Analyzing the Factors Affecting Purchase Intention: The Case of Estee Lauder Company

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Abstract. In the 21st century, Chinese consumers' consumption of beauty products is on the rise and international brands dominate the Chinese market but are now facing the threat of increasingly competitive domestic brands. This paper uses the international brand Estee Lauder as an example to explore how Estee Lauder influences consumers' purchase intentions. This paper combines some research on consumer intentions to propose three elements that influence consumer intentions perceived value, brand trust, and brand attitude. SWOT Analysis research method is used to analyze Estee Lauder's 4P marketing strategy. This study concluded that product quality, brand reputation, and social media promotion are the factors that influence perceived value, brand trust, and brand attitude respectively, i.e., the factors that influence consumers' purchase intention. Therefore, international brands can adjust and improve their marketing strategies to meet consumer needs based on these three factors. This study provided some insights into the future trends of international brands in the Chinese beauty market.

Keywords: Estee Lauder; Consumer Purchase Intention; Marketing Mix 4Ps; Cosmetic Brand.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

International brands show a clear dominance in the Chinese cosmetics market, accounting for 61.5% of the market share [1]. Domestic beauty companies, on the other hand, have gained in popularity in recent years and are expected to capture more market share in the future. International beauty businesses operate in a highly competitive and rapidly changing business climate in China, so knowing client wants is critical to their success and survival. More effective marketing strategies can be developed to enhance long-term relationships with customers by having a clearer understanding of consumer buying intentions. Loyal customers generate more profit, so which prompts the growth of the company.

Previous research has found that, in addition to price, other aspects such as product and service quality influence the purchasing decision of chevaliers. Previous research has found that, in addition to price, other aspects such as product and service quality influence the purchasing decision of chevaliers [2]. While social media is being used more and more frequently as a platform for marketing and advertising campaigns, organizations are spending a lot of time, money, and resources on social media advertising to attract customers and motivate them to buy their brands [3]. In addition to the factors mentioned above, some studies show that brand reputation and brand image, have been proven to influence consumers' purchase intentions and actual actions [4].

People have more consumption ability and diverse consumption habits in the twenty-first century as the economy advances. People are also consuming in different ways than before, and they are becoming more mindful of their appearance, which has resulted in an increase in demand for cosmetics, which is a good thing for the beauty business. At the same time, the 21st century is a digital era where people are increasingly dependent on social media for interaction and knowledge acquisition, which undoubtedly allows companies to market and promote themselves. In conjunction with the previous discussion, this study selects the twenty-first-century context to investigate a typical international beauty brand, Estee Lauder, in the Chinese market, bringing certain insights to the Chinese beauty industry.

1.2 Research gap

Cosmetics is a fast-growing industry in China, and with China as a huge consumer market, there is no shortage of research on the Chinese beauty market, such as the study of the impact of demographics, marketing mix (4Ps), and promotion mix on Chinese consumers' purchase intention on facial make-up cosmetics carried by Huang & Foosiri, and Gomes et al. 's examined the factors that female consumers in China and Switzerland consider in the process of purchasing cosmetics in two different regions of each country [5,6]. However, the research on the overall market is not granular enough, and there are different routes for national and international brands, as well as different customer groups that they target, which can be discussed separately. International brands are more appealing to non-price sensitive customer groups than domestic brands, and they create brand impressions with a good brand reputation and product quality [1].

Domestic Chinese cosmetics brands have emerged rapidly in recent years, attracting many local customers through innovative packaging, low prices, and advertising promotions. Domestic brands have a high potential for market penetration, implying that international brands will face more intense challenges in the future. Therefore, it is crucial to strengthen long-term beneficial relationships with customers so that international enterprises can survive and thrive in the Chinese competitive environment. Therefore, it is crucial to identify the factors that influence consumers' purchase intention. Since there is a lack of research on international brands in the Chinese market, this paper was created to fill the research gap. Using the typical international brand Estee Lauder as an example, it provides some insights to increase traffic approach in the Chinese beauty industry. The research question of this study is how does Estee Lauder affect Chinese consumers' purchase intentions? When international brands gain more insights into the factors that influence consumers' purchase intention, they will be able to develop more effective marketing strategies, promoting the consumer's urge to buy and ultimately driving sales.

