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SUSTAINABILITY IN MARKET EXPANSION: HOW GILLETTE CREATED A NICHE MARKET IN A CROWDED MONOPOLISTICALLY COMPETITIVE SCENARIO WITH WOMEN'S HAIR REMOVAL PRODUCTS

Tanvi Sinha

Research scholar
School of commerce & management, Career Point University, Kota

L.C Panjabi

Research supervisor
School of commerce & management, Career Point University, Kota

ABSTRACT

Market saturation can constrain firm growth through intense competition, product similarity, and limited customer acquisition opportunities, but it can also reveal underserved consumer needs. This paper examines Gillette Venus, launched in 2001, to explore how an incumbent transformed an underdeveloped female shaving segment into a differentiated and scalable market category. Drawing on monopolistic competition theory, product differentiation, market segmentation, niche marketing, and gendered product differentiation, the study employs an exploratory longitudinal single-case methodology using peer-reviewed literature, industry reports, launch documentation, company sources, and marketing case studies.

Findings indicate that Gillette combined consumer research, functional innovation, brand differentiation, and premium positioning to establish a distinct market niche. The category subsequently expanded into specialized segments, including sensitive-skin, facial, travel, and intimate grooming, while attracting competitors. The study argues that sustainable market expansion can emerge through continuous differentiation, adjacent-niche development, innovation, and category evolution.

Keywords: Gillette Venus; market expansion; monopolistic competition; product differentiation; market segmentation

1. INTRODUCTION

Firms operating in mature consumer markets face a fundamental challenge: as categories become crowded, competing for the same customers through incremental improvements can yield diminishing returns. Growth may therefore require firms to identify underserved consumers and convert unmet needs into new bases of differentiation. Market saturation can thus constrain growth while simultaneously creating incentives for segmentation and innovation.

This phenomenon can be understood through monopolistic competition, where numerous sellers offer differentiated products that are imperfect substitutes, giving firms some market power while maintaining competitive pressure (Chamberlin, 1933). Dixit and Stiglitz (1977) further demonstrated how consumer preferences for product variety can sustain differentiated offerings within broad categories.

Marketing scholarship complements this perspective. Smith (1956) distinguished product differentiation from market segmentation as mechanisms for addressing heterogeneous demand, while Dalgic and Leeuw (1994) highlighted niche marketing as a strategy for serving fragmented consumer groups through specialized value propositions.

Gillette Venus provides a useful case. Although Gillette had marketed razors to women since 1915, Venus represented a strategic transformation of an existing but underdeveloped segment rather than the invention of women's shaving. Launched in 2001, Venus moved beyond adapting men's razors by developing a product and brand system explicitly around women's shaving contexts. Consumer research informed features including an oval-shaped head, protective cushions, and a contoured handle designed around women's shaving movements and body contours (Consumer Dynamics, n.d.). Marketing Management reports that Venus subsequently captured over 50% of the global female shaving market (Kotler et al., 2022).

The launch was also strategically significant: Venus became Gillette's first simultaneous global product launch, entering 29 countries at approximately the same time (Chief Marketer, 2001). By 2008, Gillette held approximately 58% of the U.S. women's razor market and 61% of the women's blade market, with Venus positioned largely in premium and super-premium segments (Datta, 2019).

The category subsequently expanded into niches differentiated by skin sensitivity, body area, portability, facial and intimate grooming, and blade technology. Industry research estimated the global women's razor market at $3.97 billion in 2022, projecting $5.28 billion by 2028 (Arizton Advisory & Intelligence, 2022).

