



Public Brand Governance and Consumer Perception of Lushan Yunwu Tea in China: Implications for Lifespan Consumer Well-Being

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Abstract. Public regional agricultural brands with strong historical and cultural heritage often face a paradox: they possess immense latent brand equity yet achieve disappointing market performance. Using the Chinese tea “Lushan Yunwu” as a qualitative single-case study, we examine how governance failures translate into a crisis in consumer perception. Although the brand has millennia of heritage, terroir-based quality, and an estimated theoretical value of nearly RMB 5 billion, its recognized brand image in China’s national market remains vague, fragmented, and sometimes negative. The study puts forward and substantiates a process model linking governance failure to signal breakdown and experiential fracture, culminating in perception collapse, and provides a diagnostic framework and effective guidance to revitalize similarly situated public regional agricultural brands. Beyond brand revitalization, this case also speaks to any broader lifespan-innovation agenda. As consumers across the life course progressively value trustworthy, culturally meaningful, and health-related food choices, the governance of public agricultural brands becomes relevant not only to market performance but also to consumer well-being, intergenerational cultural sustainability, and sustainable quality-of-life enhancement. In this sense, restoring public trust in Lushan Yunwu Tea is linked to how traditional food heritage can remain credible, accessible, and meaningful in an aging, longevity-conscious society.

Keywords: Lushan Yunwu, Lifespan Innovation, Consumer Well-being, Intergenerational Cultural perpetuation, Healthy Consumption.

1 Introduction

1.1 A Legendary Chinese Tea and the Puzzle of Dormant Brand Assets

In the history of brand management, few brands compare to Lushan Yunwu Tea in terms of quality. Its cultivation began during the Eastern Han Dynasty and grew during the Tang and Song periods. In the Song Dynasty, it was designated as a “tribute tea,” the highest imperial honor. Lushan, its origin, is a UNESCO-listed site and a national 5A tourist area, known as a historic landmark and center of Chan (Zen) tea tradition. The mountain's cloud-and-mist climate gives the tea its “six excellences”: strong, soft leaves; a green color; a lasting aroma; and a smooth, sweet flavor. Experts estimate

Lushan Yunwu's brand value in 2024 reached RMB 4.819 billion. (Cristina & Curzi, 2024).

However, a sharp "brand paradox" motivates our inquiry. Immense, seemingly unrivaled latent brand assets contrast sharply with present-day market performance. Nationally, brand influence, market share, and consumer perception are out of alignment with historical status and theoretical value. Preliminary observations reveal key pain points and their mechanisms: atomized production by fragmented smallholders causes inconsistent oversight. Uneven product quality results from insufficient standardized controls, making each purchase a "blind box" experience. Dated brand imagery and highly similar packaging fail to set the product apart in the market. Weak communications and near-silence on main digital channels limit consumer engagement. Most critically, rampant counterfeits—enabled by insufficient enforcement—damage brand credibility. These factors reveal that a lack of coordination leads to value loss: the tea's qualities and cultural legacy fail to deliver reliable consumer experiences. Why does a brand with leading historical and cultural assets and excellent intrinsic quality struggle in today's market? At what points, and through which mechanisms, is its brand value dissipated? (Vaquero Piñeiro & Curzi, 2024) This question goes beyond brand management. In societies with an aging population, more health consciousness, and greater concern for quality of life, traditional products like tea are more than commercial goods; they are part of wellness, cultural memory, gifting, and family communication. The decline of a heritage brand like Lushan Yunwu could mean a missed opportunity to link food culture with consumer well-being across the lifespan.

1.2 Problematicization: From Public Governance Failure to a Consumer Perception Crisis

We argue that Lushan Yunwu's problem is more than a marketing mistake. It results from deep governance failure and specific mechanisms that lead to a consumer-perception crisis. As a public regional agricultural brand, Lushan Yunwu acts as a public good. Many producers within the region share brand rights. This leads to the classic 'tragedy of the commons.' Without strong coordination and oversight, individuals pursue short-term profit through actions such as adulteration and infringement. Meanwhile, the collective brand faces long-term damage shared by all stakeholders. (Wang et al., 2022)

The industry is composed of small, scattered, and unorganized entities, with weak leading firms. Tea gardens make up less than one-fifth of the city's total. This undercuts clustering and unified quality standards. The rise of counterfeits shows institutional failure. Our main claim is that Lushan Yunwu's brand crisis is a multistage cascade. Problems start at the governance level and end at consumer perception. Weak public brand governance creates a confusing and messy market. This systematically destroys the signals and experiences consumers need for trust and positive views. Negative perception is the result, not the root problem (Tan et al., 2024). Governance problems, especially with traditional and health-related products, have wide impacts. They can weaken faith in traditional foods, make them less relevant to people of all ages, and

prevent heritage practices from being passed down. This connects public brand governance to debates on lifespan innovation and ongoing life quality.