1.3 Structure of this paper

According to the discussion above, three factors influence consumers' purchase intentions: product quality, brand reputation, and social media promotion. As a result, this paper hypothesizes that product quality, brand reputation, and social media promotion will have a significant impact on the purchase intention of Chinese consumers.

To test this hypothesis, the next direction of this study will use the Marketing Theory of 4Ps to determine these three factors that affect consumer demand, which is in a sense evidence of consumer actual purchase intention. The research methodology will use the qualitative method which is SWOT analysis to summarize Estee Lauder's strengths in the four aspects of product, price, place, and promotion compared to its competitors. Indirectly, Estee Lauder's product quality, brand reputation, and social media promotion all have a significant impact on Chinese consumers' purchase intentions. Following this conclusion, the paper will discuss and conclude the overall direction of the Chinese beauty industry.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Consumers' purchase intention

2.1.1 Definition & Development

Consumer purchase intention is considered to be the subjective probability that a consumer will choose a product or service, it is the degree to which a consumer will consider buying a product [5]. As Sam & Dhanya's findings show that product quality has an impact on customers' perceived value and future shopping intentions [7]. One of the literatures of the study on purchase intention indicates that social media has a significant impact on brand attitudes, and that brand attitudes will influence the consumer's purchase intention [8]. Trust, as one of the necessary elements to maintain long-term relationships between people, also applies to the association between brands and shoppers. In much of the branding literature, some scholars have said that brand trust will be a precursor to influencing purchase intention preferences [9].

2.1.2 Important results

Consumer purchase intent is a proclivity to buy and a metric used by businesses to assess their customers. This theory is primarily used in marketing, where a clear understanding of consumer intentions can aid in the design of marketing campaigns to reach the target audience. Purchase intention is a subjective attitude that is required for purchasing decisions and can thus aid in identifying and forecasting consumer behavior. Investigating and improving consumers' purchase intentions will encourage them to engage in actual consumer behavior.

2.1.3 Summary

Given all that has been mentioned so far, it can be concluded that perceived quality contributes to the formation of consumers' subjective awareness, which will influence their willingness to buy. Brand attitude, which is also consumers' attitude toward the brand, is undoubtedly one of the influencing factors for them to consider purchasing. Consumer trust positively influences consumer preferences and thus increases purchase intentions. To sum up, perceived value, brand reputation, and social media promotion are the three key components that affect purchase intention. When analyzing consumers' purchase intention can be based on these three dimensions to find out other variables connected.

However, many studies tend to pay more attention to perceptions such as perceived value and perceived price, but it is undeniable that while purchase intention is a subjective attribute, the value created by the brand is also indispensable. Therefore, the brand attitude and trust created by the organization towards the consumer is also worthy of focus on. From this point on, it is of greater importance for the business to take into account the factors that the brand can strive for.

2.2 The marketing theory of 4Ps

2.2.1 Definition & Development

The marketing mix theory was originally just the price theory in microeconomics with a single P [5]. The modern form of 4P theory originated from the marketing mix theory proposed by American marketer Jerome McCarthy in 1960, he divided the ingredients into four categories of factors, including Price, Promotion, Product, and Place. McCarthy believed that using the right and reasonable marketing mix to develop the strategies will finally improve the market performance of the companies. Neil Borden was the first to introduce and popularize the concept of the marketing mix, and his thesis stated that each of these four components in this concept has an impact on market demand and that organizations should use these four components to make appropriate marketing plans according to their business environment. The marketing mix is not a scientific theory, but merely a conceptual framework. It identifies the key decisions that management makes in configuring their products [10]. The marketing mix is just like making a cake, where the baker adjusts the mix of ingredients according to the type of cake he wants to make. In the same way, the proportions in the marketing mix can be altered according to consumer demand and vary from product type and industry [11].