This paper investigates how firms can achieve sustainable market expansion in crowded monopolistically competitive markets by identifying underserved segments and transforming them into differentiated categories. Specifically, it examines how Gillette identified unmet female consumer needs, translated them into product and brand differentiation, altered competitive dynamics, and expanded the resulting category through adjacent niches. The paper argues that sustainable expansion can follow a three-stage process: identifying heterogeneous needs, translating them into differentiated offerings, and developing adjacent niches as the category evolves.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Monopolistic Competition and Product Differentiation

The theoretical foundation rests on monopolistic competition, where firms differentiate products through quality, design, branding, and other attributes, gaining some control over demand while facing competition from substitutes (Chamberlin, 1933). Dixit and Stiglitz (1977) further emphasized product variety, showing how differentiated offerings allow firms to compete while creating new dimensions of competition. This framework is relevant to razors, where blade technology, ergonomics, design, branding, price, and intended use shape perceived value. Gillette Venus illustrates this principle by expanding differentiation beyond blade technology to include women's body contours, shaving contexts, comfort, grip, aesthetics, and grooming experiences. Thus, market saturation may coexist with unmet consumer needs, creating opportunities for firms to redefine competition through differentiation and variety.

2.2 Market Segmentation and Niche-Market Creation

Smith (1956) conceptualized market segmentation as a response to heterogeneous consumer demand, while Wedel and Kamakura (2000) emphasized segmentation as a basis for identifying preferences and developing differentiated offerings. Niche marketing further concentrates on specialized consumer groups, allowing firms to create propositions around underserved needs (Dalgic & Leeuw, 1994). In this context, female shaving existed before Venus but remained relatively underdeveloped as a differentiated category. Venus therefore represents category development rather than simple market entry, transforming an existing segment through products designed around women's specific shaving contexts (Kotler et al., 2022).

2.3 Gendered Product Differentiation

Gender can reflect both genuine consumer needs and socially constructed consumption categories. Research shows that personal-care products are extensively gendered and often exhibit meaningful formulation and functional differences (Gonzalez Guittar et al., 2022; Moshary et al., 2023). This distinction is central to Venus: its strategy extended beyond symbolic gendered branding to functional differentiation through design, ergonomics, shaving conditions, and usage patterns, supporting the interpretation of gender segmentation as both a marketing strategy and a response to consumer requirements.

2.4 The Historical Development of Female Shaving

Gillette's 1915 Milady Décolleté demonstrates that female shaving existed as a recognized consumer segment long before Venus. However, Venus marked a distinct strategic stage by treating women's bodies and shaving practices as sufficiently different to warrant dedicated product architecture. The category can thus be viewed as progressing from market stimulation, to market differentiation, and ultimately market fragmentation, with Venus accelerating the transition from the first to the second stage.

2.5 Consumer Research as a Mechanism of Differentiation

The Venus case demonstrates how consumer research translated segmentation into product innovation. Research across home, shower, and retail environments identified women's distinct shaving behaviors and functional needs, informing features such as an oval head, protective cushions, and contoured handle (Consumer Dynamics, n.d.; Kotler et al., 2022). Thus, the process was: **gender segment → behavioral observation → functional needs → product redesign → differentiated brand**, rather than symbolic gendered packaging alone.

2.6 Premium Positioning and Willingness to Pay

Product differentiation becomes economically significant when consumers perceive sufficient added value to reduce substitution toward competitors. In 2008, Gillette held approximately 58% of the U.S. women's razor market and 61% of the blade market, while Venus occupied premium and super-premium segments (Datta, 2019). This combination of substantial market share and premium positioning suggests that differentiation generated category-level willingness to pay rather than relying primarily on low-price competition.

2.7 Competitive Dynamics and Category Development

A successful niche eventually attracts competitors, providing evidence of genuine market development. Billie, launched in 2017 as a female-focused shaving brand, combined affordable premium products with body-positive communication (Time, 2018). Edgewell's acquisition of Billie for approximately $310 million in 2021 further demonstrated the category's commercial attractiveness (Axios, 2021). Thus, differentiation can create demand that attracts competitors and expands the category.

2.8 Niche Expansion and Category Fragmentation

The contemporary women's razor market illustrates the next phase of category development. Industry research indicates increasing specialization around facial shaving, eyebrow grooming, bikini and intimate grooming, sensitive skin, travel products and environmentally oriented products (Arizton Advisory & Intelligence, 2022).