1.3 Research Gap and Theoretical Contribution

Past research on public regional agricultural brands fits into two main types. First, macro-level studies analyze governance or brand value. Second, management studies offer advice from the brand owner's perspective. (Carbone et al., n.d.) However, two main gaps remain. First, we lack detailed, process-based 'chains of evidence.' We do not know how large-scale governance failures (such as weak rules or unclear ownership) lead to real breakdowns that harm consumer-brand touchpoints. For instance, we do not see how a loophole leads to counterfeits, and then to bad online purchases. Second, digital buyer decisions rely on both official data (e.g., certifications) and extensive social proof (e.g., reviews). The ways these sources interact to shape brand views are not yet fully understood.

This study responds by providing a detailed, mechanism-based explanation of public brand failure, using Lushan Yunwu as a deep qualitative case. We propose an integrative process model connecting four key elements: public governance, market signals, consumer touchpoint experiences, and consumer perception. This approach delivers both a theoretical perspective and hands-on insights for brands encountering similar challenges (Tong et al., 2021). Additionally, the study broadens public-brand scholarship into the domain of lifespan innovation, highlighting how governance shapes access to authentic, culturally meaningful, and wellness-related experiences—experiences that are critical for heritage products that support identity and well-being across generations.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Public Brand Governance and the “Tragedy of the Commons.”

After consumption, creating severe information asymmetry. Consumers, therefore, rely on observable quality indicators or “signals” to decide. Signaling theory claims that informed producers can convey unobservable quality via costly, observable signals. In public agricultural brands, signals are pivotal because publicness amplifies uncertainty. We distinguish hard signals—authoritative, objective, and hard-to-fake cues such as GI marks, organic certifications, lab reports, and scannable traceability—and soft signals—subjective, easier to imitate cues such as price tiers, packaging design, brand storytelling, and market reputation. Hard and soft signals are interdependent: dysfunctional hard signals undermine the effectiveness of soft signals by triggering consumer skepticism, even toward premium packaging or prices. (Xu et al., 2024)

2.2 Touchpoint Dependability in Shaping Brand Perception

Brand perception accumulates along the customer journey across online and offline touchpoints: social media impressions, e-commerce pages, physical stores, customer service, unboxing, and usage. In a channel-fragmented marketplace, ensuring harmony

between information and experience across channels is a core managerial principle. When elevated online claims (e.g., “millennial tribute tea,” “Zen-infused refinement”) meet noisy, generic retail settings and untrained staff, cognitive dissonance ensues and trust erodes. A flawless journey is therefore vital for transmitting value without loss and for building durable brand equity. (Liu & Wang, 2023)

3 Research Methods

Adopting an interpretivist stance, we view brand perception as socially constructed meaning rather than an objective fact to be measured. A case-study design suits “how” and “why” questions and corresponds with our goal of explaining how brand perception forms. Lushan Yunwu is treated as an important case that represents the typical challenges faced by heritage-rich public agricultural brands amid transition.

To improve depth and credibility, we triangulate across four data sources: (1) semi-structured interviews with 25 key stakeholders (officials/associations, firm leaders/cooperatives, veteran growers, retail associates/online CS, and consumers), each 60–90 minutes and fully transcribed; (2) two focus groups of seven participants each—tourists who purchased in Lushan and frequent online buyers—discussing first impressions, trust-building moments, and gifting contexts; (3) non-participant observations of eight specialty stores in Lushan and Jiujiang, four e-shops, and two live-stream sessions, including mystery shopping; and (4) textual/material analysis of 15 packages and product pages plus over 100 sociale-commerce reviews (positive and negative).

Following Braun & Clarke’s six steps—familiarization, initial coding, theme search, review, definition/naming, and narration—we developed a detailed codebook with definitions, decision rules, and exemplars; introduced peer debriefing by an independent coder (20% of data); and applied triangulation to ensure interviews, observations, and texts supported each core theme.

4 Findings: Anatomy of Perception Decline

4.1 Signal Crisis: Cues that Generate Confusion Rather than Confidence

In an experience-goods market, consumers rely heavily on signals to build trust. We find serious ambiguity, conflict, and incredibility within Lushan Yunwu’s signaling system. Hard signals (e.g., GI marks, traceability) are poorly displayed or functionally broken, undermining the basis of trust. One online buyer lamented: “I searched the entire product page and could not find the GI mark. They boast about history, but the most convincing proof is hidden—it makes me suspicious.” Worse, scanning traceability QR codes frequently produced bare-bones pages—no batch numbers, production dates, or lab reports—triggering perceptions of perfunctory compliance and deepening distrust.

Against this backdrop, soft signals become chaotic. Prices for products under the same name range by orders of magnitude without a transparent value logic; packaging either feels cheap (souvenir-like) or overwrought (bulky, ornate boxes that do not fit tea's elegance). Instead of guiding quality inference, these prompts heighten confusion and perceived risk.

4.2 Fractured Journeys: How Inconsistency Systematically Erodes Trust

Perception accumulates across touchpoints, yet we observe repeated “breakpoints.” Mythic online narratives—replete with “tribute tea,” “imperial quality,” and “Zen purity”—collide with ordinary retail environments and generic service. A consumer expected a culturally refined teahouse but encountered rows of standard souvenir shops staffed by clerks unable to articulate tea culture. This chasm between “myth” and “mundane” is particularly damaging: promises made online are not redeemed offline, breeding dissonance and a sense of being misled.

