

Increasing Brand Awareness of Duolingo Math for Millennial Parents

Secondary Research Report

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Background Information

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted elementary education in the United States as millions of students switched to online learning. The switch was particularly consequential for learners of elementary math who have fallen significantly behind the grade level expected. Watching children struggle in school creates anxiety for parents as “parents whose children have fallen significantly behind academically are one-third more likely to say that they are very or extremely concerned about their children’s mental health” (Dorn et al., 2023). The responsibility to cultivate confidence in children typically falls on the parents, who frequently assume the role of math tutor, a role which is typically stressful because busy parents do not have the time or resources to properly help their children. Parents tutoring their children is also less effective as “research on tutoring indicates that it often works better ... provided by a teacher rather than, say, a parent” (Kuhfeld et al., 2023). When the mother or father becomes the tutor the quality of learning is compromised and both parent and child become stressed.

Wearing too many hats in the home for parents all too often causes them to make sacrifices to their wellbeing. In a 2022 survey of millennial parents, “53 percent reported sacrificing sleep for their children, while 47 percent regularly give up date nights, hobbies, and time with friends” (Marquette, 2022). Taking on too many roles in the home is also associated with increased burnout for millennial parents. “Roughly half of Gen Zs (52 percent) and millennials (49 percent) feel burned out” (Deloitte, 2023). The adverse effects of burnout are even more prevalent in women because they are expected to take on more household chores than their male counterparts. This dynamic

negatively impacts the entire family unit, and the burnout cycle continues. For all these reasons outlined above, solutions need to be found to resolve issues of parent burnout and lack of confidence in elementary math learners as a matter of urgent need.

Duolingo Math offers one such solution in the form of a gamified math learning app targeting millennial parents of children in the 4-13 years age range.

Brand/Organization Insights

Duolingo is an education platform with one goal in mind: to develop the best education in the world and make it universally available. The founders, Luis von Ahn and Severin Hacker, understand that language learning can become tedious if the lessons are not presented suitably. Language learning is often unnecessarily expensive. These factors make learning inaccessible to many consumers in the U.S. These two factors of cost and appropriacy of presentation inspired the co-founders to create a platform that used gamification in its initial stages to teach new languages that keep learning fun, engaging, and cost-free for users of all levels. Duolingo has created considerable excitement for consumers since inception in 2011. In this year alone it “accumulated a waiting list of over 300,000 (users)” (Zippa, 2021). After experiencing its most successful year to date in 2020 owing to millions of families being stuck in their homes during pandemic lockdowns looking for free activities, Duolingo decided to go public in the summer of 2021. Duolingo has continued to witness steady growth in users and revenue as well as robust evolution of its interface and apps since going public.

This phenomenon of user growth and evolving brand engagement has created extremely high levels of brand awareness for Duolingo in the U.S. market with Gen Z audiences in particular. The brand profile of Duolingo has gained a following of almost

8 million users on TikTok alone, where it enjoys extremely high engagement rates in terms of likes, comments, and video saves. On the back of this success, Duolingo is striving to reach out to millennial audiences, in its effort to help millennials adopt home-based math learning habits for their children in the 4-13 years age range. These offerings include Duolingo Math, which uses the same gamification as the language learning platform to learn math skills, and Duolingo for Schools, which allows educators to create lessons and track data that displays students' learning.

Duolingo for Schools helps the industry receive and process feedback on how to make the learning experience more effective. The main criticism of the brand is that it cannot effectively teach users to learn the necessary skills to speak a new language. Through working with teachers, Duolingo can handle feedback, making the app more effective while helping teachers reduce the time it takes to plan lessons.

The Competition

Duolingo Math has two strong competitors: Khan Academy and Kumon. Duolingo sets itself apart from the competition because of the unique gamification on the platform which keeps learners engaged. Duolingo Math is considered a game rather than a legitimate tool. The competition has also been around much longer than Duolingo Math, and both have created strong followings and brand resonance with consumers.