The market is therefore no longer simply “men's razors vs. women's razors.”

It increasingly consists of multiple subcategories based on:

- body area;
- skin sensitivity;
- blade technology;
- portability;
- product format;
- price;
- sustainability;
- grooming philosophy;
- distribution model.

This represents an important mechanism of sustainable market expansion. Once a company establishes a broad niche, further growth can occur through **adjacent niche development**.

2.9 Sustainability as Market Sustainability

In this paper, sustainability refers to the durability and scalability of market expansion, rather than environmental sustainability. However, environmental concerns increasingly shape competition in women's razors, with firms adopting recyclable packaging, recycled materials, and recycling initiatives (Procter & Gamble, 2022; Arizton Advisory & Intelligence, 2022). This illustrates how differentiation evolves from functionality and comfort toward convenience, specialization, identity, and environmental considerations, requiring continuous adaptation to sustain a niche.

3. RESEARCH GAP

Existing literature separately explains product differentiation, segmentation, niche marketing, gendered products, market growth, and Venus's product development. However, these streams insufficiently integrate the sequence from market saturation and underserved needs to segmentation, differentiation, premiumization, niche expansion, competitive entry, and category fragmentation. This paper addresses this gap by conceptualizing Venus as strategic market expansion through niche creation within monopolistic competition.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PROPOSITIONS

Based on the literature review, the paper investigates four research questions.

1. How did Gillette identify and exploit an underserved female consumer segment within the shaving industry?
2. How did product and brand differentiation enable Gillette Venus to establish a distinct market position?

3. How did the creation of the women's razor category alter competitive dynamics within the shaving industry?
4. To what extent can niche-market creation through differentiation provide a sustainable mechanism for market expansion?

The following propositions are developed for the case analysis.

1. In a saturated monopolistically competitive market, identifying underserved consumer needs can create opportunities for profitable niche-market formation.
2. Product differentiation is more likely to produce sustainable niche-market advantage when functional differentiation is reinforced by distinctive brand positioning.
3. Successful niche creation can increase willingness to pay when differentiated product attributes generate sufficiently high perceived consumer value.
4. Sustainable market expansion occurs when firms extend the original niche into adjacent consumer needs rather than relying exclusively on the initial product proposition.
5. Successful niche creation can intensify competition by making the newly established category economically attractive to competitors.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

This research employs an **exploratory longitudinal single-case study** of Gillette Venus.

A case-study methodology is appropriate because the objective is to examine a complex strategic process involving multiple interacting variables rather than isolate a single causal relationship. The case incorporates market structure, consumer research, product design, branding, pricing, competitive response and subsequent category development.

The study is longitudinal because Venus cannot be adequately understood through its 2001 launch alone. The analysis therefore examines the evolution of female shaving across multiple periods.

5.2 Case Selection

Gillette Venus was selected for three reasons.

First, Gillette was already a major participant in the broader shaving market, making Venus an example of **market expansion by an incumbent rather than entry by a start-up**.

Second, Venus represents a clear transition from relatively generic female adaptation toward purpose-designed female shaving.

Third, sufficient secondary evidence exists to reconstruct the strategic process, including academic research, industry reports, launch documentation, marketing case studies and company material.

5.3 Data Sources

The study triangulates five categories of secondary evidence:

1. **Peer-reviewed academic literature** on monopolistic competition, segmentation and gendered pricing/differentiation.

2. **Empirical market research** concerning women's razor market shares and price positioning.
3. **Industry reports** concerning market size, growth, competitive dynamics and product trends.
4. **Contemporary case studies and launch reports** documenting the development and introduction of Venus.
5. **Corporate and brand documentation** concerning product evolution and sustainability initiatives.

The use of multiple source types reduces dependence on Gillette's own interpretation of its strategic performance.

