

Investigating the Corporate Brand Image of Athletic Footwear Companies via Service Design: A Case Study of Yu Bao Footwear Ltd.

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Abstract: *This research integrates "Service Design" and "Brand Image" as key frameworks, focusing on the case of Fujian's Yu Bao athletic footwear brand. The study engages with a wide spectrum of respondents, including the brand's design team, management staff, marketers, and consumers. The objective is to generate a service design framework that more accurately caters to the brand's requirements and meets consumers' needs effectively, thereby providing a solid foundation for the future enhancement of the brand image.*

Keywords: *Athletic Footwear, Service Design, Brand Image*

1. Introduction

The brand image is of utmost importance to businesses, especially those in the consumer industry, as it influences product sales.^[1] Consumers are more likely to choose companies and products with a strong brand image. Footwear, being an essential part of daily life, faces increasing demands from consumers as the economy develops. Footwear manufacturers, as a crucial part of people's daily necessities, play a pivotal role in the industry. Chinese footwear can be primarily categorized into four types based on material properties: leather, fabric, rubber, and plastic. The processing technologies of these four categories have learned and integrated from one another under the drive of economic and technological development. Over the years, Chinese footwear manufacturers have entered a stage of large-scale development, diversifying product types, designs, and modes. The trend of "trendiness, humanization, and youthfulness" has become more prevalent in the footwear industry. In particular, in the past decade, post-90s and post-00s have become the main consumer groups of the footwear industry, accounting for 75% of the total consumer base in China. This shift has significantly increased the attention to "trendy" footwear brands, prompting them to align their designs more closely with the preferences of mainstream consumers and promote the trendy lifestyle of the new era.^[2] For instance, when designing athletic shoes, manufacturers consider the needs of the younger generation and integrate traditional Chinese cultural elements with globally popular elements. In this way, the footwear products can both disseminate culture and meet current trends, hence becoming more appealing to younger consumers.

2. Research Methodology and Design

2.1. In-Depth Interviewing

This study first employs semi-structured interviews with service recipients (purchasers of Yu Bao athletic shoes) and relevant stakeholders in the service design process. It aims to collect the interviewees' subjective feelings and intentions about shoe product classifications, obtaining information closer to the interviewee's inner thoughts and gathering more first-hand information. Following this, the collected information will be analyzed and organized. Finally, the arranged information will be applied to the service design process.

2.2. Field Research

Through field research, this study will investigate the environment of the brand image design activities within the premises of the Yu Bao footwear factory. After collecting first-hand data, the research will organize and analyze the information, derive findings, and then apply these findings to the

technical process of service design.

2.3. Behavioral Observation Method

The research observation sites will be set up in the manufacturing center and retail stores of Yu Bao Footwear. The manufacturing center is divided into three sections: the design department, the decision-making department, and the marketing department. Systematic observations will be conducted on the process from the athletic shoe design to decision-making approval and finally the opinions of the sales department within the Yu Bao Footwear manufacturing center. Observations will also be made on consumer purchasing behavior within retail stores.

3. Research Process and Results

3.1. Selection of Observation Points and Analysis of Actual Observations

The design, decision-making, and marketing departments of Yu Bao Footwear's manufacturing center are all located within the conference room of the design department office on the 2nd floor of the administration building. To comprehensively understand the process of Yu Bao athletic shoe brand image design, researchers chose weekdays from 8:00-10:00, 14:00-16:00, and 17:00-19:00 to observe behaviors at the aforementioned points in different periods. Through multi-faceted observation, it was found that the staff in the design department of Yu Bao Footwear mainly focuses on three aspects in terms of design information: First, browsing and learning from domestic and foreign trendy athletic shoe brands; second, monitoring the movements of domestic athletic shoe consumers; third, researching the popularity data of color styles under periodic characteristics. These three content areas are what every staff member in the design department focuses on daily. Therefore, the advantage of this observation point is that it can closely understand the design content and brand image composition of the design department at the front line, and by observing through the members of the same unit, the design department's stakeholders can behave naturally, and the most authentic service design process can be observed.

During the observation of the decision-making department, the observation point was set inside the decision-making meeting room. The decision-making department has a high level of authority and can better determine the influencing factors and ideas of the leadership regarding the brand image of Yu Bao Footwear.

For the observation of the marketing department, the observation point was set inside the collective office of the marketing department. The reason it wasn't set in the office of the person in charge of marketing is because the aggregated information obtained by the person in charge is already filtered, and the basic information of the marketing staff cannot be observed.

