

The Evolution of Brand Co-Branding Models Empowered by New Media Platforms: A Cultural Ecology Study Based on Symbolic Consumption and Cross-Circle Communication

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Abstract:

The new media ecology generated by the digital technology revolution is reshaping the underlying logic of brand co-branding. Taking symbolic consumption theory and cross-circle communication theory as the dual-track framework, this study systematically analyzes how new media platforms reconstruct the cultural ecology of brand co-branding through technological empowerment and communication innovation via multi-case in-depth descriptions and mixed research methods. The study reveals that brand co-branding in the new media environment exhibits three characteristics: dynamic construction of symbolic value, fission of cross-circle communication networks, and innovation of technology-driven logic, forming an interactive mechanism with “symbol-communication-technology” as the core. This research not only expands the techno-cultural dimension of brand co-branding theory but also provides an integrated analytical framework for enterprises to build ecological co-branding strategies in the digital era.

Keywords: New media platforms, Brand co-branding, Symbolic consumption, Cross-circle communication, Technological empowerment

1. Introduction

1.1 The Evolution of Marketing Ecology in the Digital Age

When Luckin Coffee and Moutai’s “Jiangxiang

Latte” impacted the consumer market with a “break-through trend” of “5.42 million cups sold in a single day + 1 billion social topics,” the phenomenon reflects the disruptive reconstruction of brand co-branding models by new media platforms. Driven by the combined technological forces of algorithmic recom-

mendation, short-video communication, and user-generated content (UGC), the traditional brand co-branding logic based on resource complementarity (“1+1=2”) is evolving into an ecological paradigm centered on cultural symbiosis (“1+1>2”). According to data from iiMedia Research (2024), the penetration rate of brand co-branding models in China’s new media marketing market has surged from 18% in 2019 to 32.7% in 2024, demonstrating notable characteristics of “accelerated technological drive, deepened cultural narrative, and strengthened cross-circle penetration.” However, academic theories explaining this transformation still lag behind practical developments, particularly lacking systematic research on the three-dimensional interactive mechanism of “technology-symbol-communication.”

1.2 Research Questions and Value

This study aims to address three core propositions: First, how do new media platforms shape consumers’ cognitive maps of co-branded brands through the deconstruction and reconstruction of symbolic systems? Second, how does the internal logic of cross-circle communication break through the circle barriers of traditional marketing to form viral diffusion effects? Third, how do technological tools such as artificial intelligence and algorithmic recommendation fundamentally reconstruct the communication genes and value creation models of brand co-branding? Answering these questions will not only help improve the digital marketing theory system but also provide practical guidance for enterprises to formulate precise co-branding strategies in the era of fragmented communication.

2. Literature Review: Theoretical Context and Research Gaps

2.1 The Paradigm Evolution of Brand Co-Branding Research

Academic exploration of brand co-branding originated from the economic explanation of “synergy effects” [1], with early research focusing on the complementarity of brand equity and consumer evaluation models [2]. With the rise of social media, research perspectives have shifted to co-branding strategies in digital interaction scenarios, such as the mediating effect of KOL communication [3] and the impact of user engagement on co-branding effectiveness [4]. However, existing literature mostly remains at the empirical level of “phenomenon description-strategy induction,” lacking theoretical exploration of the deep cultural logic of brand co-branding under technological empowerment.

2.2 The Marketing Translation of Symbolic Consumption Theory

Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory provides a classic analytical framework for interpreting consumption culture. In the context of brand co-branding, consumption behavior is essentially a process of decoding symbolic values: consumers construct self-identity and social distinction through the interpretive meaning of visual symbols (e.g., LOGO juxtaposition) and linguistic symbols (e.g., cross-border copywriting) of co-branded brands [6]. The technological characteristics of new media platforms further amplify the fluidity of symbols—the dynamic narrative of short videos and the symbolic empowerment of virtual avatars transform traditional static symbolic systems into interactive and reconstructible dynamic meaning networks [7]. However, existing research has not clarified the fission mechanism of symbolic meanings in cross-circle communication.

2.3 The Theoretical Origin and Marketing Application of Cross-Circle Communication

The theoretical foundation of cross-circle communication can be traced back to the sociological “weak tie theory” [8], whose core lies in how information flows between different social circles create value. In the marketing field, this theory is manifested as activating the communication momentum of “marginal nodes” through content innovation to achieve penetration from core customer groups to pan-circle audiences [9]. New communication forms such as Douyin “challenges” and Xiaohongshu “grass planting” essentially build multi-node and highly elastic communication networks through the social fission of UGC content [10]. However, existing research lacks quantitative analysis of communication network structures, particularly ignoring the decisive impact of algorithmic recommendation technologies on cross-circle communication efficiency.

