

“Cross-industry Collaboration” Marketing Strategy and Communication: Taking the Collaboration between Duolingo and Luckin as an Example

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Abstract:

In the current market context where cross-industry collaborations are increasingly prevalent yet risk becoming homogenized, the collaboration between Luckin Coffee and Duolingo stands out as a representative and groundbreaking case of success. This study takes this co-branded campaign as its research focus and, drawing on narrative theory, participatory culture, and emotional branding theory, employs a case study approach to examine its marketing communication strategies in depth. The study identifies three effective strategies: (1) precise targeting of multi-segment audiences; (2) emotional storytelling centered on a “wedding” theme to enhance user immersion and emotional bonding; and (3) a participatory communication mechanism that stimulates user-generated content (UGC) and brand interaction, thereby facilitating viral dissemination. The results indicate that communication strategies centered on emotional narrative and user co-creation can effectively counteract marketing homogenization, enhance the symbolic value of the brand, and sustain long-term user engagement. This research provides theoretical implications and practical strategic insights for future cross-industry collaborations.

Keywords: Cross-industry collaboration; communication; marketing.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the current landscape of the consumer market, where cross-industry co-branding marketing is on the rise but gradually falling into homogenization. This phenomenon is particularly pro-

nounced in the emerging consumer market targeting Generation Z. This study offers important theoretical and practical insights into how narrative strategies and user participation can break through communication boundaries and enhance brand value. It not only provides practical cross-industry marketing strategies

for similar brands but also enriches marketing communication theory grounded in participatory culture. This study focuses on the cross-industry co-branding case of Luckin Coffee and Duolingo, and analyzes it in detail from three dimensions: target market segmentation, emotional narrative design, and mechanisms of user co-creation.

This study examines cross-industry collaboration between Luckin Coffee and Duolingo as its case and takes an analysis from three dimensions: target market stratification, emotional narrative design, and user co-creation mechanism. In terms of research methods, this paper employs the literature analysis method to examine industry reports, social media data, and related academic literature. The strength of this method lies in its ability to provide a full understanding of the case background, strategic details, and communication effects, which is conducive to an in-depth interpretation within a theoretical framework. The objective of this study is to analyze and summarize the key strategies and their theoretical underpinnings in this successful case, so as to offer insights for brands seeking to avoid homogenization in highly competitive markets. To this end, the research focuses on core strategies such as emotional narrative and the dissemination of user-generated content (UGC), and examines the case planning process as well as audience feedback.

2. Background

Cross-industry collaborations are based on brand collaborations. Brand collaboration refers to the process where two or more brands, during marketing, combine their respective products and services to solidify their brand image, create higher commercial value, and better communication effects [1]. However, Cross-industry collaborations emphasize that the cooperating brands come from different fields. In an environment without mutual competition, they leverage the diverse resources and advantages of both sides, capture the common characteristics and demands of their users, and achieve greater commercial value [2].

Cross-industry collaboration marketing has become a very popular brand strategy nowadays. For instance, Luckin Coffee, as a beverage company, has frequently partnered with popular games, anime IPs, and TV dramas in recent years. Pizza Hut, Heytea, and other restaurant brands have successively collaborated with the game. Data shows that from January to May 2024, the social media engagement of related works of “brand collaboration” on social media reached 410 million interactions [3]. Nowadays, Generation Z users are the core consumer group in the market. This type of user pursues uniqueness and yearns for novelty and adventure. Brands from completely different fields can create a sense of freshness to users and attract

greater attention and discussion through novel cooperation methods. In addition, people’s lives are embedded in digital communication, and many young people are keen on producing derivative content (user-generated content, UGC) on social media. Due to the high communicative salience of cross-industry collaborations, secondary creation has facilitated the viral diffusion. Therefore, cross-border collaboration marketing is an effective brand communication strategy. However, under the high-frequency joint promotion, consumers have perceived homogenization among different campaigns, and the publicity has led to counterproductive publicity effects.

In such an environment, the collaboration between Duolingo and Luckin Coffee is not merely a simple aggregation of brand elements. Instead, it has successfully broken the deadlock of low efficiency in collaborations through unique narrative framing and communication strategy, a fitting brand image, and in-depth user participation, achieving mutual benefit for both brands. The partnership between Luckin Coffee and Duolingo was driven by a high degree of user overlap and aligned brand positioning. This event moved beyond the conventional product-level element stacking and integration. It innovatively generated multiple trending discussions in a short period of time by an engaging IP narration (by personifying both brands’ IPs” and conducting a series of promotional activities centered on the theme of their symbolic ‘marriage’). Through this cross-border collaboration event, both parties have effectively reinforced their brand images, significantly enhanced brand awareness, and thus achieved their business goals.

