

# Campaign Critique: The Strategic “Marriage” of Duolingo and Luckin Coffee (2025)

Shuling Zhang \*

School of the Arts & Media, The University of New South Wales, Australia

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**Abstract:** This article makes a critical public relations analysis of the 2025 joint marketing campaign of Duolingo and Luckin Coffee in China. Although the “marriage” narrative has successfully exploited the subculture and algorithm fluctuations of the network to achieve huge digital exposure and short-term sales surge. But in-depth analysis shows that it has obvious public relations limitations. The campaign simplifies the complex audience into simple “meme-consumers”, prioritizing superficial influence over sustainable community building, and covering up Duolingo’s core educational values through the risk of missing information. The main purpose of this study is to evaluate the key gap between performance digital indicators and long-term reputation capital. To achieve this goal, the evaluation is based on three core theoretical frameworks: spreadable media, pseudo-events, and brand community definitions. Finally, it makes strategic proposals to shift from symbolic narratives to functional and relationship driven ecosystems.

**Keywords:** Joint marketing; Meme subculture; Brand community; Public relations; Pseudo-event; Uses and gratifications; Strategic communication.

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## 1. Strategic Context

### 1.1. Campaign Objectives

By early 2025, the widespread joint brand promotion activities in China’s digital market have caused widespread fatigue among consumers. Against the background of market saturation, although Luckin Coffee has rapidly expanded to 24,000 physical stores [1], it still faces a key strategic bottleneck. Driven by algorithm fluctuations, this coffee chain brand urgently needs to transform from a functional coffee supplier to a symbolic cultural symbol [2]. At the same time, Duolingo also took this opportunity to work with the partner to make full use of its global influence in the field of gamified education [3]. And Duolingo faces obvious public relations difficulties in shaping its dramatic image. This challenge is particularly prominent in the social and cultural context of China. In this market, the stagnation of user retention rate further highlights the urgent need for a digital partner with more cultural resonance.

The strategic value of cooperation comes from the respective advantages of the two brands. Luckin Coffee has an extensive physical retail network. Duolingo has a unique digital brand image. Therefore, this kind of cooperation links physical consumption with digital participation.

This connection can be seen in the activity design. Duolingo and Luckin not only promoted a co-branded product, but also built a unified narrative around their mascot. The wedding story gives a distinct social background for cooperation. This allows the two brands to communicate through relationships rather than traditional commodity information. Campaign Asia reported that the wedding was released through Weibo and other Chinese social media platforms [3]. Luckin also invites users to participate in the wedding and share the content of the event through its official Weibo account.

This strategy is very important because the two brands need different ways of interaction. Luckin can provide physical consumption scenarios. Duolingo can provide a digital

learning environment. The event connects the two environments through a common narrative. Therefore, its strategic advantage is to build a bridge between the two brands, not just to put the two logos in the same promotion activities.

However, this connection also creates a strategic risk. The shared narrative may be more memorable than the product itself. Consumers may still remember these characters and wedding stories, but they have not established a closer connection with the functional value of the brand. Therefore, the activity needs to transform symbolic attention into meaningful brand interaction. This issue has become the core of the follow-up evaluation of the activity.

### 1.2. Target Publics

The designated target group includes young people aged 18 to 30 living in major cities in China with scientific and technological literacy [4]. This group has a strong dependence on digital platforms to obtain specific psychological satisfaction [5]. The target audience is strategically positioned at the intersection of high intensity labor and extensive digital consumption. And this group has a high acceptance of compensatory emotional shelters. At the same time, these specific groups show a clear tendency to connect with brands that have successfully created a “social currency” and promoted their participation in a broader main culture [2]. For this, the junction between the highly visible visual image of Duolingo and the structure of Luckin Coffee’s comprehensive and unique narrative plays a catalytic role in psychological relief.

However, although this basic operational logic can effectively guide consumers to divert their attention briefly, it also triggers a serious public relations dilemma. There is still significant theoretical ambiguity about the long term effectiveness of consumer participation based on such a main subculture [2]. This interaction full of variables has triggered an important academic debate. Whether viral public participation can successfully cultivate lasting brand loyalty or is just a brief immersion limited to digital virtual events.