2.4 Research Gaps: The Three-Dimensional Fragmentation of Technology, Symbol, and Communication

Current research limitations are concentrated in three dimensions: First, the theoretical gap in the technology dimension—how cutting-edge technologies such as AI-generated content and algorithmic recommendation reshape the underlying logic of brand co-branding has not formed a complete analytical framework; Second, the absence of an ecological perspective—the interactive relationship of “platform-brand-user” is fragmented into isolated variables, lacking integrated research at the cultural ecology level; Third, the imbalance in methodology—the fragmentation of qualitative and quantitative research results

in superficial analysis of the mechanisms of cross-circle communication. This study systematically fills these research gaps by integrating multidisciplinary theories and mixed research methods.

3. Theoretical Framework and Research Design

3.1 The Construction of a Three-Dimensional Analytical Framework

Based on a critical integration of existing theories, this study constructs an interactive analytical framework of “symbolic value construction-cross-circle communication path-technological empowerment logic” (Figure 1). The symbolic value dimension takes Roland Barthes’ three-layer semiotic system of “signifier-signified-myth” as the core to analyze how co-branded brands influence consumer cognition through symbolic coding; the cross-circle communication dimension draws on social network theory to focus on the connection strength and structural hole distribution of communication nodes (brands, KOLs, users); the technological empowerment dimension focuses on the full-chain innovation of AI, algorithmic recommendation, etc., in content production, distribution, and consumption. The dynamic interaction of the three constitutes the cultural ecology model of brand co-branding empowered by new media platforms.

3.2 The Mixed Application of Research Methods

3.2.1 In-Depth Semiotic Decoding

Using Roland Barthes’ “myth analysis method,” this study conducts multi-level interpretations of the diverse symbols in the Luckin × Moutai co-branding case. For example, the color symbols in packaging design (the collision of Luckin Blue and Moutai Red), taste symbols (the semantic migration of “Jiangxiang”), and cultural symbols (the generational narrative of “young people’s first Moutai”) construct a cultural myth of “rejuvenating traditional premium liquor” through the dynamic mapping of signifiers and signifieds[6].

3.2.2 Quantitative Analysis of Social Networks

Using Gephi software to visualize the communication data from platforms such as Douyin and Xiaohongshu. Taking the “Jiangxiang Latte” related topics as an example, the study captured 5,000 user comments and forwarding data to construct a social network map including brand official accounts, top KOLs, and ordinary users. By calculating indicators such as degree centrality and betweenness cen-

trality, core communication nodes (e.g., food bloggers with millions of followers) and key communication paths (e.g., the three-level communication chain of “brand official announcement-top KOL diffusion-UGC secondary creation”) were identified[10].

3.2.3 Qualitative Mining of Cultural Texts

Using NVivo software to conduct semantic network analysis on social media texts to extract high-frequency vocabulary and emotional tendencies. In the comment corpus of “Jiangxiang Latte,” words such as “breakthrough,” “nostalgia,” and “ritual sense” formed meaning clusters, reflecting consumers’ cognitive tendency to regard co-branded products as “cultural fusion markers”; emotional analysis showed that positive evaluations accounted for 68%, neutral evaluations 25%, and negative evaluations 7%, indicating that the co-branding symbolic system successfully activated emotional resonance among mainstream consumer groups[7].

3.2.4 Comparative Studies of Multiple Cases

In addition to the Luckin × Moutai case, the study also includes typical cases such as Heytea × Fujiwara Hiroshi (trend culture cross-border) and Nike × Roblox (metaverse virtual co-branding). Through cross-case comparisons, the common laws and differential characteristics of brand co-branding under different technological scenarios are revealed. For example, in virtual co-branding cases, AR fitting technology extends symbolic consumption from the physical level to the digital twin space, demonstrating the role of technological empowerment in expanding symbolic boundaries[9].

4. Argumentation and Analysis: The Reconstruction of Cultural Ecology under Technological Empowerment

4.1 The Dynamic Construction of Symbolic Value and Cognitive Penetration

With the technological support of new media platforms, the symbolic system of brand co-branding exhibits remarkable characteristics of “multi-level deconstruction-scenario-based reconstruction.” Taking Luckin × Moutai as an example, its symbolic value construction went through three stages: First, the collage of physical symbols—the color juxtaposition and LOGO overlay in packaging design formed cross-border cognition at the visual level; Second, the migration of semantic symbols—the naming of “Jiangxiang Latte” transformed Moutai’s taste symbols into perceivable consumption images, and the scenario narrative of “shake before drinking” on

short-video platforms endowed the product with the symbolic connotation of “ritual sense”; Third, the upgrading of cultural symbols—the social media topic #MoutaiNoLongerExclusiveToMiddleAged transformed the co-branding behavior into a generational cultural dialogue, constructing a collective imagination of “rejuvenating traditional brands”[6].

The dynamic construction of this symbolic value is essentially the differential decoding of symbolic meanings across different circles through the content distribution mechanisms of new media platforms. NVivo analysis shows that Generation Z users focus more on “trendy cross-border” symbols, while middle-aged groups emphasize “nostalgic connection” symbols, and the two complete the meaning co-construction of co-branded brand symbols through interactive discussions on social platforms[7].