According to the 2023 China Urban Coffee Development Report, Luckin Coffee’s main consumers are young people aged 20 to 30. They tend to seek novelty, emphasize high cost-effectiveness, and care about the efficiency of preparation. Duolingo has a relatively large number of Generation Z users (those born between 1995 and 2010), who value self-learning, appreciate community culture, and place importance on individual expression [4]. Luckin Coffee’s consumer base demonstrates relatively stronger purchasing power. Duolingo’s user base encompasses a broader spectrum of young people. Collaborations can enable both parties to within overlapping consumer segments, achieve deeper market penetration across different segments of the youth, and strengthen their influence in the young market. Therefore, the reason why Luckin Coffee and Duolingo chose to collaborate across industries can be clearly understood. The age and lifestyle of their target groups have a high degree of overlap. At the same time, both brands position themselves around youthfulness, enjoyment, and self-improvement, which facilitates consumer acceptance of the campaign. Secondly, their

respective consumption scenarios are complementary. The combination of the high-frequency and convenient consumption of coffee and the self-improvement needs of language learning reinforces consumer engagement. Finally, both user groups are highly active on social media platforms. Joint activities can quickly spark discussions within digital communities and stimulate secondary creation and further dissemination, which is highly beneficial for marketing communication, planning process as well as audience feedback.

3. Case Analysis

3.1 Analysis of Marketing Strategies

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When receiving the paper, we assume that the corresponding authors grant us the copyright to use the paper for the book or journal in question. When receiving the paper, we assume that the corresponding authors grant us the copyright to use. According to data from social media platforms, the hashtag #LuckinCoffeeXDuelingo has generated tens of millions of impressions on platforms such as Weibo and Rednote. According to official data, the sales volume of Green Sasa Latte has exceeded 9 million cups in the first week. Duolingo has successfully expanded its local influence, transforming from a purely educational tool into a widely recognized cultural icon. Below, The following section analyzes the specific marketing and communication strategies employed in this successful case.

3.1.1 Market targeting

Based on the STP theory, brands need to clearly define their target markets. This study, through analysis, divides the target groups of the case activities into three user segments. This collaboration precisely targets three layers of users.

The first layer is the overlapping users of the two brands. They are highly familiar with and actively engage with the services of both Duolingo and Luckin. They mainly consist of primarily students and young professionals who prioritize self-improvement and value enjoyment, convenience, and efficiency. Such characteristics are in line with the brand positioning of both sides. For this group of deep users, participating in the case activities brings them a sense of belonging to the community. They are inclined to actively share their participation on social media, thus becoming an important force in expanding the reach of the event. Therefore, this joint campaign has significantly

strengthened user loyalty and enhanced overall customer equity [5].

The second layer consists of the existing customers from the counterpart brand. According to the consumer equity test proposed by Blattberg and Deighton, brands were able to attract and engage each other's loyal customers through strategically designed promotional activities, achieving the goal of expanding the customer base.

The third layer consists of a broader group of broader segment of Generation Z and digitally active young users. Although they had not previously engaged with either brand, the Z generation has the characteristics of long-term use of the Internet, with a strong tendency to follow trending topics and viral short-form content online [6]. The campaign attracted considerable attention from this group through highly entertaining, emotionally engaging content and meme-driven dissemination. This engagement stimulated interest among new users, prompting them to try products and services from both brands. The introduction of this group indicates that potential users have been tapped, contributing to the potential growth and long-term development of both brands.

As Fournier mentioned, a brand can be personified by consumers as an entity with personality and behavior through marketing activities, product design, and other brand-related strategies [7]. Luckin Coffee is striving to achieve this. Previously, Luckin Coffee's initiatives focused on producing IP-themed beverages based on the characteristics of its partner IPs; it has transformed its narrative centered on the 'marriage' of the two IPs. In this case, brands initiated IP-based marketing efforts. In May 2025, Luckin Coffee's brand IP "lucky" opened an independent IP account on Douyin to share its "personal" daily life. The main content focuses on trending topics and viral meme challenges. Luckin Coffee strives to shape the relaxed and endearing personalities of its characters, delivering emotional value to users and enhancing brand attachment.