3.2. Stakeholders in the Design Service of Yu Bao Athletic Shoes

The stakeholders in the service design of Yu Bao athletic shoe brand image consist of corporate functional departments, dealers, consumers, and related government departments. Around the service of Yu Bao athletic shoe brand image, the service recipients are potential consumers - the buyers, and the service providers - Yu Bao footwear manufacturers, are tasked with creating more accepted product designs. The contact points between Yu Bao consumers and Yu Bao footwear manufacturers mainly lie with the dealers - dealer shops (including online and offline supply segments), these dealer shops are provided by individual proprietors and various sales manufacturers(As shown in Figure 1).^[3]



(Source: Self-organized by this study)

Figure 1: Stakeholders in the design service of Yu Bao athletic shoes

3.3. Analysis of Interviews on Yu Bao Athletic Shoe Brand Image Design

This research adopted unstructured interviews. Through conversation, inquiries were made regarding the views on the influencing factors of the brand image of Yu Bao athletic shoes, and the willingness to purchase Yu Bao athletic shoes. The interview contents are summarized as follows:

1) Frontline employees of Yu Bao enterprises generally have a basic understanding of the design of the Yu Bao brand image. As production employees, they mainly accept the production tasks arranged by the enterprise, pay less attention to some designs and brands, and have weaker decision-making power.

2) Yu Bao product consumers' understanding of the brand image is greatly influenced by marketing advertisements. They believe that big brands mean quality in all aspects, providing assurance, and pay more attention to the style and color preferences of the selected products during the purchase process. They pay less attention to other detailed aspects, besides, price is also one of the important influencing factors.

3) Yu Bao product marketers have a certain understanding of the service design of brand image, and pay more attention to product reputation, consumer recognition, and the level of social approval during the distribution process. This is used to evaluate the results of the product brand image service design.

4) Yu Bao enterprise designers have a richer consciousness of brand image design. They understand the design philosophy and process of Yu Bao athletic shoes and are more confident in the athletic shoe designs put forth by the Yu Bao enterprise.

3.4. Summarizing Typical User Profiles in the Service Design of Yu Bao Footwear Brand Image

Based on behavior observation, the proportion of behaviors that do not purchase Yu Bao footwear brand is larger, while those that purchase Yu Bao brand products are a small minority. Therefore, based on behavior, consumers are divided into two main categories according to their purchasing behaviors: those who have purchased Yu Bao brand products and those who have not. These are further subdivided into four types of people: those with strong buying intention, those who are indecisive about buying, those who are indecisive and do not buy, and those with a strong intention not to buy. Typical user profiles are then drawn for these categories (As shown in Figure 2).

(1) Individuals with a strong buying intention. These people have a strong sense of identification with the Yu Bao brand, they select Yu Bao products with a clear intention to purchase. This research refers to these people as 'User A'.

(2) Indecisive buyers. These people have a moderate level of identification with Yu Bao brand products, but their intention to buy is not very strong. This research refers to these people as 'User B'.

(3) Indecisive non-buyers. These people are attracted to the products when they come to the Yu Bao brand retail store but make the decision not to buy after being sold to by the retail store staff. This research refers to these people as 'User C'.

(4) Individuals with a strong intention not to buy. These people have a low level of identification with Yu Bao brand products and are not attracted to them, their buying intention is very low. After looking around in the retail store, they will leave. This research refers to these people as 'User D'.

(5) Designers. The designers of the Yu Bao footwear brand, these people are tasked with information integration analysis, defining consumer needs, and designing products that meet consumer psychological requirements.

(6) Decision-makers. The decision-makers for the styles of Yu Bao footwear products, these people bear the responsibility for the final style and brand image of the products.

(7) Marketers. The promoters of the Yu Bao footwear brand, they are responsible for promoting the products to various dealers, malls, supermarkets, and retail stores.

(8) Retail staff. The end-sellers of the Yu Bao footwear brand, they are responsible for selling the products to consumers, being the last executors of the process that realizes the economic benefits of the product.



Source: Self-organized by this study

Figure 2: Typical User Profiles

The eight typical users summarized in the previous text have different experiences in their interaction with the Yu Bao footwear brand.

For User A, they generally do not need much pre-purchase preparation before buying Yu Bao brand products. They have a high level of recognition of the brand image and do not struggle or hesitate in their choices. After the purchase, they have a certain degree of excitement and are likely to recommend the brand to others around them under this emotional experience.

As for Users B and C, both of these groups have a medium level of recognition and purchase intention for the Yu Bao brand. They are in a state of indecision before making a purchase, wavering between buying or not. Therefore, the service design of the Yu Bao brand needs to focus on these two groups' consumption preferences to strive to develop them into brand customers.