4.2 The Network Fission and Mechanism Innovation of Cross-Circle Communication

The core of cross-circle communication lies in breaking the “information cocoon” circle barriers to build a multi-node collaborative communication ecology. Social network analysis shows that the communication network of Luckin × Moutai presents a “core radiation-marginal fission” structure: brand official accounts and top KOLs constitute core nodes, with an average degree centrality of 185.2, undertaking the functions of information sources and communication hubs; ordinary users, as marginal nodes, form communication branches through secondary creation (e.g., adapting short videos of “Moutai coffee mixing tutorials”), promoting information penetration into multiple circles such as food, workplace, and finance[10]. In terms of communication motivation mechanisms, the technological characteristics of new media platforms have generated three innovations: First, the topic fission mechanism—Douyin stimulated user creativity by setting up an incentive model of “participate in the challenge to win co-branding peripherals,” making the #JiangxiangLateChallenge topic reach over 800 million views; Second, the emotional resonance mechanism—the Weibo topic #WhenMoutaiMeetsLuckin focused on the “collision between tradition and modernity,” triggering emotional resonance among different age and professional groups, with over 5 million interactions; Third, the algorithmic breakthrough mechanism—Xiaohongshu’s collaborative filtering algorithm accurately pushed co-branding content to seemingly unrelated circles such as “coffee lovers,” “Chinese liquor collectors,” and “working professionals” based on user interest tags, achieving exponential improvements in “weak tie” communication efficiency[8,10].

4.3 The Underlying Logic and Model Innovation of Technological Empowerment

AI and algorithmic technologies are fundamentally changing the value creation logic of brand co-branding. At the content production end, in the Heytea × Fujiwara Hiroshi co-branding case, AI-generated 100,000 personalized advertising copies achieved precise matching of “user portraits-copy styles” through natural language processing technology, with click-through rates increasing by 47% compared to traditional copies[9]; At the communication and distribution end, Douyin’s “interest recommendation algorithm” dynamically adjusted the exposure strategy of co-branding content based on real-time data such as user viewing duration and interaction frequency, enabling core messages to break through effectively in an “information overload” environment[3]; At the consumption scenario end, Nike × Roblox’s virtual shoe exhibition authenticated digital products through blockchain technology, and users could display purchased virtual shoes on social platforms, forming a closed loop of “virtual symbolic consumption-real-world identity recognition”[9].

The deep significance of this technological empowerment lies in transforming the traditional “experience-driven” model of brand co-branding into a “data intelligence-driven” model. Gephi analysis shows that by identifying structural holes in communication networks (e.g., cross-circle KOL nodes), enterprises can improve marketing resource allocation efficiency by over 300%; NVivo’s emotional analysis results provide quantitative basis for real-time adjustment of symbolic narrative strategies[4,7]. Technology is no longer just a communication tool but has become the underlying gene shaping the cultural ecology of brand co-branding.

5. Conclusions and Future Prospects

5.1 Core Research Findings

This study reveals three logics of brand co-branding empowered by new media platforms: First, symbolic value construction is the core of cultural ecology—brands achieve deep colonization of consumer cognition through the dynamic deduction of multi-level symbolic systems; Second, cross-circle communication is the path of ecological operation—the collaboration of technological mediation and emotional resonance builds a “core radiation-marginal fission” communication network; Third, technological empowerment is the driving force of ecological evolution—technologies such as AI and algorithms reshape the entire chain of content production, distribution, and consumption, pushing brand co-brand-

ing from “resource integration” to “intelligent symbiosis”[1-4,6-10].

5.2 Practical Implications and Strategic Recommendations

For brand owners, it is necessary to establish a three-dimensional collaborative strategy of “symbolic narrative-technological tools-circle operation”: At the symbolic level, focus on the creative transformation of traditional cultural symbols and modern aesthetic needs (e.g., the youthful expression of Moutai’s “Jiangxiang” symbol); At the technological level, make good use of AI-generated content, algorithmic recommendation, and other tools to improve communication precision; At the circle level, activate the participation momentum of diverse audiences by cultivating “cross-circle KOLs” and designing UGC incentive mechanisms[3,9,10].

For platform owners, they should optimize the “break-through” capability of technological ecology: On the one hand, develop algorithm models supporting cross-circle communication (e.g., enhancing “weak tie” recommendation weights); On the other hand, build an open content creation ecology (e.g., providing AI editing templates and virtual scene building tools) to reduce user participation thresholds[8,10].

5.3 Research Limitations and Future Directions

This study mainly focuses on consumer brand cases, and its applicability to B2B brand co-branding needs to be verified; Additionally, it does not deeply explore the ethical impacts of algorithmic recommendations (such as the exacerbation of information cocoons and data privacy issues). Future research can introduce computational sociology methods to analyze the interaction between

technological ethics and brand co-branding or expand into emerging fields such as the metaverse and AIGC to further explore brand co-branding model innovations in virtual ecologies[5,9].

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