2.2.2 Important results

The 4Ps of marketing theory applies particularly to the field of marketing and can be a good way to guide the company's sales plan. Different companies will adjust the mix of the four elements in proportion according to themselves as well as their markets and customers, to identify and meet market demand and achieve profitability for the business.

Price is a factor that affects sales volume, which includes setting pricing objectives and policies, fixed prices, discount policies, etc. [12]. Organizations should price their products reasonably; pricing too low will yield less profit and pricing too high will tend to reduce sales. There is a break-even point here to maximize the benefits.

Promotion is the organization's way of communicating the value of a product to its target audience, which can change the measurement of the value of a product or service by the target consumer [12]. It affects the audience's perceived value of the brand, such as how a brand's product or service is perceived. Positive and negative communication in social media and traditional advertising of the company can influence consumers' attitudes towards the brand [8].

Product is one of the strongest predictors, and two perceptions that lead to high levels of purchase intention and ultimately repeat purchase behavior, are high product quality and high customer satisfaction [12]. As for the product as a concrete manifestation of the value created by the organization, it determines what specific customers the company will satisfy, and good product quality differentiates it from its competitors and gains customer trust.

Place refers to the location of the company's activities to ensure the availability of the product, and some studies have found that place has an impact on customer decisions [12]. The place is a spot that provides value to the target audience. Choosing a place based on audience goals will make the product known to those who the potential customer is.

2.2.3 Summary

In practical application, many businesses will add other elements into the marketing mix according to requirements. Although this theory has defects, 4P are still the main ingredients of the marketing mix. The 4Ps theory has proved remarkably useful in the last decades because it helped to improve the business market performance. This proves the reliability of the theory aside. The purpose of the 4Ps theory is to address market demand, which can also lead to the conclusion that Price, Promotion, Product, and Place will affect consumer demand.

This paper makes a thorough judgment and evaluation based on the theory's conclusions. In terms of product categories, an effective mix should produce high-quality products that meet consumer needs, which is a requirement for launching marketing strategies and the foundation for brand impressions and brand reputation. Second, in terms of promotion categories, an increasing number of promotion campaigns are derived from social media, which is more innovative than traditional advertising promotions, because the brand's public relations outreach also increases brand awareness, thereby strengthening the brand's reputation to some extent.

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

SWOT Analysis is a tool commonly used to analyze the internal and external environment of a business, an in-depth assessment of the company's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats will inform the development and feasibility of the company's future strategy. SWOT Analysis consists of two main components, which are the internal environment as indicated by existing strengths and weaknesses, and the external environment as indicated by existing opportunities and threats [13].

In a previous study led by Balamuralikrishna et al., they use SWOT Analysis to analyze an educational example of vocational programs [14]. SWOT Analysis was applied to examine the environmental conditions of the program. There is another paper led by JATMIKO et al. that uses SWOT analysis to propose strategies for developing MSMEs, using an analytical framework to assess and measure the development strategies of firms [15].

SWOT Analysis is a business strategy analysis method that many academics use to study a company's campaigns or strategies, and it can help businesses improve and form optimal business strategies. The goal of this paper is to investigate the factors that influence consumer purchase intention. Purchase intention is comprised of three major components: perceived value, brand trust, and brand attitude, all of which are associated with the strategies in the 4Ps marketing mix. In this study, a qualitative SWOT Analysis was used to analyze price, promotion, product, and place strategies in Estee Lauder's 4Ps marketing mix, and to determine what factors affect Chinese purchase intention based on SWOT indicators.

3.2 The introduction of Estee Lauder

The research object of this paper is the Estee Lauder brand, according to which the analysis information and data are all from Estee Lauder.

Estee Lauder was an industry pioneer in its early days using direct selling and free samples. In those days, advertising was limited, and word of mouth came as an aid for business [16]. Since then, Estee Lauder has accumulated a good reputation.

Estee Lauder can be considered one of the leaders in the beauty industry, and its products are sold in about 150 countries or regions, so the global recognition of the brand is quite strong [17]. Its brand has built up an excellent market position through product innovation, high-quality products, and services, as well as selective distribution methods and effective promotion [17].

