



Beyond the Viral Moutai Latte: Luckin Coffee's Co-Branding Playbook and the Limits of Youth-Oriented Brand Renewal

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Abstract. Luckin Coffee's collaboration with Kweichow Moutai became one of the most visible co-branding events in China's beverage market. The Moutai Latte generated strong sales, social-media discussion, and public curiosity, but the case should not be understood only as a viral marketing success. This paper uses Luckin Coffee's co-branding strategy as a case to examine how brand alliances support consumer attention, symbolic transfer, social-media participation, purchase intention, and youth-oriented brand renewal. Based on studies of brand alliance spillover effects, co-branding strategy, consumer brand engagement, purchase intention, and Luckin Coffee's joint-branding strategy, this paper develops a case framework for explaining Luckin's co-branding playbook and its limitations. The analysis suggests that co-branding can create topic visibility, symbolic novelty, perceived product uniqueness, and consumer participation. However, its long-term value depends on brand fit, product quality, platform execution, price acceptance, and the ability to convert short-term curiosity into stable brand preference. The paper contributes by distinguishing viral co-branding from sustainable brand renewal and by proposing implications for partner selection, product design, social-media communication, consumer experience management, and long-term brand positioning.

Keywords: Luckin Coffee, Moutai Latte, co-branding, brand alliance, consumer brand engagement, youth-oriented brand renewal, purchase intention.

1 Introduction

Co-branding has become a common marketing strategy in China's consumer market. Coffee brands, tea brands, cosmetic brands, food brands, fashion brands, and cultural IP owners frequently launch joint products to attract young consumers. These collaborations are often designed not only to sell products, but also to create social-media topics, strengthen brand personality, and reshape consumer perceptions. In this context,

Luckin Coffee has become a representative case because it uses frequent product innovation, digital ordering, low-price promotion, and co-branding campaigns to maintain market visibility.

The collaboration between Luckin Coffee and Kweichow Moutai is especially important. Kweichow Moutai represents high-end Chinese liquor, business culture, traditional prestige, and scarcity. Luckin Coffee represents convenience, affordability, digital consumption, and young urban lifestyles. The Moutai Latte combined these two very different brand images into one product. On its launch day in September 2023, Luckin reported that the product sold 5.42 million cups and generated sales of more than RMB 100 million, which made it a widely discussed case in China's beverage market.

However, the popularity of the Moutai Latte also raises a more important academic question. Does viral co-branding really support long-term brand renewal, or does it mainly produce short-term traffic? A product may attract attention because it is surprising, limited, or humorous, but attention does not automatically become brand loyalty. Similarly, a collaboration may bring symbolic value to both brands, but it may also cause confusion if the product experience, brand fit, or consumer expectations are not well managed.

This paper analyzes Luckin Coffee's co-branding playbook through the case of the Moutai Latte and related joint-branding practices. The focus is not only on the product's sales performance, but also on the mechanisms through which co-branding influences consumer response. The research question is: how does Luckin Coffee use co-branding to attract young consumers, and what are the limits of this strategy for sustainable brand renewal?

The paper is a case-based conceptual analysis. It does not estimate causal coefficients or use internal company data. Instead, it draws on existing literature and public case evidence to develop an analytical framework. The key argument is that Luckin's co-branding success depends on four mechanisms: partner-symbol transfer, product novelty, social-media participation, and digital purchase conversion. Its limitations lie in overdependence on novelty, possible brand dilution, product-experience uncertainty, and the difficulty of turning viral attention into long-term brand equity.

2 Literature Review and Conceptual Basis

2.1 Co-Branding and Brand Alliance Effects

Co-branding means that two or more brands appear together in one product, service, or marketing campaign. It is different from ordinary promotion because consumers do not only judge the product itself. They also pay attention to whether the two brands match each other, whether the cooperation is reasonable, and what kind of symbolic meaning the cooperation creates.

Recent co-branding research suggests that consumers often understand co-branded products as a kind of relationship between brands. When this relationship appears natural and vivid, consumers are more likely to form a positive evaluation and show stronger purchase intention^[1]. This perspective is useful for understanding Luckin's

Moutai Latte. The product was not simply a coffee with liquor flavor. It created a symbolic connection between two very different brands: Luckin, which represents convenient and youth-oriented coffee consumption, and Moutai, which represents traditional prestige and high-end liquor culture.