Duolingo Math is branded quite differently than its competition, as Duolingo positions itself as silly and fun in its owned media channels. Khan Academy and Prodigy Math position themselves as serious learning platforms, which likely increases consumers' trust that children will improve their math skills by practicing on the platform. One significant difference in the competition's social media pages is the target

audience's age. Duolingo is advertising to Gen Z. The competition is advertising to millennials which explains the difference in tone. The most substantial advantage that Duolingo Math has over the competition is a much stronger brand resonance with consumers and a better understanding of how to make learning fun and engaging.

Industry/Category

While the educational apps category is highly crowded with competition, such as Prodigy Math and Khan Academy, the category does not contain well-developed apps that are both gamified and allow progressive skill building. The educational app category is also an area of low visibility. Apps in this category are only found once searched for and are not typically top-of-mind for consumers. Duolingo Math's popularity offers a vast advantage as the platform has high visibility thanks to its user-friendly nature and social media presence. Duolingo's social media is particularly effective because the social team interacts with followers using a personal and human tone. "For brands on social media, a human voice may be employed to foster reliability" (Sligh & Abidin, 2023). Using a trustworthy and relatable tone of voice is vital in the education app category because parents need to feel they can rely on the apps that assist in educating their children.

The system of education as a whole is currently not well received in the U.S. as schools are underfunded and, like parents, teachers are burning out at high rates. The truth is that since COVID-19, students are behind in mass quantities and are not catching up. According to a report by McKinsey, "more first and second graders have ended this year two or more grade levels below expectations than in any previous year" (Dorn et al., 2023). The unfinished learning due to COVID-19 is causing parents to lose

faith in the American education system: “57% of millennial parents believe that schools are not preparing children to be citizens of the future” (Gilmour, 2023). Parents are seeking out additional tools to address this setback. That is where Duolingo Math can come in as an accessible and much-needed assistant.

Cultural Insights

Many cultural factors affect how parents handle at-home learning and assist their children with extracurricular tutoring needs. As discussed before, tutoring is more effective when administered by a trained tutor or a teacher rather than busy parents. Unfortunately, tutors are costly, charging “\$25 to \$80 per hour when teaching privately and \$25 to \$50 per hour when tutoring online” (Tutors 2024). The average millennial cannot afford this rate as “more than three in 10 (35%) adults admit they still have at least one bill on their parents’ tab” (SWNS, 2023). On top of this, “47% (of millennials) live paycheck to paycheck and worry they will not be able to cover their expenses” (Rainosek, 2022). This puts hiring a tutor out of the question for many Millennial parents, meaning a free option is the only option.

Another essential factor to consider in the execution of this campaign is screen time and how the audience feels about this topic. Understanding consumers' boundaries regarding screen time is vital because iPad time is here to stay. Surprisingly, it is only sometimes the parents setting the pace for screen time in the household. As children become more comfortable with modern technology, “it is recognized that children also play a role in their parents' online activity and influence their adoption of digital technologies; this phenomenon is called bottom-up technology transmission” (Bertrandias et al., 2023). Children are leading the charge which makes Duolingo Math

more appealing than its competitors. It's near impossible to convince a nine year old boy that Khan Academy is just as fun as Roblox; but a bright funny owl on Duolingo Math? He could be convinced.

Many parents feel overwhelmed by technology use and even feel ashamed when they do allow it for their children because they fear any parenting slip up may result in their child failing in life. However, as screen time becomes more common than in past years, parents are turning to professionals to implement healthy screen habits. According to a 2020 Pew Research Report, "Majorities of parents (61%) of children aged 11 or younger say they get advice or information about screen time from doctors" (Auxier et al., 2020). Parents turning to medical professionals for parenting advice suggests that marketing Duolingo Math to pediatricians could be a helpful strategy as they are influencing parents surrounding screen time and technology.