Duolingo, on the other hand, has been continuously deepening the personification marketing strategy of its IP character Duoluo. The green owl of Duolingo is not merely an app icon; it serves as a key embodiment of the brand's identity and a globally recognized 'super IP' with distinct personality traits that are well-known on global social media. DORA frequently sends messages to users to remind them to check in, which facilitates the dissemination of her personality traits through meme culture. In addition, Duolingo has established a unique emotional connection with its users by uploading viral videos and entertainment content about Duolingo on TikTok and Twitter, enhancing the brand's sense of closeness. This approach has also reinforced the product's key attribute that learning can be

enjoyable.

Both parties co-created IP narratives in this campaign, strengthening the original brand characteristics and offering consumers a novel brand experience. The co-branded event attached social attributes to both the coffee and the learning software through light-hearted and fun entertainment content: transformed purchases or subscriptions into forms of social currency within digital communities. Luckin Coffee incorporated a ‘Drink with Me’ prompt into its online ordering interface. Purchasing the co-branded products signified participation in the brand narrative. Users shared their purchases on social media as a symbolic contribution, and then engaged in more discussions with friends in the comment section, spreading their trendy image of being “young and trend-conscious” to the social circle. This kind of purchasing behavior, based on entertainment experience, not only provides users with a sense of identity and emotional resonance but also confers symbolic value on the brand that transcends the functional utility of the product [8].

3.1.2 Project and service design

Luckin Coffee has launched the “Green Shasha (Duolingo-inspired) Latte”, which not only has a taste reminiscent of “Green Bird”, but also comes with a new co-branded theme cup featuring the mascot ‘Duo the Owl’, along with paper bags, cup sleeves and stickers of the same series. The accompanying slogans, presented in a light and conversational tone, encouraged coffee buyers to engage with Duolingo: “You don’t want to learn at all, do you?” “Drink more and learn more.” This creative integration of coffee with a learning scenario served as an effective behavioral cue, guiding users to open the Duolingo app to check in. At the same time, it launched notebooks, study stickers, memory cards and other branded merchandise closely related to learning functions, highlighting Duolingo’s core product proposition of making learning engaging and enjoyable.

3.2 Analysis of Communication Strategies

The serialized narrative structure fully immerses users in this event, bypassing users’ cognitive elaboration and generating positive emotions towards the characters [9]. The wedding narrative constructed by this joint event, from the wedding video to the opening of the offline “wedding house” store, has built a complete, playful, and entertaining virtual narrative. When users watch, participate in purchasing, and share, they reduce their sensitivity to advertisements and fully immerse themselves in enjoying the pleasure they bring. The highly personified intellectual property (IP) characters in the story enable users to form emotional connections with the two IP characters, eliciting

positive affective responses (e.g., pride, joy) aligned with brand communication goals. The highly interactive scenarios enable the audience to form communities in the interactive digital forums and user-generated content platforms, creating a sense of belonging for users. The different creative videos every day have stimulated curiosity and sustained audience engagement over time. Next, emotions are the driving force behind actions. According to Bagozzi’s emphasis, coping is a response to emotional connections [10]. These positive emotions will trigger users’ purchasing behavior. However, the more ingenious “giving as a gift” plot maintains the status of consumers as participants in the event, allowing users who are immersed in it to naturally transform their emotions into consumption behaviors.

In this case, the campaign’s virality was driven largely by extensive user-generated content (UGC). The driving force behind this online buzz lay in the brand’s adoption of strategies designed to encourage participatory creativity. The controversial and memorable Duolingo brand mascot invites extensive public discourse: Duolingo once announced the “death” of Duo, sparking widespread online debate worldwide. Through collaborations with multiple brands in offline events and online interactions, Duo generated a “bride-snatching” narrative. The event teaser further amplified the unresolved suspense surrounding the identity of the “groom.” These elements provided ample space for audience imagination and discursive engagement.

Rather than exercising direct control over communicative direction, the brand designed highly imitable and “remix” symbolic cues to stimulate user engagement [11]. Users participated by creating and sharing short-form videos, memes, and online commentaries. They could articulate their stance within the shared thematic framework. According to Jenkins, participatory culture centers on users’ active content creation. In this case, the brand fostered a narrative space by ceding partial control over communication processes, enabling users to gain a strong sense of community belonging through creative production and social interaction, thereby further amplifying brand diffusion [12].