5.4 Analytical Framework

The case was analyzed according to five strategic stages:

Stage 1 — Market condition:

Degree of crowding and existing competitive structure.

Stage 2 — Opportunity identification:

Identification of underserved female consumer needs.

Stage 3 — Differentiation:

Translation of consumer insights into product, brand and communication differences.

Stage 4 — Market creation:

Development of a recognizable and commercially scalable women's razor category.

Stage 5 — Sustainable expansion:

Extension into premium products, adjacent subsegments and evolving dimensions of value.

6. CASE ANALYSIS: GILLETTE VENUS

6.1 From Female Razor to Female Shaving Category

Gillette's female-shaving involvement predates Venus, with the 1915 Milady Décolleté demonstrating an established female segment. Venus's significance lay in recognizing that existing women's razors remained insufficiently differentiated, often resembling men's products (Kotler et al., 2022). Thus, Gillette pursued niche creation rather than simple market entry by redefining women's shaving needs.

6.2 Consumer Insight as the Starting Point

The Venus strategy began with consumer research across homes, showers, and retail environments, examining both functional and emotional aspects of shaving. Research identified women's larger shaving surfaces, wet-shaving contexts, body contours, and grip requirements. These insights informed the oval head, protective cushions, and contoured handle (Consumer Dynamics, n.d.), demonstrating **observation → unmet need → innovation → differentiation.**

6.3 Functional Differentiation

Venus's product design represented a competitive departure by addressing specific shaving challenges. Its oval head improved maneuverability, while the contoured handle enhanced grip and control in wet environments. Research found women changed their grip approximately 30 times during shaving (Kotler et al., 2022), demonstrating behavioral segmentation within demographic segmentation and enabling a more meaningful niche.

6.4 Emotional and Symbolic Differentiation

Functional differentiation alone would not have created a powerful consumer brand.

Gillette therefore positioned Venus not simply as a shaving instrument but as part of a broader beauty experience.

Contemporary launch material described the brand as a beauty-oriented proposition, while Consumer Dynamics describes the brand strategy as connecting functional technology with women's aspirations.

This created two levels of differentiation:

Functional layer

- ergonomic design;
- body contours;
- maneuverability;
- lubrication;
- comfort.

Symbolic layer

- femininity;
- beauty;
- confidence;
- self-care;
- empowerment.

The combination was strategically valuable because it increased the number of dimensions on which Venus could differentiate itself from conventional razors.

6.5 The Stand-Alone Brand Decision

An important strategic decision was to establish Venus as a distinct brand rather than simply introducing another women's razor under a conventional Gillette architecture. The launch was described as Gillette's first simultaneous global launch, reaching 29 countries (Chief Marketer, 2001). This was significant for two reasons. First, it communicated that the company viewed women's shaving as sufficiently important to justify its own global identity. Second, it created a distinct mental category for consumers. Instead of "Gillette makes razors; some are for women," the proposition became "Venus is a brand specifically associated with women's shaving." The branding decision therefore reinforced the segmentation strategy.

7. MARKET PERFORMANCE AND PREMIUMIZATION

The subsequent performance of Venus provides empirical evidence that the differentiated proposition generated substantial commercial value. By 2008, Gillette held approximately 58% of the U.S. women's razor market, compared with approximately 31% for Schick. In women's blades, Gillette held approximately 61% compared with approximately 35% for Schick (Datta, 2019). More importantly, Gillette's leading Venus products were not

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Journal Website www.coherencejournal.in

positioned as low-cost products. Venus Embrace occupied the super-premium segment of the women's razor market, while Venus Original occupied the premium segment. This finding is particularly significant. If Gillette had entered the female market primarily by lowering prices, the strategy would represent conventional market penetration.

Instead, the company established a value proposition that supported:

differentiation → perceived value → premium positioning → market share.

This provides strong support for Proposition 3.

The case therefore illustrates how niche creation can create not merely additional demand but **willingness to pay**.