In terms of User D, as a group with a lower level of recognition for the Yu Bao brand and weaker purchase intention, it is very difficult to change their perception and willingness. The purchasing intention and brand impression of this group cannot be forced upon Yu Bao.

For designers, their job is to design the products. When the new product style is praised by marketers, receives positive feedback from retail staff, and is recognized by consumers, their sense of achievement in design will greatly increase. Conversely, a decrease in this sense of achievement can even result in economic losses to the company. Therefore, Yu Bao brand designers attach great importance to preliminary consumer preference research.

The role of the decision-makers is to make decisions on the product proposals given by the designers, ultimately approving mass production of new products. Not only do decision-makers bear the realization of the entire company's economic benefits, but they also supervise the design department and frontline production workers. Their decision-making determines the final direction of the brand image and the future development direction of the enterprise.

For marketers, they have the most direct contact with retail staff in the construction of brand image service design. They are responsible for shipping large quantities of products to storefronts, malls, and supermarkets. Therefore, they are the group that understands the sales performance of brand products, apart from retail staff. Their understanding of whether the product image is recognized is quite clear. If the brand image service design is not done well and is not recognized, their distribution will become difficult, increasing the difficulty of their work, reducing work efficiency, and losing economic benefits.

Retail staff execute the final process of the Yu Bao brand image - sales. They not only need to observe the Yu Bao brand's manufacturers but also research consumers' consumption preferences, then provide feedback to the manufacturers to aid in service design tailored to consumer concepts. However, in the actual retail process, retailers can choose not to stock or to stock less. Therefore, they pay less attention to consumer purchasing behavior. Even if the manufacturer conducts research on the retailer, the retailer's feedback is often superficial and formalistic. Therefore, manufacturers need to provide greater incentives or rewards to ensure the retailer provides genuine feedback on the consumers' true intentions towards the Yu Bao brand.

Integrating the above summary and the descriptions from the user experience map, for users willing to purchase products from the Yu Bao footwear brand, the most significant pain point lies in the need to

clarify their own requirements before purchase. The variety of shoe brands and the richness of styles can lead to a considerable expenditure of energy and concentration during the selection process. Those with slightly uncertain purchase intentions may hesitate and struggle, resulting in failed purchases. For users who have no intention of buying Yu Bao brand products, there are virtually no pain points. For service providers, the most significant pain point is that products designed with substantial manpower, material, and financial resources are not recognized by consumers, leading to dismal sales. This makes the company's prior research and surveying meaningless, designers are seen as having made errors in their work, and the company suffers economic losses and damage to its image. These situations reduce the economic benefits pursued by the enterprise, irreversibly impact consumers' perceptions of the brand image, increase the burden on the brand manufacturers, and delay the promotion of brand styles.

The pain points in user experience and those of relevant stakeholders can all potentially be transformed into opportunities: for the receivers and providers of Yu Bao's brand image services, changing the existing service design process, redefining the service design standards, and conducting thorough preliminary research to understand consumers' current brand needs to the greatest extent, can further promote consumers' intention to purchase Yu Bao brand products. Retail staff perform the final execution of the Yu Bao brand image—sales. They need to observe not only the manufacturers of the Yu Bao brand but also research consumers' consumption preferences. They then provide feedback on consumers' behavioral preferences to manufacturers, so that the manufacturers' service design can adapt to consumer concepts. However, in the actual retail process, retailers can choose not to stock or to stock less, so they pay less attention to consumers' purchasing behavior. They don't take some consumers' dissatisfaction and suggestions seriously, thereby missing out on an excellent opportunity for consumer research. Even if the manufacturer conducts research on the retailer, the retailer's feedback is often superficial and formalistic. Consequently, it is imperative for manufacturers to administer more significant incentives or rewards, thereby ensuring that retailers yield veritable feedback encapsulating the true consumer perceptions towards the Yu Bao brand.

3.5. Research Findings

The following research results can be drawn from the above observations of the production of Yu Bao sport shoe company's brand image:

- (1) The first-line production environment of the Yu Bao enterprise is relatively poor, and the employees pay little attention to the brand image.
- (2) The design department of the Yu Bao enterprise has a heavy workload, and there is insufficient collaboration among the design personnel.
- (3) The decision-making level of the Yu Bao enterprise places importance on profits, and the decision-makers pay more attention to the corporate image.
- (4) Consumer needs are changeable, and there are differences in evaluations between online and offline consumers.