The Asia Pacific is Estee Lauder's fastest-growing region, so naturally, Estee Lauder also pays attention to China, the market in the Asia Pacific region. Estee Lauder entered the mainland China market in 1993. Through the brand's e-commerce and mobile websites and platforms, it has 135 physical retail stores and coverage in 670 cities. And they have created a dedicated research center in Shanghai to better understand the needs of Asian consumers [18]. The Chinese market is of great research value for the brand.

3.3 SWOT Analysis

3.3.1 Strength

Estee Lauder has adopted a premium price strategy. Estee Lauder positioned itself as a high-end brand and set a high price to maintain the high-end brand reputation [19]. Yet Estee Lauder has a new price strategy in China, it is a short-term price reduction strategy. Estee Lauder is offering price cuts for the sake of its expected Chinese customers [20]. This unique plan for Chinese customers is launched without losing the brand's reputation and at the same time stimulates the full interest and focus of Chinese consumers. While Ngo found that brand reputation positively affected brand trust, thus affecting the purchase intention [21]. The price reduction offer is time-limited and does not have long-term effects. According to Figure 1, Estee Lauder's financial data for the last three years, net sales in the Asia Pacific have continued to grow in the past two years, with a growth rate of about 22.7% from 2020 to 2021 [17]. Estée Lauder has indirectly increased sales through brand trust and short-term discount promotions.

	Year Ended June 30		
(In millions)	2021	2020	2019
NET SALES			
By Product Category:			
Skin Care	$ 9,484	$ 7,382	$ 6,551
Makeup	4,203	4,794	5,860
Fragrance	1,926	1,563	1,802
Hair Care	571	515	584
Other	45	40	69
	16,229	14,294	14,866
Returns associated with restructuring and other activities	(14)	—	(3)
Net sales	$ 16,215	$ 14,294	$ 14,863
By Region[1]:			
The Americas	$ 3,797	$ 3,794	$ 4,741
Europe, the Middle East & Africa	6,946	6,262	6,452
Asia/Pacific	5,486	4,238	3,673
	16,229	14,294	14,866
Returns associated with restructuring and other activities	(14)	—	(3)
Net sales	$ 16,215	$ 14,294	$ 14,863

Figure 1. Comparative summary of operating results for fiscal 2021, 2020, and 2019 [17]

Estee Lauder's social media promotion strategy drives traffic to its brands. The benefit of social media over traditional advertising is that it is interactive, and it is very simple to gather information from consumer reviews. Estee Lauder is boosting its promotion outlay in China. According to the marketing report released by social media RED in 2021, commercial placements are concentrated in the beauty area, while Estee Lauder has the largest volume of placements, with 2,854 commercial notes. Besides, it has a high conversion rate for its advertising investments to sales [22]. Estée Lauder is also aware that RED is the most popular social platform for Chinese consumers to search for beauty information, and thus makes a large number of placements. The brand has a strong online presence and can reach and engage a large number of potential customers via events and social media. This type of digital-age promotion increased brand exposure, allowing more people to engage and form brand connections.

Estee Lauder's founders originally developed a unique marketing concept based on high-quality products, and they have made many investments in research and development, and in 2011 they set up a dedicated R&D center in Shanghai, China [18]. To cater to high-end brands, product quality is naturally the most critical factor. According to data analysis researcher Nina Nowak, Estee Lauder's net sales growth is indicative of the success of the premium brand, with 48% of consumers citing its high-quality products as the main indicator of product value for money [23]. As Sam & Dhanya argues, product quality affects consumers' perceived value [7]. In the Chinese market, international brands have higher quality and effectiveness, because their overall effect and benefits are perceived by Chinese consumers to be higher than domestic brands. Consumers are willing to pay more for brands that are more perceived [1].

Fabrizio Freda, Estée Lauder's chief executive, said Estée Lauder has opened department stores, independent stores, and Sephora in 38 cities in China through its portfolio of brands. It remains one of the most prestige brands in China in terms of distribution channels [24]. This aligns with the brand's initial distribution strategy of primarily selling in department stores, which solidifies the brand's premium positioning with high-end service additions that can influence consumers' purchasing decisions among competing products and brands.

