast fashion, streetwear and luxury, respectively. Through a literature review combined with case studies, this paper will explore the differences in their strategic systems. Finally, this paper will try to explore how different types of brand archetypes survive in the modern fashion industry and what marketing implications it brings.

2. The Branding Logic of Fast Fashion: The Case of Zara

As a pioneer of fast fashion model, Zara is a brand of Inditex group. It has conquered a formidable position in the global apparel retail market by breaking the common sense of apparel retail. Its success lies in its business model which is significantly different from the industries' practice. Through a careful analysis of marketing mix of Zara, that is, the product, distribution and promotion strategy, it can be found that it has formed a delicate synergy to establish a powerful brand image of speed, trend-responsiveness and easy adoption. This paper will analyze these key strategies and explore the impact on market performance and consumer behavior as well as the limitations of its business model.

The strategic system of Zara is essentially established on the basis of product and supply chain. Different from the competitors who produce according to the season design calendar, Zara uses a data-driven and demand-led strategy, which is small batch production and fast inventory turnover [4]. The design team collects the sales information and consumer feedback from the store continuously. Then, the brand uses the information to identify and respond to the trend. It is reported that a concept can be transformed from design to the store in a few weeks. The strategy of moving fast not only reduces the risk of overstocking of unpopular goods but also creates a sense of scarcity and urgency. It forces consumers to make a decision as soon as possible. By producing a large variety of styles in small quantities, Zara creates a new shopping experience for consumers, which makes the goods in the store change frequently, and encourages consumers to visit the store again and again.

In terms of distribution and place, Zara's distribution method is a strong physical presence with an integrated digital presence. It places its stores in high traffic, prime commercial districts in cities around the world. These stores are essentially its form of brand communication [5]. The store's interior design, merchandising and location act as an advertisement in and of itself. In addition to this physical presence, Zara has created an integrated e-commerce website that parallels the in-store experience and creates an integrated brand message digitally as well as physically. This means that the consumer experiences an omnichannel interaction where they can engage with the brand both digitally and in the brick-and-mortar stores.

One of the most notable things about Zara's marketing is that they do not engage in advertising. Advertising is a way that companies try to talk to their consumers through mass media advertising. Companies allocate resources to produce advertising that reaches consumers through various forms of mass media. Zara, however, invests in building an integrated digital image and in retail stores [6]. The official website and social media accounts of the company such as Instagram essentially create a digital lookbook for consumers with high quality images of new arrivals and items. This is a "pull" marketing strategy that creates a desire in consumers to come to the brand and discover its products. It creates the image of a tastemaker that does not need to advertise or sell itself. It allows consumers to come to the brand and discover its products, essentially creating a more intimate relationship with the consumer.

The sum total of all of this is that the brand has created a cohesive brand message and image: "Zara = affordable on-trend clothes." The success of the company as evidenced by its growth is beyond question. The speed at which goods are turned around and sold creates a buying frenzy in consumers that is trained to feel like they have to buy now or miss the trend when it hits [7]. The effect of this is that consumers trust the company and that they are modern, efficient and consumer driven. This has helped Zara become very successful at being fashion for the masses.

There are two major problems with this model, and both stem from the pursuit of speed and low costs at the expense of quality. The first is a charge of lack of originality and quality. There have been numerous claims that Zara steals from luxury brands and creates knock-offs. The bigger problem is the environmental and ethical impact of fast fashion. This includes accusations of environmental impact such as textile waste and accusations of unethical labor practices.

As the industry calls for more purpose and sustainability, Zara's efficient machine for turning out mass market appeal is not sustainable.

3. The Culture of Scarcity and Subcultural Capital: The Case of Supreme

Compared with Zara's efficient machine for producing mass-market appeal, Supreme is a study in how to build a culture marketing playbook based on creating artificial scarcity and authentic subculture [1]. Supreme was born from the New York's downtown skate scene and has evolved into a giant in the global streetwear scene through an in-depth understanding of the power of scarcity and brand lore. Supreme's marketing strategies are not a series of clever commercial strategies but a master plan to create the first form of brand cultural capital that generates the second commercial value. In this section, this paper will analyze the key strategies employed by Supreme—particularly,

the coordinated limited-edition drop model, strategic collaborations, and community marketing—on the basis of their impact on the brand and consumer perception and a critical examination of the sustainability of its “cool” over the global market.