Multiple other brands also engaged in this campaign. Wang Xingang proposed the concept of “brand teasing,” referring to multiple brands interacting on social media through a personified brand voice, thereby attracting consumer interest and prompting independent engagement through likes, comments, and cascading reposts [13].

Under Duolingo and Luckin Coffee’s promotional posts, such as the “Wedding Seat Invitation” and “Wedding Sponsor Invitation,” dozens of enterprises participated in playful interactions with Luckin Coffee and offered

product giveaways through comment-section raffles to celebrate the pair. These interactions were sufficiently engaging to stimulate audience curiosity and positive affect, fostering deeper identification with brand values [14]. For major brands, this practice generated increased media visibility and a more approachable brand image, while for platforms, it enriched content quality and boosted user engagement. This interactive model represents a mutually beneficial form of social marketing that is worthy of emulation.

4. Discussion

In today's market environment of frequent cross-industry collaborations, brands face the challenge of avoiding marketing homogenization. This case provides three key insights.

First, engage consumer emotions through narrative storytelling. Traditional cross-industry collaborations often rely on superficial product add-ons, such as IP-based packaging or limited-edition flavors. Such collaborations tend to attract only consumers already interested in the products or partner brands, rather than reaching a broader audience. However, the "wedding narrative" between Duolingo and Luckin Coffee, built on a highly personified brand mascot and a coherent, engaging storyline, enabled users to experience a sense of immersion during both viewing and participation. Such emotionally resonant promotion can reach a wider range of consumers, rather than merely attracting those with a pre-existing functional need for the product.

Second, the strategic design of sustained communication pacing rather than a rapid decline in attention. This case ensured a steady flow of marketing content through a sequential narrative arc consisting of "event preview – guest invitations – wedding ceremony – online interactions – product launch – offline engagement – introduction of subsequent products." The brand released meme-based videos and short wedding clips on a daily basis, engaged repeatedly with users in the comment sections, and organized offline pop-up stores. This sustained social media visibility helped avoid the weak communication impact typically caused by a rapid decline in attention following the launch of co-branded products.

Third, user co-creation outweighs one-way communication. In this case, the brand did not fully control the dissemination pace but provided a creative space, which stimulated extensive derivative creations. This shifted communication from a one-way brand-led approach to a community-driven participatory event, significantly increasing the likelihood of sustained topic engagement and enhancing users' purchase intentions. Although this case achieved viral success, certain risks warrant careful con-

sideration. The dissemination heavily relies on user-generated derivative content, and the trajectory of public discourse remains beyond the brand's control. As Shifman notes, meme dissemination is often accompanied by modification and reinterpretation [11]. Users frequently produce parodic content and may even disseminate adverse messages during derivative creation. However, brands find it difficult to maintain control over discourse once creative space is granted. Should the discourse take a negative turn, it may potentially damage the brand's image.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the success of Luckin Coffee's collaboration with Duolingo is attributable to three core strategies: First, based on substantially overlapping target audiences and complementary brand positioning, precise community penetration and user expansion have been achieved; Second, through emotional and narrative storytelling design, it fosters user immersion, effectively stimulating purchasing behavior and social sharing. Third, by adopting an open communication framework, the campaign encouraged users to co-create content (UGC), form extensive community participation and cross-brand interaction, thereby achieving cross-community communication. Therefore, this study concludes that against the backdrop of the prevailing homogenization of cross-industry collaborations, a communication strategy centered on emotional narrative and driven by user co-creation can significantly enhance brand influence and user loyalty, facilitating the shift from functional consumption to emotional and symbolic consumption. This research offers theoretical and practical implications for the theory and practice of cross-industry brand collaborations and communication strategies. At the theoretical level, it enriches the scholarly perspectives on cross-industry collaborations in aspects such as emotional narrative, personified branding, and user participation, especially in the development of communication mechanisms in the context of Generation Z and social media. At the practical level, it provides brands with an actionable strategic framework, including how to avoid homogenization through story-driven content, how to expand communication effectiveness by leveraging UGC, and how to achieve amplify social buzz through multi-brand collaboration. Future research should further explore the following areas: First, the dissemination pathways and impact mechanisms of user-co-created content in cross-border collaboration activities, especially the double-edged sword effect of negative or derivative creation on brand image; The second is the continuity of long-term story narration; The third is how to more accurately assess the actual effective-

ness of the joint activities through quantitative methods.

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