Co-branding can also help a high-end brand reach a broader consumer group. In the Moutai Latte case, many young consumers may not regularly buy Moutai liquor, but they could try a Moutai-flavored latte at a much lower price. This made Moutai more accessible in an everyday consumption scene, while still keeping part of its premium symbolic value^[2]. For Luckin, the cooperation also added cultural weight and public discussion value to an ordinary coffee product.

The success of this kind of cooperation depends not only on brand reputation, but also on novelty, entertainment value, and consumer participation. When a co-branded product feels fresh and interesting, consumers are more willing to discuss it online, share photos, and compare their own experience with others^[3]. This explains why the Moutai Latte quickly became a social-media topic. People were interested not only in the taste, but also in the unexpected combination itself.

2.2 Social-Media Engagement and Youth-Oriented Brand Renewal

In the digital market, co-branding is closely connected with social-media communication. A co-branded product becomes more influential when consumers are willing to post about it, comment on it, and turn it into a shared online topic. For this reason, the value of co-branding is no longer limited to product sales. It also includes visibility, discussion, user participation, and brand image renewal.

Social-media collaboration needs more than online popularity. A campaign may attract attention at the beginning, but its final effect still depends on product design, communication control, user feedback, and the consistency between the brand and the partner^[4]. This is especially important for Luckin, because its co-branding campaigns rely heavily on fast online spread. If the product experience does not match consumer expectations, negative comments can spread as quickly as positive ones.

Luckin's co-branding strategy should also be understood as part of its broader marketing system. Its frequent joint campaigns work together with store expansion, new product launches, digital ordering, coupons, and a large user base^[5]. The Moutai Latte was successful not only because Moutai was a famous partner, but also because Luckin already had the channels to turn online attention into real purchases.

Youth-oriented brand renewal is therefore not only about making a traditional brand look young for a short time. It requires a product and communication style that can fit younger consumers' daily lives. In this case, Luckin gained topic value and cultural prestige from Moutai, while Moutai entered a younger and more casual consumption scene through Luckin. However, this kind of renewal has clear limits. Young consumers may try a co-branded product because it is novel, but long-term loyalty still depends on taste, price, convenience, product quality, and whether the brand remains relevant after the online discussion fades.

3 Case Background: Luckin Coffee and the Viral Moutai Latte

Luckin Coffee was founded as a digital-first coffee chain. Its business model emphasizes app-based ordering, store expansion, product innovation, coupons, delivery, and data-driven marketing. Compared with traditional café brands, Luckin's brand image is more closely linked with convenience, affordability, and frequent new product launches. This background made it suitable for rapid co-branding campaigns because the company already had digital channels, product-development routines, and a large consumer base.

The Moutai Latte was jointly launched by Luckin Coffee and Kweichow Moutai in September 2023. The product used a Moutai-flavored component and packaging elements associated with Moutai. It created immediate public attention because the two brands seemed very different. Luckin represented everyday coffee consumption, while Moutai represented formal banquets, business occasions, high price, and traditional liquor culture. This contrast made the product highly discussable on social media.

The product's popularity was supported by several factors. First, the partner combination was surprising. Consumers were curious about how Moutai could be combined with coffee. Second, the price lowered the symbolic threshold of Moutai consumption. Many young consumers could not regularly buy Moutai liquor, but they could afford a discounted Moutai-flavored latte. Third, the product was easy to share online. Its packaging, name, and unusual combination were suitable for photos, short videos, and comments. Fourth, Luckin's store network and mobile-ordering system made the product quickly accessible. This allowed online attention to become offline purchase more efficiently.

At the same time, the case also revealed the limits of viral co-branding. Some consumers purchased the product mainly for curiosity rather than taste preference. Some discussions focused more on the symbolic joke of "young people's first Moutai" than on stable product value. If the collaboration is remembered only as a short-term topic, its contribution to long-term brand renewal may be limited. Therefore, the case should be analyzed through both its marketing success and its strategic constraints.