The key to the success of Supreme’s marketing lies in the well-staged use of limited-edition “drops.” That is, every week, the brand releases a limited number of new products for sale in stores and online. These products sell out within minutes [1]. This also means that a “hype” is generated around the particular piece. The brand never restocks sold-out items. This black market exists for every product and makes reselling items for a markup an extremely attractive option.

This creates a powerful psychological attraction toward the Supreme product such that the demand for its items far exceeds the available supply. In the past, Supreme has collaborated with a diverse range of partners, from high-end fashion brands such as Louis Vuitton and Tiffany & Co. to sportswear brands such as Nike and The North Face, as well as obscure artists and cultural figures. Collaborations are a type of cross-over, allowing Supreme to simultaneously participate in different subcultures, raise the status of their partners and generate a huge amount of media attention. Every collaboration recontextualizes the Box Logo, creating a new cultural narrative for the brand. It also positions the brand as the aggregator and decider of cool across different cultural spheres.

In addition to the use of limited-edition drops and collaborations, Supreme’s marketing strategy avoids the use of traditional advertising. The brand is marketed almost entirely through word-of-mouth, social media engagement, and the cultural capital of the skate team and celebrity affiliates sponsored by the brand. The stores themselves are community centers, reflecting the raw aesthetic of skate culture. This has helped to cultivate the fiercely dedicated following that acts as Supreme’s decentralized marketing machine around the world.

The combined power of all of these has produced one of the most potent brand images in contemporary fashion. Supreme is not a “clothing brand,” but a stand-in for the symbols of “cool,” rebellion and knowing. This powerful brand image is immediately translated into superior market performance and consumer behavior. Consumers buy into the brand not because it is functional appeal, but because they want to signal cultural capital and social identity. As such, the purchase intention and brand loyalty is extremely high [8].

The company has successfully commercialised authenticity, translating its subcultural roots into a global commercial success.

Nevertheless, the model of Supreme is by nature fraught with challenges and potential decline. The recent acquisition of the VF Corporation raises many fears that the authentic, counter-cultural brand will be diluted as it continues to expand for mass-market appeal [9]. The very act of becoming more accessible will diminish the cachet of its exclusivity. Furthermore, the culture of hype culture could easily be diluted, leaving a sense of brand fatigue among consumers, perhaps even diminishing returns from the next hot collaboration. In addition, the hype train can easily be derailed if consumers accuse the brand of being driven by speculative culture, and that its value is ascribed by a market that exists in a subculture of its own. The logic of this conundrum is one that faces every heritage brand, but perhaps none as uniquely so as Supreme.

While Prada resides in luxury fashion, its strategic logic is vastly different from the speed model of Zara or the subcultural mystique of Supreme. As a heritage brand, Prada’s core problem is to satisfy the conflicting demands of the past, of craftsmanship, intellectualism and exclusivity, against the digitalized global consumer of today. Therefore, Prada’s marketing logic is to simultaneously mystify the brand in order to maintain a certain aura of exclusivity, while also making an intelligent use of modern communication channels to appear cool. In this section, Prada’s core marketing strategies—brand heritage, celebrity and digitalisation—are analysed for their impact, as well as critically examined for the paradox of modernising a heritage brand.

Marketing begins with the strong brand identity that has been developed over many years as a heritage of Italian craftsmanship, avant-garde, intellectual brand [3]. Brand heritage is not marketed as a dead legacy, but as a living memory that supports its premium positioning and charging. Unlike the here-today, gone-tomorrow ethos of the fast fashion industry, Prada’s value proposition is one of

timeless quality and symbolic capital around its logo—the triangle. This is reflected in its high-end products, limited-edition releases and in-store experience, which is all about luxury service and aesthetics. Prada consistently communicates its history and artisanal quality, ensuring that it remains at the very top of the fashion food chain and a symbol of enduring value.

In the past few years, Prada has gradually reformed its image with a clear-cut strategy in selecting celebrities and brand ambassadors. Not limited to pretty models, Prada chooses to cooperate with people who are “intelligent and innovative” and this strategy has been proven successful. Instead of pretty and famous models, Prada chose China Women’s National Football Team as its brand ambassadors. This was a surprising move because usually, luxury brand selects celebrities who are either pretty or famous. By doing this, Prada associated itself with strength, tenacity and a sense of honor of the national football team [10]. In addition to China Women’s National Football Team, Prada has also collaborated with other actors, artists and singers to make the brand closer to young people. Prada uses this diverse group of people to connect with younger audiences. This combination of celebrity endorsement and digital marketing strategy helps Prada to reinforce its image of a classic brand while also making it appear new and modern.