Based on the potential opportunities that can be generated from the above research results summary, combined with the service design process, and the related solutions obtained from preliminary in-depth interviews, 1. Collaborate with renowned enterprises to implement brand integration; 2. Support rural villages and others to enhance the brand's social public welfare image; 3. Thin profit but high turnover, implement price concessions; 4. Introduce new equipment and develop new styles; 5. Conduct thorough social research before product design; 6. Improve the service design process.

The issues of Yu Bao footwear brand image were considered from the perspectives of service system design and product innovation design. By integrating and balancing various stakeholders of the Yu Bao footwear brand, a service system is constructed to form a coordinated system for enhancing the brand image. By integrating all stakeholders related to the brand image, such as manufacturers, raw material suppliers, retailers, designers, managers, front-line employees, retail store employees, and consumers, and drawing on successful cases of domestic and foreign brand image service design models, a mutually supervisory, supportive, and collaborative brand service system is constructed (Figure 3), forming a collaborative system.(As shown in Figure 3)

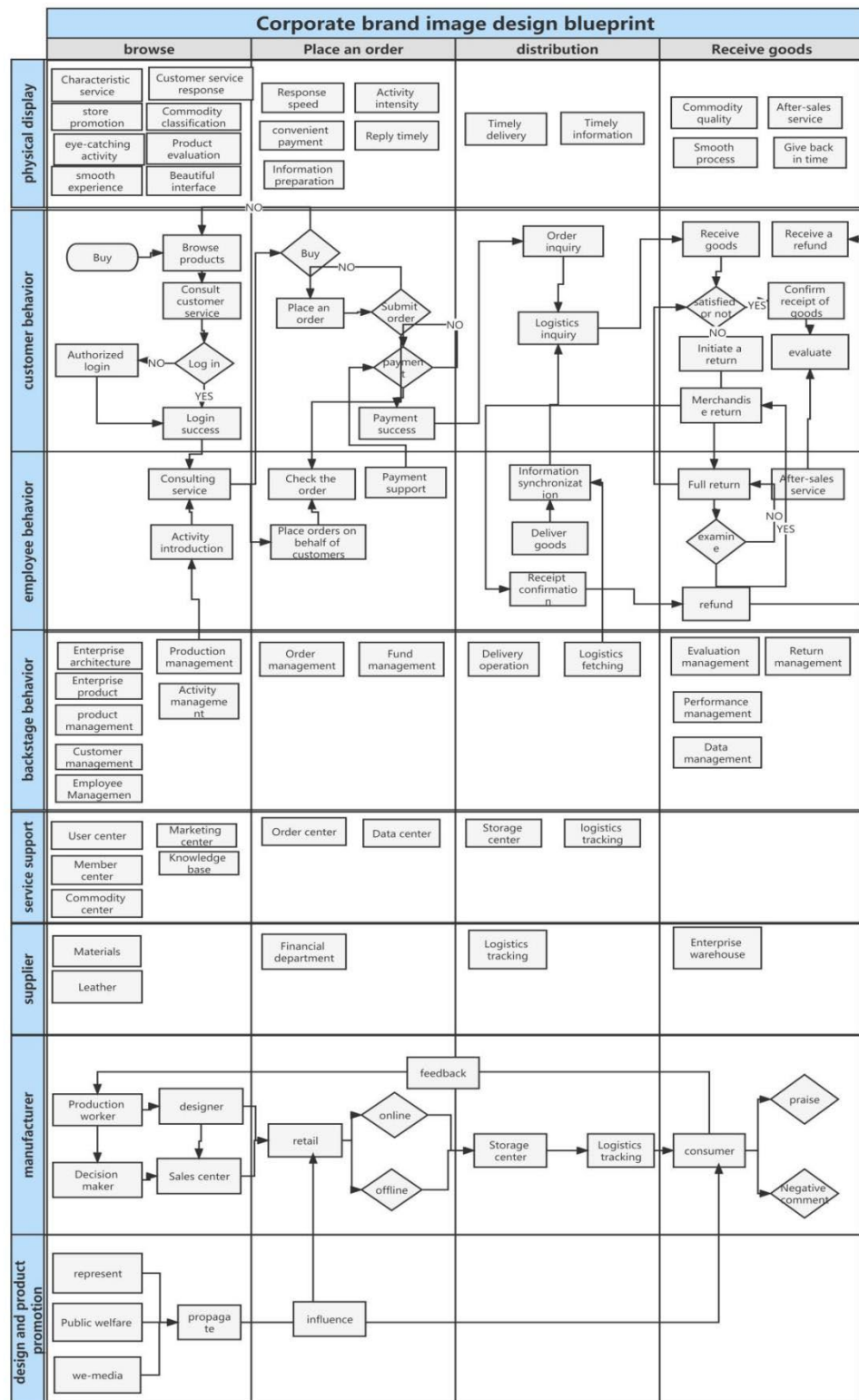


Image Source: Self-drawn by the researchers

Figure 3: Service Design Blueprint

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

4.1. Research Conclusions

4.1.1 Discrepancy in the Perception of Service between Designers and Recipients of Yu Bao Sports Shoes

In consumer perception, the brand image shaped by service design is aimed to serve consumers. The purpose is to increase consumer recognition of the product, thereby generating consumption willingness and purchasing behavior. As far as the brand's design and manufacturing are concerned, designers do not directly interact with consumers during the design process. Instead, they design products based on information collected and organized by other departments, and it is easy for personal preferences for the color and style of sports shoes to be mixed in, leading to a discrepancy between the origin of the design and production of Yu Bao sports shoes and the needs of end consumers.^[4]

4.1.2 The service design of Yu Bao Sports Shoes brand image is influenced by different entities

The information collection prior to the service design of Yu Bao Sports Shoes and the target audience it faces are closely related to the service design behavior. Before designing styles, the designers of Yu Bao Sports Shoes need to understand current market information, including popular styles, symbols, culture, colors, target audience, advertising effects, etc. This is because such market information determines whether the product of Yu Bao Sports Shoes can be accepted and liked by consumers, and it also determines the possibility of translating into the most important economic benefits. When consumers make purchasing decisions, they will match various details of the selected brand with their own preferences. Once a match is successful, their purchasing intention will be significantly boosted. The individual age, cultural level, income level, etc., of the consumer will impact their purchasing behavior. Therefore, the premise of conducting service design for Yu Bao Sports Shoes is to accurately grasp the current consumption concept of consumers. The design should start from cultural background, age characteristics, income level, and advertising effects, which are closely linked to consumer purchasing intention, and delve into consumer groups for surveys, observations, and interviews so that designers can carry out their work with the most comprehensive information.

