



Exploring Luckin Coffee's Brand Communication Strategy Based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model

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Abstract. In response to increasingly fierce competition among coffee brands, communication strategies of coffee chain companies also need to evolve, continuously adjusting to changes in market dynamics and consumer demands. This study explores Luckin Coffee's brand communication strategy from the perspective of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). Through an in-depth analysis of the central and peripheral routes, it aims to clarify how brand communication influences consumer perception of brand benefits and the mechanism of brand attitude formation, with a focus on the critical role of brand design in the communication process via the peripheral route. Additionally, this study intends to provide feasible reference points for the coffee industry in developing scientifically sound and effective marketing strategies.

Keywords: ELM, Communication strategy, Luckin coffee

1 Introduction

By applying the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) to delve into Luckin Coffee's brand communication strategy, we can gain valuable insights into how brands interact with consumers, persuade purchasing behavior, and foster loyalty. The ELM uncovers the underlying mechanisms by which people process persuasive information and distinguishes between two primary persuasion pathways: 1. Central Route: This pathway relies on high engagement and deep processing of information. Its persuasive effect is achieved when consumers actively engage with and thoughtfully consider the content of the information. 2. Peripheral Route: This pathway involves low engagement processing, where consumers rely on surface cues—such as the appeal of the communicator or emotional appeals—rather than the substance of the information to form judgments.

As competition in China's coffee market continues to intensify, Luckin Coffee has become a significant player due to its unique digital-first business model. Its rapid expansion, unconventional marketing strategies, and high level of digital engagement make it an exemplary case for analyzing how brand communication leverages both central and peripheral routes to influence consumer attitudes and behaviors. This study

aims to provide a structured analytical perspective to reveal how, in a highly competitive and fast-evolving industry, brands can build effective communication strategies by tailoring to different levels of consumer engagement.

2 Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Brand Communication

Brand communication is the process by which brand owners engage in continuous dialogue with their target audience through various brand communication methods to optimize brand equity. Guided by core brand values and within the framework of brand identity, companies use advertising, public relations, and marketing to convey the brand image crafted by the company to target consumers. The goal is to win consumer recognition and establish a deliberate brand image in the consumer's mind. This helps increase brand awareness, build a positive image, and strengthen customer loyalty. Target audiences include potential consumers, existing customers, competitors, and the media.

Through precise strategies, companies aim to attract potential consumers, solidify relationships with current customers, showcase their strengths to influence competitors, and ultimately expand brand influence. The core of brand communication lies in how scientific communication strategies are employed to build positive brand perception, emotional connection, and behavioral inclinations, thus enhancing brand value, winning consumer trust and loyalty, and ultimately strengthening brand competitiveness in the market. In today's competitive environment, brand communication plays a crucial role in a company's marketing strategy. As digital technology and social media advance, brand communication methods and strategies are also evolving. In an era of information overload, the importance of brand communication strategies is increasingly prominent. Companies must continually learn and innovate to adapt to changing consumer needs and gain a competitive advantage. Effective brand communication strategies help establish and reinforce a brand's position in consumers' minds, promoting the company's sustained growth.

2.2 ELM (Elaboration Likelihood Model)

Social psychologists Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo formally introduced the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) in 1986 to integrate and explain the complex and sometimes contradictory findings of previous studies, creating a systematic framework for attitude change research. The model asserts that information recipients exhibit different levels of thought depth and effort investment when processing information, leading to two distinct processing routes - the central route and the peripheral route^[1]. These two paths result in attitude change, and they are mutually exclusive. The central route involves individuals deeply analyzing and processing information based on their knowledge and ability levels. Through careful consideration and evaluation, they form a rational attitude and assessment, deciding whether to accept or reject persuasion. This route requires individuals to invest significant time and effort in thoroughly examining