Prada also adopts a digital-first and localized marketing strategy to tell its story in different markets. In addition to a comprehensive online and offline omnichannel, Prada also creates a number of content marketing stories on digital platforms such as Instagram, Weibo and Xiaohongshu [2]. Prada’s digital marketing is not limited to selling products. Prada also tells stories with its cultural campaigns, digital activities and virtual events. In addition to digital marketing, Prada also collaborates with artists for the release of the “Prada Mode” series. Thanks to this localization and digital marketing strategy, Prada has created a two-way communication with consumers and told its story to consumers in a more direct way.

The above-mentioned integrated strategy helped Prada to stand out in the modern luxury market. By enhancing its heritage, Prada attracted its old customer base, namely the traditional high-net-worth consumers. In addition, Prada’s omnichannel and digital marketing strategy helped the brand to attract a new generation of consumers, especially young people [11]. These two types of consumers helped Prada to grow its market and especially achieve a significant market growth in emerging markets. In order to enhance its image of a classic brand and a new brand, Prada told its story to consumers. Consumers do not only value the quality of the product but also the reborn brand image that tells a new story.

However, Prada’s strategy also faces a number of challenges. On the one hand, Prada’s active push into digital marketing also brings about certain challenges. The luxury industry always values exclusivity and rarity. However, the widespread access to digital channels may weaken this luxury tenet. On the other hand, Prada faces a certain risk of market homogenization because many other houses also adopt the same formula of omnichannel and digital marketing. Therefore, Prada bears a great risk in maintaining its own voice. In addition, Prada’s active attempt to attract young consumers may also bring about a risk of alienating its old customers.

For fast-stylizing brands such as Zara, which are under increasing criticism regarding their sustainability and brand differentiation, it is suggested that the company consider incorporating a more transparent and substantial eco-conscious value in its supply chain and consumer communication. In addition to current operational strategies, Zara should invest in building a more substantial brand story in order to create a stronger bond with its consumers and transcend a transactional relationship, which would also alleviate accusations of sameness and protect brand identity [6]. For streetwear brands such as Supreme, whose model relies on scarcity and subcultural authenticity, the main recommendation is to improve and better tailor its “drop” system to its core consumer base rather than the secondary consumer base that trades on the black market. This can be achieved through measures such as loyalty-based access [1]. In addition, to protect its brand from being excessively diluted by commercialization, Prada should adopt a more selective approach when it comes to its collaborations, to ensure each is adding cultural capital.

For a house like Prada, the risk of using digital channels is to maintain the image while at the same time not appear accessible. Therefore, Prada should not use digital channels to broadcast to a mass audience, but to create an exclusive digital experience for its audience in order to strengthen its image as a house of luxury. This way Prada can use digital channels to reach a mass audience, while at the same time bridging the aspirational gap for its audience, which is necessary for its brand message and brand communication across its past and digital future.

4. Conclusion

In summary, this study has analyzed the marketing strategies used by fast-stylizing (Zara), streetwear (Supreme) and luxury (Prada) brands to shape their brand images in the modern global fashion industry. The findings revealed that the success of Zara lies in its speed of operation and responding to the market; however, it is limited by its sustainability and differentiation issues. On the other hand, the success of Supreme lies in its strategies of using scarcity manufacturing and cultural capital to create commercial value; however, it is limited by its brand dilution caused by commercialization. This clever use of scarcity is further amplified by the well-staged use of collaborations. The key to the success of Prada lies in the strategies of blending heritage and digital use to avoid the legacy; however, it is limited by how to maintain the image of being an exclusive house while gaining a modern global audience. Based on the findings, the corresponding recommendations for each brand to avoid these limits were made. Zara should improve its eco-conscious value in the supply chain and communication with consumers. Supreme should find a way to be more authentic while becoming larger commercialized. Prada should use digital marketing without seeming accessible. This study enriches the related literature on the different branding logic within these three types of branding and provides important references for marketing practice in marketing strategies in an increasingly complex digital environment.

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