3.3.2 Weakness

Estee Lauder's product category is relatively limited and still dominated by cosmetics [25]. The product line can be appropriately expanded to other businesses, which can leverage its accumulated consumer market and brand reputation to create more revenue.

Estee Lauder is in the premium segment. The company's target customers are the upper and upper-middle class, who are relatively price insensitive, so its price is relatively high [19]. This is not attractive enough for the average consumer. Even if its brand reputation is high enough, it is a disadvantage for consumers with low disposable income in the beauty category.

3.3.3 Opportunities

One positive effect of the pandemic on cosmetics is that people spend more time at home, and they focus more on skincare [1]. Since the skincare market segment is growing. Estee Lauder can use advanced research and development centers to innovate more product categories after an in-depth understanding of consumer needs in China and other Asia-pacific regions.

As the world's largest e-commerce market, China's convenience is maximized by Internet shopping. Social media and e-commerce platforms are very effective branding methods in China. These online channels have also been successful in building trust and reputation among Chinese consumers [1]. This is a huge opportunity for Estee Lauder, which is focusing more on its department stores as a sales channel, as this is where the brand initially built its reputation [17]. However, allocating more resources to online sales in China, and increasing distribution channels in markets will have the potential to reap unexpected rewards.

3.3.4 Threats

Although social media marketing is popular, Estee Lauder has improved its brand perception by utilizing this promotional strategy. It can allow you to interact with customers, but there is also the risk of uncontrollable negative electronic word-of-mouth. Each customer has different tastes, and each person's skin type can elicit different emotions. Because negative social media word-of-mouth spreads quickly, brands are somewhat threatened by negative social media word-of-mouth.

Some consumers have complained about the use of animal testing for the products [26]. Estee Lauder's controversy in this regard will tarnish its brand reputation. However, due to Chinese policy, animal testing is required to ensure the safety of the ingredients. So, this weakness has been criticized but cannot be eliminated.

4. Results & Discussion

4.1 Results

After evaluating Estee Lauder's marketing mix based on SWOT Analysis, this paper found that in the internal environment, Estee Lauder's price, promotion, product, and place strategies have certain strong strengths, while the price and product strategies still have some weaknesses. In the external environment, Estee Lauder's product and place strategies have opportunities for improvement, whereas promotions and products strategies face threats.

In terms of strength, Estee Lauder's pricing strategy profits from brand trust and a unique price reduction offer for China to increase sales. The promotion strategy is based on heavy advertising through the operation of RED, China's preeminent social media for beauty, and its advertising investment has a high conversion rate to sales, meaning that the cost of advertising investment ultimately translates into a high rate of sales. The core product strategy is to develop product innovation based on high-quality products. Chinese consumers also perceive international brands to be more effective in terms of quality and are willing to pay more for high-quality products. The Place strategy, led by Estee Lauder, has a distribution channel based on department store sales, with high-end services and environments to strengthen the brand's position. Its distribution channel is so strong that Estee Lauder is also one of the most prestigious brands in the Chinese distribution channel.

In terms of weaknesses, Estee Lauder has a limited product line that can be effectively expanded into other businesses. Furthermore, its higher prices may deter those with limited disposable income from investing in beauty.

Estee Lauder also has some opportunities to improve. For example, more and more Chinese consumers are focusing on skincare after the outbreak and can innovate products according to the needs of Asian consumers such as China. Secondly, the brand should grasp more of the opportunity of China's developed e-commerce market and devote more resources to online sales.

Threats to the brand also exist, social media has a strong influence, and if there are negative comments may affect the brand's reputation. Secondly, Chinese policy requires imported cosmetics to be tested on animals to ensure safety, but brands can suffer from consumer dissatisfaction as a result.

4.2 Discussion

According to the data and content in the analysis, Estee Lauder's marketing mix is relatively strong. Based on the findings of the strengths analysis, it is possible to conclude that brand trust, influenced by brand reputation, will eventually lead to sales growth, and sales growth is also evidence of actual consumer purchasing behavior. Social media promotion also increases brand exposure and sales. The superior performance of Estee Lauder products was also perceived by Chinese consumers. Furthermore, Estee Lauder's brand prestige has bolstered the brand's position. Estee Lauder should keep its specialties and even strengthen the above-mentioned strategic output, which will be effective.