The activity mainly puts superficial digital indicators above the substantive relationship infrastructure. Therefore, this situationalization has laid a solid foundation for deeper exploration of this phenomenon.

More importantly, the audience strategy should not be evaluated only through instant participation. There can be many forms of participation. Consumers can comment, forward or create humorous replies. They do this probably because the content is interesting and easy to share. However, this does not necessarily mean that their relationship with a brand will become closer.

This distinction is crucial to understanding the activity. The activity is highly dependent on the cultural visibility of the network language. It relies less on the functional value of coffee or language learning. Jenkins' research on participatory culture shows that digital participation can include creating, sharing and disseminating content [7]. Participation does not automatically mean building a lasting relationship with the brand. Therefore, the potential of the activity to attract young digital users should be regarded as the entrance to participate in the interaction. It should not be regarded as direct evidence of establishing a long term relationship.

## **2. Strategic Tactics and Critical Intervention**

### **2.1. Precision of Publics vs. Superficial Archetypes**

By taking Generation Z as the main target group, the activity fully reflects the high attention to the specific psychological satisfaction pursued by urban youth [5]. Through this tactical configuration, the initiative has successfully met the immediate psychological needs of the public. But this result is achieved by simplifying these different groups into pure "meme-consumers". Such a framework will ultimately undermine the sustainable status of consumers in a resilient network [6]. Although the "marriage" narrative effectively exploits the inherent communication of digital content [7], it fundamentally underestimates the complexity of public participation. It misunderstands complex social identities as a simple medium for the spread of the virus.

The problem is not the use of memes itself. The main problem is to regard the participation of meme as proof of good public relations.

Consumers may participate in a humorous publicity campaign. This participation may help the dissemination of information, but the connection between consumers and brands may still be weak.

This distinguishes between communication participation and relational participation. Communicative participation can improve the visibility of the campaign content. Relational participation requires deeper and more continuous contact. These contacts may involve brands, their products and other consumers.

This distinction is consistent with McAlexander et al.'s [6] understanding of brand community. A strong brand community depends on the relationship network. It is not only based on individual interaction between consumers and brands. From this perspective, the activity creates a temporary common cultural reference. However, there is no sufficient evidence that this reference will develop into a stable community structure.

### **2.2. Misalignment Between Narrative Tactics and Brand Message**

There is a fundamental contradiction between the chaos in the tactical execution of the movement and the institutional discourse it tries to convey. Duolingo and Luckin Coffee deliberately concealed the full details at the beginning of the project to stimulate public speculation. Although this "Information Lacuna" strategy [8] can effectively catalyze collective speculation, it inadvertently covers up the core values inherent in the participating brand. For Duolingo, changing from an "annoying mentor" to a "dramatic partner" may weaken its teaching authority. But this transformation is a key component necessary to promote meaningful participation [7]. Therefore, although this practice has attracted wide attention among the public, excessive propaganda has failed to strengthen the basic identity of the brand. Instead it weakens the image of the enterprise, so that the superficial flamphides the real value.

Information blanks can attract attention, because incomplete information will prompt the audience to interpret the missing part. In this campaign, the wedding narrative provides a simple framework for this interpretation. Users can guess the relationship between these two mascots. They can also participate in and respond to the story by commenting, forwarding and so on.

But this strategy creates tension between attention and information clarity. The less information the audience gets at the beginning, the more room they have to build their own understanding. This can increase the discussion and make the activity more interesting. At the same time, this interpretation may deviate from the functional identity of the brand.

This problem is particularly relevant to the two brands in this case. Duolingo is essentially closely related to language learning, while Luckin Coffee is fundamentally connected to coffee consumption. The wedding narrative does not directly convey these two functions, but is realized by establishing a symbolic relationship between the two brands.