The last cultural insight to be aware of in the positioning of Duolingo Math is the high level of burnout, anxiety, and depression amongst millennial parents. Mental illness and burnout significantly change how parents interact with their children in the home. According to a 2023 survey, "46% of moms are in or currently seeking therapy (32% due to anxiety, 12% due to depression, 16% due to relationship challenges, and 15% due to postpartum challenges)" (Kiziol, 2023). A large part of the burnout and anxiety that millennial parents are feeling stems from the lack of community that many parents feel. "It takes a village to raise a child," according to the famous African proverb. However, most moms (75%) say they do not have enough support from family or friends" (Niguel, 2022). Duolingo Math can position itself as a part of the family community, an extra source of help that overworked parents so desperately need.

Target Audience Insights

Millennial parents do not want to be portrayed in marketing as a one dimensional figure whose identity is boiled down to “mother” or “father”. The millennial parent needs to be spoken to by brands as multifaceted and complex individuals. Millennial parents value their identity outside of parenthood. A 2022 survey found that “75% of millennial parents say that they have continued to pursue their passions since having a child” (Cuker Insights, 2022). The high percentage of millennial parents continuing their passions after having children is likely due to the activities becoming more accessible in the digital age.

Millennial parents will also not respond to only targeting the mother or father in messaging as “82% of younger parents believe that brands should speak to mom and dad equally” (Cuker Insights, 2022). Heterosexual millennial couples value mother and father being an active part of the household as “when the wife does it all, not surprisingly, the outcomes are bad for the couple,” which in turn will create a bad outcome for the family unit at large.

Along with a change in household expectations, a change in household management and parenting strategies is common within the millennial generation. The most potent example of this is the rise in popularity of gentle parenting, which “is an approach that steers away from punishment and focuses instead on helping children become more self-aware” (Moscatello, 2023). Critics of gentle parenting explain that it causes parents to either consciously or unconsciously relinquish their position of authority in the home. This pivot in turn tends to give their children too much of a voice, which frequently transforms the power balance in the home and puts parents at a

greater risk of exhaustion brought about by supervising rebellious children. One mother who is an advocate against gentle parenting explains in a recent report that “every time I talk to other toddler moms, a lot of the conversations are about how hard things are, how our kids annoy us, how we need our space, how we feel overstimulated [...] and we each have only one to two kids” (DeGering, 2023). The sense of losing authority over their children, can threaten entire family units and contribute to the dreaded experience of parental burnout.

The target audience for this promotional capstone campaign are millennial parents who value their children's education, who are overworked and who are facing enhanced levels of anxiety surrounding the wellbeing of their children. High levels of stress in parents are exacerbated further by the cultural imperative for millennial parents to be the best parent possible while at the same time prioritizing not only their career ambitions but also their personal pursuits and hobbies. According to a survey conducted by Stahl (2021), “to best parent their children, 53% of mothers reported reducing their hours at work, and 51% felt they were unable to give all their energy at work.” Examining this phenomenon of parental stress further, Melore (2022) differentiates the way millennials feel the weight of parenthood from other generations pointing out that millennial parents tend to be highly independent and sometimes view asking for help as a weakness: “fifty-seven percent of moms feel like they’re failing at their job when they ask for help, and two-thirds feel like a burden when they reach out to their family to talk about stress (67%).” This mindset for parents is unhealthy and can lead to an increase in parental anxiety and depression (Fingerman, 2017; Luriechildrens.org, 2024).

There exists an underexploited opportunity for providers of online learning platforms to tap into and transform for the better this prevailing anxiety that millennial parents experience as they face the challenge of ensuring the development of their children's math skills. Zero-cost, easy-access resources have become more important than ever because even low levels of depression can severely lower energy levels in parents. One parent explains in a 2023 study, “I just feel like there’s no point in doing whatever it is that I’m doing. Or being present for whatever I’m present for. Or that there is no point. There is exhaustion and that is physical; and emotional” (Ford, 2023). Platforms such as Duolingo Math are able to mitigate these problems by offering low-energy pathways for parents to entertain and educate their children while parents can take sufficient time for themselves to relax or tackle projects they may not have had time to complete otherwise.

Problem Statement

To convince overwhelmed millennial parents that Duolingo Math can strengthen their children's math skills and make homework-time both faster and easier. Why does this matter? Because family time is best spent relaxing and laughing, rather than crying over math sheets.

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