8. FROM NICHE TO MARKET CATEGORY

The subsequent development of Venus demonstrates that the initial niche did not remain static. The women's razor market expanded into increasingly differentiated product segments.

Industry reports identify products targeted at:

- body shaving;
- facial shaving;
- eyebrow grooming;
- bikini and intimate grooming;
- sensitive skin;
- travel;
- moisturizing;
- different blade technologies.

The global market itself has expanded substantially. Arizton estimated the women's razor market at approximately \$3.97 billion in 2022 and forecast approximately \$5.28 billion by 2028 (Arizton Advisory & Intelligence, 2022).

The strategic implication is that Venus can be interpreted as a **platform for category expansion**. The initial proposition was a razor designed specifically for women's bodies.

The subsequent propositions became:

- a razor for different skin types;
- a razor for different body areas;
- a razor for travel;
- a razor for intimate grooming;
- a razor with additional moisturizing and skin-care benefits.

The category therefore developed from a single demographic niche into a collection of **need-based sub-niches**.

9. COMPETITIVE ENTRY AND THE BILLIE CHALLENGE

The emergence of competitors provides further evidence that the category became economically meaningful. Billie, founded in 2017, explicitly positioned itself around a

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Journal Website www.coherencejournal.in

female-first shaving experience. The company challenged established women's razor marketing by emphasizing affordability, body positivity and women's choice (Time, 2018).

Billie's eventual acquisition by Edgewell for approximately $310 million in 2021 demonstrates the strategic value of the female personal-care market (Axios, 2021). The competitive evolution is important because it indicates that Gillette's success did not result in permanent monopoly control over female shaving. Instead, the opposite occurred. Gillette's differentiation helped establish the category.

The category then generated:

demand → market attractiveness → competitive entry → additional differentiation.

This is precisely the dynamic expected in a monopolistically competitive environment. A successful differentiated niche can become the foundation for further competition.

10. GENDER DIFFERENTIATION: VALUE CREATION OR ARTIFICIAL MARKET CONSTRUCTION?

An academically balanced analysis must consider whether gender-specific razors merely repackage functionally similar products. However, research finds substantial gender-based product differentiation and no universal pricing disadvantage (Gonzalez Guittar et al., 2022; Moshary et al., 2023). Venus's functional design supports genuine differentiation, while its evolving communications increasingly emphasize consumer choice, functionality, comfort, and broader representations of women (Unstereotype Alliance, 2018).

11. SUSTAINABILITY OF MARKET EXPANSION

The evidence suggests that Venus achieved sustainability in market expansion through four mechanisms.

11.1 Continuous Product Innovation

The original product proposition did not remain fixed.

The category subsequently introduced:

- multiple blade systems;
- moisturizing technologies;
- sensitive-skin variants;
- travel products;
- intimate-grooming products;
- facial products;
- disposable and refillable formats.

Continuous innovation prevents a niche from becoming technologically stagnant.

11.2 Adjacent-Niche Development

Gillette expanded from general female body shaving toward more specific needs. This represents a **niche-within-a-niche** strategy.

For example: **women → women who shave → women with sensitive skin → women seeking intimate grooming → women seeking convenient/travel grooming.**

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Each step creates another potential source of differentiated value. This provides support for Proposition 4.

11.3 Brand-Based Competitive Advantage

A product feature can be copied. A brand ecosystem is harder to replicate. Venus developed a distinctive identity around female shaving, allowing Gillette to build associations extending beyond individual blade technologies.

This is important in monopolistically competitive markets because competitors can often imitate functional characteristics.Sustainable advantage therefore requires continuous reinforcement through: **product + brand + consumer knowledge + distribution + category association.**

11.4 Adaptation to Changing Consumer Expectations

Differentiation evolves with consumer expectations. While Venus initially emphasized ergonomics, body-specific design, comfort, and femininity, contemporary differentiation increasingly incorporates convenience, inclusivity, autonomy, specialization, and sustainability. P&G's recyclable packaging initiatives illustrate this evolution (Procter & Gamble, 2022), while this paper primarily examines market sustainability, the durability of demand and competitive advantage.