This narrative effectively provides a reason to talk about cooperation. It is weak in explaining why cooperation is important, except for the story itself. This leads to a gap between the attention of the event and the meaning of the brand. The activity can successfully answer the question of what is happening. It is necessary to establish a stronger mechanism to explain why this kind of cooperation is valuable to consumers.

This distinction also helps to explain why the activity can generate a high level of interaction, but fails to trigger a discussion about the same level of brand core functions. This narrative provides a topic that is easy for the audience to participate in. Functional value needs more in-depth attention. Thus the activity gives priority to low-input participation. This helps to spread quickly, but does less to convey complex brand values.

### **2.3. Visibility vs. Sustainable PR Value**

From experience, although the operation has achieved a significant increase in the number of daily active users and expanded to 24,000 physical stores [1]. But this operational result contrasts sharply with the strategic limitations of the public relations level. The initiative does not promote long term community building, but mainly focuses on short term digital visibility.

Evaluated through the theoretical lens proposed by

McAlexander et al. [6], a resilient brand community necessitates stable and enduring associations. On the contrary, this particular activity is still affected by highly volatile algorithmic behavior, resulting in the fact that public participation is essentially short-lived. Therefore, tactical acquisition of digital traffic cannot automatically be transformed into institutional trust or sustainable brand value. In the end, this initiative presented an obvious “pseudo-event” [9]. Although it brought significant immediate results, it was at the expense of a sustainable and long term framework for the cultivation of relationships.

The concept of pseudo-event helps to understand this limitation. The pseudo-event aims to attract attention because it is deliberately designed to be publicly visible [9]. Its success can be observed through the immediate reaction of the media and the audience. However, attention itself cannot establish a lasting relationship.

This distinction is important because the value of public relations will develop over time. A short publicity campaign can improve brand awareness and encourage consumers to interact with the brand. While these results are more meaningful when the interaction continues after the event. If there is no continuous interaction, the activity will always rely on the temporary value of the event.

The problem is not that short term visibility is worthless. For an event to enter the public discussion, it must be visible. Problems arise when visibility becomes the main standard for measuring success. In this case, the activity may focus more on attracting attention than building relationships.

The framework of McAlexander et al. [6] provides a useful comparison. The brand community depends on the relationship between customers, brands, enterprises, products and other customers. These relationships are broader than single communication events. These relationships are broader than single communication events. They also asked for a meaningful customer experience. Current campaign creates a strong common experience, but less evidence of a continuous relationship structure.

Therefore, the event should be considered as a successful establishment of initial public connections. Its weakness is that the mechanism to maintain this connection is limited. The strategic mission is not to replace the viral transmission. This is the establishment of the second layer of interaction after the viral spread. This will make short term exposure the starting point of a long-term relationship, not the final result.

### **3. Effectiveness, Data Evidence and Strategic Pivot**

#### **3.1. Effectiveness and Data Evidence**

From a quantitative perspective, the initiative effectively operationalizes meme logic within the digital ecosystem. According to data from the Luckin Coffee FY2025 Q3 Interim Report, its main promotional drink “Green Bean Latte” reached an unprecedented sales of 5.12 million cups in the first 72 hours after its launch on July 8, 2025. At the same time, through QianGua’s monitoring and analysis [4], the huge digital footprint of the #Dorui wedding # campaign has been verified. In the first ten days after its release, this tag was viewed up to 128 million times. This exposure is accompanied by 2.6 million active interactions on Xiaohongshu and related platforms, including likes, shares and comments.

Nevertheless, rigorous qualitative analysis reveals that

there is a significant gap between the visibility of numbers and the depth of actual participation. The emotional analysis of the 10 most interactive posts on Xiaohongshu shows that the user’s interaction mainly focuses on the bizarre and absurd creative narratives surrounding the corporate mascot. The substantive discussion on the authority of Duolingo teaching and the quality of Luckin Coffee failed to attract attention in the text data [10]. These key brand elements account for a small proportion of user generated content. On the contrary, public discussion is almost entirely dominated by superficial words such as “crazy”, “absurd” and “CP”.