4 Luckin Coffee's Co-Branding Playbook

Luckin's co-branding playbook can be understood through the way it connects public attention, brand meaning, social discussion, and purchase behavior. In the case of the Moutai Latte, the campaign first attracted attention because the partnership itself was unusual. Luckin and Moutai belonged to very different consumption scenes. Luckin was associated with affordable, convenient, and youth-oriented coffee consumption, while Moutai represented high-end liquor, tradition, and cultural prestige. This contrast made consumers curious not only about the taste of the drink, but also about the reason behind the cooperation.

The collaboration also allowed the two brands to exchange symbolic meanings. Luckin borrowed part of Moutai's cultural prestige and national-brand image, while

Moutai entered a younger, more digital, and more everyday consumption scene through Luckin. In this way, the product was not only a new coffee flavor, but also a symbolic meeting between traditional liquor culture and young urban coffee consumption.

Social-media participation further strengthened the campaign. The Moutai Latte was easy to photograph, comment on, and discuss. Many consumers shared their tasting experiences, posted packaging photos, compared the actual flavor with their expectations, or made jokes about drinking "Moutai" during the workday. These user-generated posts helped the campaign spread beyond official advertising and turned ordinary consumers into part of the communication process.

Luckin's digital system also played an important role. Its mobile app, coupons, wide store network, delivery service, and fast product supply made it easy for consumers to move from online interest to actual purchase. A consumer who saw the product on social media could quickly check nearby stores, place an order, and share the experience afterward. Without this convenient purchase path, online popularity would have been less likely to become real sales.

However, this strategy also has limitations. Novelty does not last forever, especially when consumers become used to frequent co-branding campaigns. A surprising partnership may create discussion, but it still needs a reasonable product logic. If the co-operation looks forced, consumers may see it as a short-term marketing trick. Viral products can encourage trial purchase, but they do not necessarily lead to repeat purchase. There is also a risk that consumers remember the partner brand or the online joke more clearly than Luckin itself.

The campaign ultimately demonstrated how digital infrastructure can convert fleeting curiosity into measurable market movement. Luckin leveraged live sales data to adjust store allocations and marketing spend within hours of launch. This responsiveness prevented stock shortages in busy areas while keeping promotional costs under control. More importantly, the partnership introduced a fresh demographic to the brand ecosystem. Many new buyers returned for regular menu items after experiencing the special drink. Yet sustaining this momentum requires continuous innovation rather than reliance on viral mechanics alone. Companies must balance novelty with consistent quality to transform momentary attention into lasting loyalty.

5 Managerial Implications and Conclusion

Luckin Coffee's co-branding strategy shows how a brand can use public curiosity to reach younger consumers. The Moutai Latte became popular because the cooperation between Luckin and Moutai was unexpected but still understandable. Coffee and liquor belong to different consumption scenes, but they are both beverage products, so the combination did not seem completely unreasonable.

For brand managers, co-branding should not only pursue surprise. A surprising partner can attract attention, but the cooperation still needs a clear connection. If the two brands have no meaningful relationship, consumers may only regard the campaign as a short-term marketing trick.

The product itself also needs to be acceptable. Online discussion can encourage consumers to try a new product, but taste, price, packaging, and convenience still influence their final attitude. If consumers buy the product only once because of curiosity, the campaign may create traffic but not real brand loyalty.

User feedback is another important issue. In this case, many consumers shared photos, reviews, jokes, and tasting experiences on social media. These posts helped the product spread quickly. At the same time, negative comments about taste or expectations could also influence later consumers. Therefore, brands should not only create online topics, but also respond to consumer opinions and improve future products.

In conclusion, the Moutai Latte was successful because it combined brand contrast, symbolic novelty, social-media discussion, and Luckin's convenient digital ordering system. However, viral co-branding does not automatically lead to long-term brand renewal. For Luckin, the more important issue is whether these campaigns can strengthen its image as an innovative and reliable coffee brand. For Moutai, the challenge is whether such cooperation can really bring the brand closer to young consumers, rather than only creating temporary curiosity.

Future research can further study this case through consumer interviews, social-media content analysis, or comparisons with other co-branding campaigns. It would also be useful to distinguish between one-time trial caused by curiosity and real repeat purchase after the viral moment has passed.

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