We further note gaps between explicit/implicit promises and fulfillment: lavish gift boxes often contain mediocre tea; service guarantees (e.g., “quality assured,” “tenfold compensation for fakes”) evaporate when post-sale issues arise. These fractures prevent the assembly of a coherent, credible brand image and cumulatively deplete brand equity.

4.3 Cultural Capital in Idling: From Powerful Signifiers to Hollow Labels

Lushan Yunwu's cultural repertoire—millennial tribute tea, sacred mountain, Chan tea culture—should confer differentiation and emotional bonding. Instead, cultural signs are deployed superficially as static labels (mountain silhouettes, archaic fonts, seals), producing homogenized aesthetics. Storytelling defaults to didactic timelines (“since Han, flourishing in Tang/Song”), which fail to appeal to younger consumers, who seek vivid, human-centered accounts and immersive encounters. Without activation, the brand is demoted to “just another high-mountain green tea,” forfeiting its distinctive cultural moat.

Moreover, the absence of curated cultural experience spaces (e.g., immersive tea-ritual venues) reveals a tactical oversight: selling a product rather than a lifestyle. Lacking an experiential “memory anchor,” cultural assets do not translate into identity-shaping impressions.

4.4 Vicious Cycles: When Official Endorsements Meet Negative Social Proof

Trust construction in contemporary markets depends on the interaction of official endorsements and social proof. Although Lushan Yunwu holds strong official laurels (well-known marks, GI protection, Expo medals, tribute-tea history), such authority is scarcely evident in digital discourse, where opinions form. In the absence of compelling online translations of these validations, negative user-generated content dominates e-commerce and social media, including complaints about counterfeits, inconsistent

quality, and inflated prices, which directly contradict official claims. When “imperial quality” is juxtaposed with reviews likening taste to “leafy water,” consumers privilege peer testimony, further undermining official authority.

Viewed through a lifespan-oriented lens, these outcomes indicate that the perception crisis of Lushan Yunwu is not only a branding problem but also a disruption in the social credibility of a traditional product that could otherwise support culturally meaningful and wellness-focused consumption. When authenticity signals fail and experiential trust collapses, the brand loses its ability to function as a stable cultural and consumption reference among generations.

The thematic findings can be summarized in four closely related dimensions of brand-perception barriers. First, there is a clear signal of a crisis. Hard signals, such as traceability and geographical-indication cues, fail to function as credible trust-building mechanisms, while soft signals, including packaging and price, become confusing rather than reassuring. Instead of reducing uncertainty, these signals intensify suspicion and perceived risk. Second, the customer journey proves seriously fractured. Romanticized online narratives set expectations for cultural complexity, authenticity, and refinement, yet ordinary offline retail settings, generic service encounters, and weak after-sales support commonly fall short of those expectations. This inconsistency creates cognitive dissonance, causing consumers to feel disappointed or even deceived. Third, Lushan Yunwu’s ample cultural capital remains largely idle. Although the brand possesses a long history, tribute-tea status, and strong associations with Lushan’s cultural environment, these assets are often reduced to static labels and decorative symbols rather than being translated into engaging stories, involving experiences, or memorable identity markers. As a result, the brand struggles to form emotional affinity with consumers, especially younger ones. Fourth, the interaction between official endorsement and social proof creates a vicious cycle. Official certifications, historical status, and institutional recognition are not properly communicated in digital environments. At the same time, negative user-generated content about counterfeit products, unstable quality, and poor value spreads more visibly and persuasively. Consequently, peer testimony tends to override official authority, further aggravating the perception crisis. Taken together, these four dimensions reveal that a single isolated weakness does not cause the decline in public brand perception, but rather the cumulative interaction of governance problems, signal disorder, experiential inconsistency, and negative digital feedback.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Discussion: A Process Model of Public-Brand Perception Failure

Synthesizing the evidence, we articulate a dynamic, cascading model of perception failure. Stage 1 (foundational failure): a weak, fragmented governance system produces authorization chaos, nominal standards, lax oversight, and ineffective anti-counterfeiting—creating a governance vacuum. Stage 2 (market failure): the vacuum

yields chaotic signals and fractured touchpoints. Stage 3 (consumer failure): repeated expectation–reality gaps collapse trust and nurture a negative overall perception. Stage 4 (negative feedback): eroded willingness to pay punishes high-quality producers (“bad money drives out good”), while negative word of mouth wards off potential buyers—locking the brand into downward spirals.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

As a single qualitative case, depth comes at the cost of statistical generalizability. Subsequent research might conduct comparative cases (e.g., contrasting a successful GI tea with a struggling one), develop quantitative instruments to test causal links in the process model, and undertake long-term tracking of reforms to assess their practical impact. Subsequent studies might further explore how heritage agricultural brands are perceived by consumers at different life stages, including younger consumers who pursue cultural identity and older consumers who emphasize trust, familiarity, and health-related value. Such work would deepen understanding of how public-brand governance intersects with lifespan-oriented consumption, quality-of-life concerns, and the sustainable passing on of cultural products in aging societies.

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