12. DISCUSSION

The case provides evidence supporting all five propositions, although with varying degrees of strength.

Proposition 1:

Gillette operated in an established shaving market but identified a consumer segment whose needs were not fully represented in existing products. The company transformed these differences into a market opportunity.

The important insight is that market saturation did not eliminate growth opportunities. Instead, it encouraged a search for **heterogeneity within the existing market**.

Proposition 2:

Venus combined functional differentiation with brand differentiation.

Functional characteristics included:

- ergonomic design;
- oval head;
- body-contour compatibility;
- protective features;
- lubrication.

Brand differentiation included:

- dedicated identity;
- female-focused communication;
- beauty and confidence associations;
- global positioning.

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This combination made the product more difficult to evaluate as a simple commodity.

Proposition 3:

The premium and super-premium positioning documented by Datta (2019) indicates that consumers were willing to purchase differentiated Venus products at prices above the middle of the market.

This suggests that successful niche creation can generate **pricing power through perceived value**.

Proposition 4:

The women's razor category expanded into increasingly specialized products and applications.

The market therefore demonstrates a process of:

niche creation → niche expansion → sub-niche development.

This provides an important mechanism for sustainable growth.

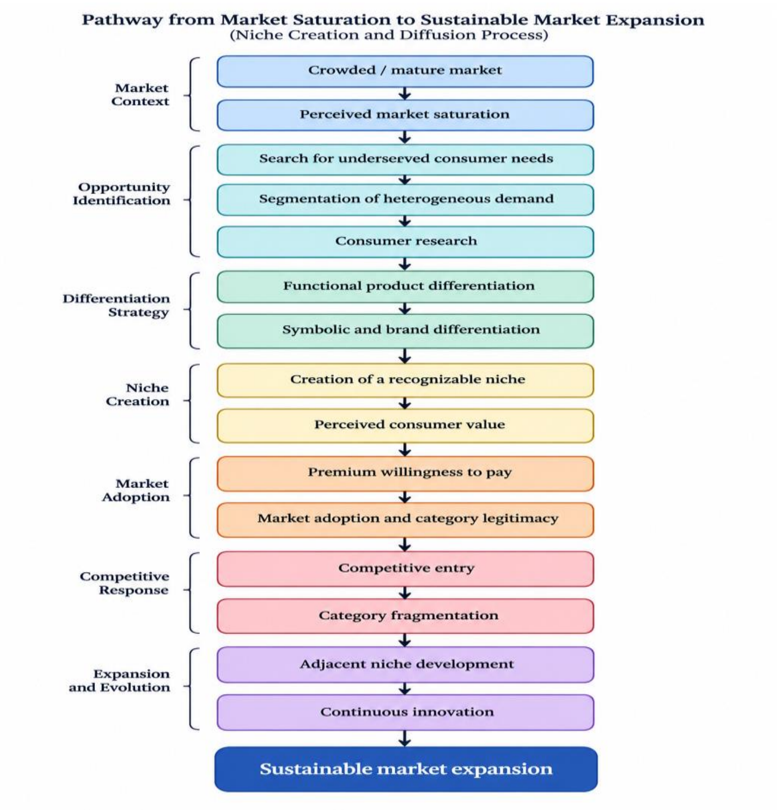
Proposition 5:

The emergence of competitors such as Billie demonstrates that successful category creation can attract additional firms.

The resulting competitive environment does not invalidate the original strategy. Instead, it demonstrates that the niche has become a legitimate market.

13. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the case evidence, the paper proposes the following framework:



The framework suggests that sustainability is not achieved by protecting a niche from competition indefinitely.

Rather, it is achieved by developing the niche sufficiently that:

1. it becomes commercially significant;
2. the firm establishes brand and product advantages;
3. new consumer needs are identified;
4. the category expands into adjacent niches;
5. the firm continues to innovate as competitors enter.