Applying the theoretical perspective put forward by Jenkins et al. [7], although the content of the activity is highly communicative, the final public participation is completely manifested as a performance phenomenon. The audience is just a bystander of the brief digital wave, not the active co-creator of the brand meaning. In addition, judging from the relationship framework of McAlexander et al. [6], this large influx of traffic reflects the brief gathering of public attention, rather than the formation of a resilient brand community. Data shows that despite increased visibility, the initiative has not generated sustainable reputation capital. This inadequacy stems from the fact that public identity is based on the novelty of “pseudo-events” [9], rather than the internalization of the substantial value of the brand.

When interpreting these results, the difference between reach and relationship quality is very important.

The high number of views and interactions indicates that the event has attracted attention. Sales data also show that consumers respond very positively. However, these indicators mainly measure the degree of exposure and short term behavioral response. They do not directly measure the persistence of the relationship between consumers and brands.

Users may interact with the content because it is entertaining. They may also share it, because it is culturally relevant at a specific moment. This does not necessarily mean that they will continue to identify with these brands after the advertising campaign loses its novelty.

This limitation is consistent with the discussion of participation by Jenkins et al. [7]. In the network media environment, content can spread quickly. However, the meaning of the content may only be temporary or separate from the core values of the brand.

Therefore, the activity is considered very effective in attracting attention in the short term. The available data provides weak evidence for the long term development of the community, as well as weak evidence for sustainable reputation building.

#### **3.2. Strategic Recommendations and Justification**

Recommendation 1: Shifting from Symbolic Narratives to Functional and Practical Communities

Action: Transform absurd marriages into a structured loyalty ecosystem. Specifically, realize the “Learning-Refueling Synchronization” function in Luckin and Duolingo applications. The learning progress of Duolingo users should directly correspond to “Coffee Points” or Luckin’s exclusive membership.

Theoretical Justification: This strategic fit has upgraded the activity from a brief, performance style communication to a “meaningful participation” framework [7]. The activity effectively integrates the core practical value of language learning and beverage consumption into the user experience.

This interaction has successfully transformed traditional consumption habits into a strong “customer-to-product” relationship rather than just staying at the digital entertainment level. McAlexander et al. [6] identify this specific association as the cornerstone of a tenacious brand community.

**Recommendation 2: Cultivating a Fabric of Relationships through Offline Integration**

**Action:** Use Luckin Coffee’s rich physical store network to launch the “Bilingual Hub” project. This is a special offline learning space to transform digital “meme” into social interaction in the real world. For example, weekly oral communication activities.

**Theoretical Justification:** A resilient brand community must go beyond the basic dual relationship between consumers and brands and achieve it by establishing an important “customer-to-customer” connection. This extensive network embodies the dynamic “fabric of relationships” formed by the relationship framework of McAlexander et al. [6]. By providing a practical environment for the community, this tactical shift not only breaks the distraction of decentralized attention, but also builds a psychological and social infrastructure.

## 4. Conclusion and Key Learning

In short, the cooperation between Luckin Coffee and Duolingo has successfully applied the “meme logic” and penetrated deep into the hustle and bustle of the digital world. But it also highlights a fundamental contradiction in the field of modern public relations: the gap between communication and substantive participation. Although the activity effectively stimulates the participation of the audience through absurd narratives, this participation is still mainly at the formal level. This case study shows that in a saturated market environment, popularity is only a temporary resource and cannot be automatically converted into long term reputation capital.

For future public relations practice, a key insight points out that digital strategy must shift from using “algorithm volatility” to building a lasting “relationship network” [6]. Although “strategic absurdity” can effectively improve public visibility, without “meaningful participation” [7] as support, this perception is still structurally empty. The initiative of the audience is directly guided to maximize the functional utility

of the brand. Therefore, the ultimate goal must go beyond the simple arrangement of short “pseudo-events”. On the contrary, the strategic focus should be on building a system driven by a consistent “customer experience” and a strong “brand community” [6]. Combining digital promotion methods with these substantive links is crucial to maintain the lasting presence of the market and cultivate long term loyalty after the brief new trend of social media platforms completely subsides.

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