For the disadvantageous aspects, Estee Lauder can be properly separated from the beauty industry to develop other businesses, such as the more popular Chinese health care vitamin tablets, collagen, etc. In terms of price, Estee Lauder can develop a more affordable product line in its brand portfolio to target low-income earners. For potential threats, Estee Lauder can regularly release the rating system of major social media platforms, through cross-rating to obtain a relatively fair rating and evaluation, to give consumers a more valuable reference standard. Animal testing is difficult to avoid, and only until the Chinese government formally enacts relevant legal provisions can consumer complaints be eliminated.

In the literature review, it is mentioned that consumers' purchase intention contains three elements: perceived value, brand trust, and brand attitude. Sales also indicate consumers' purchasing behavior to a certain extent, and the actual consumption behavior is also the embodiment of consumers' purchase intention. Based on the analysis it can be concluded that product quality affects consumers' perceived value, and consumers are willing to spend more money on high-quality products. It shows that perceived value does affect consumers' purchase intention, which is consistent with the theory. Previous scholars have also mentioned that product reputation affects brand trust. Judging from the growth rate of Estee Lauder's net sales, brand trust will indeed affect consumers' purchase intention. The previously mentioned theory also views that social media promotion affects brand attitudes. The marketing reports of RED apps show that social media promotion has attracted more potential consumers to a certain extent, affecting such consumers' attitudes towards brands, and thus increasing sales. This shows that brand attitudes will have an impact on consumers' purchase intention.

The SWOT Analysis research method has some limitations, one of which is the lack of subjectivity. By summarizing information, this analysis method relies more on subjective judgment. Furthermore, the SWOT Analysis framework does not take into account two-sided factors, such as the fact that a strategy may have advantages and disadvantages, but there is no absolute advantage or disadvantage.

5. Conclusions

This paper examines the marketing field of the international brand Estee Lauder in the Chinese market during the digital era of the twenty-first century. It investigates how the Estee Lauder brand influences the purchasing intentions of Chinese consumers. The Consumer Purchase Intention Theory identifies three key elements that influence purchase intention, as well as price, product, promotion, and place strategies that influence consumer demand through the Marketing Theory of 4Ps. As a result, this paper employs the SWOT Analysis method to examine Estee Lauder, the research object, and concludes that product quality, brand reputation, and social media promotion will influence three factors of purchase intention, namely perceived value, brand trust, and brand attitude. This is in line with the hypothesis. Based on these three factors, Estee Lauder can continue to expand its social media promotion in China and provide a multi-platform composite rating for consumers' reference to reduce the negative impact of negative reviews.

The findings of this paper also validate that the three elements of consumer purchase intention theory do influence purchase intention and that the 4Ps marketing theory does influence consumer demand. With a 61.5% market share in China, international brands dominate the Chinese beauty market, however, they will face competition with the rise of domestic brands. This article analyzes the factors that influence Chinese consumers' purchase intention, thus contributing to international brands adjusting their marketing strategies to increase profits.

The research results suggest a new theoretical framework, namely that product quality, brand reputation, and social media promotion influence consumers' purchase intentions. This hypothesis was developed by combining the research theories of different scholars and validated by the Estee Lauder case study. This provides some direction for future trends in the Chinese beauty market.

This paper is based on the authors' summary analysis and there are subjective influences. In addition, the study is indirectly revealing consumers' purchase intention through sales growth, and there is no direct evidence of a strong relationship between the two. Instead, the analysis method is mainly combined with the psychological analysis of Chinese beauty market consumers, such as their perceptions and attitudes towards international brands. Therefore, the results of this study are considered to have general applicability to international brands.

Future research in this area could use quantitative research methods like questionnaires and interviews to gather more direct evidence to clarify the validity of this theory. Simultaneously, the demonstration method is not limited to cosmetic brands, but can also be applied to the marketing of brands in other industries.

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