This represents a dynamic rather than static understanding of competitive advantage.

14. THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This study makes three principal contributions.

14.1 Integrating Economic and Marketing Perspectives

The study connects monopolistic competition with market segmentation and niche marketing. Economic theory explains why differentiated products can generate market power. Marketing theory explains how firms identify consumer heterogeneity and transform it into differentiated offerings. The Venus case demonstrates how these processes can operate simultaneously.

14.2 Reframing Niche Creation

The paper distinguishes between **entering a niche** and **creating a market category**. Gillette did not discover an entirely nonexistent female shaving need.

Instead, it:

1. identified existing female demand;
2. identified inadequacies in existing products;
3. differentiated the product around female usage;
4. constructed a dedicated brand;
5. scaled the proposition globally;
6. expanded it into adjacent needs.

This represents a more nuanced definition of market creation.

14.3 Introducing a Dynamic Concept of Sustainable Market Expansion

Traditional competitive-strategy discussions can treat differentiation as a means of defending market position. This study suggests an alternative interpretation. Differentiation can be used to **expand the market itself**. The firm creates a new dimension of competition, attracts consumers into the differentiated category and then uses subsequent innovation to expand that category. Sustainability therefore emerges from **continued category development rather than permanent isolation from competitors**.

15. Managerial Implications

The case provides several implications for firms operating in mature consumer markets.

15.1 Do not equate market saturation with absence of opportunity

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Journal Website www.coherencejournal.in

A crowded market may still contain consumers whose needs are poorly served.

Managers should therefore examine not only market size but also **unmet needs within existing segments**.

15.2 Segment behaviorally, not only demographically

"Women" was an initial segmentation variable.

The more valuable insights came from examining:

- where women shave;
- how they hold razors;
- what body areas they shave;
- what discomfort they experience;
- what they value emotionally.

Behavioral segmentation therefore produced more meaningful product differentiation than demographic segmentation alone.

15.3 Combine functional and symbolic differentiation

A differentiated product is stronger when consumers can identify both:

what makes it work better and **what makes it meaningful to them.**

15.4 Premiumization requires perceived value

A firm cannot simply declare a product premium.

The consumer must perceive sufficient additional value to justify a higher price.

The Venus case suggests that ergonomic design, specialized functionality and brand meaning can collectively generate that value.

15.5 Treat niche creation as the beginning rather than the end

Once a niche becomes successful, competitors will enter.

The strategic response should therefore be continued innovation and adjacent-market development.

16. LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations.

First, it is a single-case study and therefore does not establish universal causal relationships.

Second, much of the available evidence concerning Venus's initial development originates from company partners, marketing agencies or corporate sources. These sources may emphasize successful elements of the strategy.

Third, historical market-share data are more readily available for selected years and geographic markets than for the entire period from 2001 onward.

Fourth, industry reports use proprietary methodologies and market definitions that may differ across publishers.

Fifth, the paper primarily evaluates market sustainability rather than environmental sustainability. Although environmental developments are discussed, a dedicated environmental life-cycle analysis would require separate data on materials, manufacturing, transportation, product longevity and disposal.

Finally, consumer preferences around body hair are socially and culturally heterogeneous. The experience of female shaving in the United States and Western Europe cannot automatically be generalized to all global markets.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined how Gillette transformed an underdeveloped female shaving segment into a differentiated and scalable market category through Venus. The strategy combined consumer research, behavioral insights, functional innovation, brand differentiation, premium positioning, and global category development. By 2008, Gillette held approximately 58% of the U.S. women's razor market and 61% of the blade market, with Venus occupying premium segments (Datta, 2019). Subsequent niche expansion and competitor entry further demonstrated category development. The case suggests that market saturation can stimulate growth when firms identify meaningful unmet needs, translate them into defensible value propositions, and continually evolve differentiation. Venus therefore illustrates how incumbents can expand market boundaries rather than merely compete within existing ones.

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