4.1.3 Service Design of Yu Bao Brand Image Should Keep Pace with the Times

Although Yu Bao Sports Shoes can consider the preference factors of the target group to a certain extent during the service design process, they pay less attention to broader era characteristics. For example, the service design of the brand image of Yu Bao Sports Shoes does not consider the elements and semantics of "trendy brand" culture, which leads to the direct abandonment of the brand by young groups interested in trendy brand culture. Therefore, subsequent service design of the brand image of Yu Bao Sports Shoes should make plans and preparations that keep pace with the times.

4.2. Research Suggestions

4.2.1 Enhance Corporate Image

(1) Increase Corporate Brand Image (CIS) Promotion

This study suggests emulating the promotion methods and intensity of well-known and large brands in promotional efforts, fully exploiting the philosophy identification (CI), behavior identification (BI), and visual identification (VI) in the corporate image identification system to stimulate purchasing intention and behavior for Yu Bao Sports Shoes.

(2) Create a Good Value for Money Philosophy Identification (CI) Image

Firstly, Yu Bao Sports Shoes can increase brand image by adjusting the intensity of price discounts. Secondly, the manufacturers of Yu Bao Sports Shoes can use certain sales models to enhance the consumer's purchase experience.^[5]

(3) Strengthen Corporate Brand Visual Identification (BI) Image

(4) The service design process for the brand image of Yu Bao Sports Shoes should also strengthen its brand marketing, enhance the brand marketing of Yu Bao Sports Shoes, and realize the enhancement and progression of its brand image.

4.2.2 Corporate Product Image Promotion**(1) Product Image Promotion Service Design**

The service design for the brand image of Yu Bao Sports Shoes should consider contributions to the social welfare domain, establishing a public welfare image.

(2) Service Design based on Product Image Audience Preferences

As an apparel product, Yu Bao Sports Shoes should conduct large-scale social research prior to service design, to enhance the brand image and increase sales.

(3) Product Development Service Design

A comprehensive service design process is an important guarantee for the success of the brand image and its recognition by the general public. A thorough brand image service design process is what drives the conditions for brand development.

4.2.3 Corporate Quality Enhancement

(1) High Quality. The deepening and refinement of service design provide a foundation for development, making the formulation of high-quality product service design goals possible.

(2) Redesign. Ensure the brand itself follows consumer demands in the information age, producing products that meet consumers' psychological needs.

(3) New Technology. The brand needs to keep up with market trends by introducing new technology, ensuring high product quality and low-cost inputs.

(4) Emphasis on Savings. Cost-saving is an essential means for a company in its pursuit of profit.

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