and analyzing information, resulting in stable and lasting attitude changes that are predictive of future behavior, as it is based on a comprehensive understanding and deep thought. The peripheral route, by contrast, is a simplified information processing method. In this route, individuals tend to rely on simple, superficial external cues to form attitude judgments without thoroughly analyzing the information’s details and accuracy. Attitude changes via the peripheral route are typically temporary and susceptible to counter-persuasion, lacking predictive value for behavior. This route is more reliant on external cues and heuristic rules rather than a comprehensive evaluation of information. The Elaboration Likelihood Model posits that motivation and ability are core factors determining an individual’s information processing depth, including the amount of thought investment and potential bias. When individuals are highly personally invested in the information, or when information is closely relevant, they tend to have a higher motivation to process information, increasing the likelihood of using the central route. Conversely, individuals with lower cognitive needs are more likely to use the peripheral route. Ability, influenced by factors such as expertise, personal experience, and information interference, also impacts information processing. Individuals with strong information processing abilities tend to scrutinize high-quality arguments more thoroughly, while those with weaker abilities may rely on peripheral cues, such as source credibility, to form attitudes. The model reveals that in the formation and function of the central and peripheral routes, various factors interact. These factors can achieve the same persuasive effect through different mechanisms, and in varying contexts, the same factor may produce different effects. The ELM provides a coherent perspective for understanding these phenomena, allowing researchers to better understand how individuals choose different processing routes and predict changes in attitudes and behavior across different contexts (As shown in the Table 1).

Table 1. Elaboration Likelihood Model.

	Central Route	Peripheral Route
Object	motivated, ability	unmotivated, inability
Focus	information itself	cues outside of the information
Processing	systematic, comprehensive, deep	simple, explicit, shallow
Attitude Stability	stable	unstable
Predictability	high	low
Example	products quality, innovative, KOL	visual design, endorsements, discount activities

3 Luckin Coffee’s Brand Communication Model

3.1 The Dual-Route Model of Luckin’s Brand Communication

From the ELM perspective, Luckin Coffee's brand communication strategy can be analyzed through the central and peripheral routes. Consumer behavior is driven by attitude, which is influenced by the way they process information and the persuasion meth-

ods used by media. The ELM analyzes consumer information processing methods, distinguishing between "high elaboration" and "low elaboration" approaches. When elaboration likelihood is high, persuasion through the central route is particularly effective; when it is low, the peripheral route is more effective. Consequently, Luckin Coffee adjusts its communication strategy using both routes to enhance brand influence.

3.2 Central Route Communication Strategy

Luckin's central route strategy focuses on detailed descriptions of products and services, a commitment to quality, an innovative business model, a strong value proposition, and endorsement by Key Opinion Leaders (KOL). For consumer groups who are highly attentive, enjoy exploring, and actively process information, Luckin provides detailed and logically structured product and brand information. For instance, with each product launch, Luckin highlights the origin, production process, and unique formula of its coffee beans to showcase product professionalism and high quality. Luckin emphasizes using high-quality Arabica coffee beans from top-growing regions in China, Brazil, Ethiopia, Colombia, Panama, and Guatemala, winning the IICAC International Coffee Tasting Gold Award for five consecutive years. Its "SOE" (Single Origin Espresso) won the Platinum Award in 2021 and 2023. Popular products, including Raw Coconut Latte and Sauced Latte, have been widely praised by young consumers. In September, Luckin partnered with Sina News to host the "Luckin Coffee Healthy China Tour" for World Car-Free Day, promoting green travel and low-carbon lifestyles with over 100 consumers and media journalists in attendance. Healthy beverages were provided to cyclists to relieve fatigue and boost endurance. Health expert Fu Quan remarked that Luckin has played a leadership role in promoting healthy coffee and looks forward to more healthy options in the future. Since August 2023, the "Luckin Coffee Healthy China Tour" has been promoting coffee health concepts across various cities while fulfilling corporate social responsibilities. By innovating and committing to high-quality, healthy coffee products, Luckin aims to become a world-class brand. Through public welfare activities, the brand not only enhances its image, but also deepens emotional connections with consumers. In brand communication, Luckin adheres to the vision of "allowing everyone to enjoy high-quality coffee" and the mission of "creating moments of luck and inspiring the pursuit of a better life." Highlighting its high-cost performance and innovative business model (such as online ordering and offline pick-up), Luckin attracts consumers who align with its brand values.

3.3 Peripheral Route Strategy

Compared to the Central Route Approach, the Peripheral Route Approach is Used to Influence Consumer Attitude Formation or Change. When using the peripheral route approach, consumers typically do not actively or deeply investigate the brand characteristics or the advantages and disadvantages of its products during the information acquisition process. This method primarily targets consumers with low attention to brand information who are not inclined toward in-depth processing. It mainly conveys brand

information through emotional or relatively superficial factors (such as mood, atmosphere, visual effects, etc.) to quickly capture the attention of this segment of consumers. Luckin's peripheral route strategy in brand communication includes brand visual design, endorsements and brand collaborations, as well as a range of discount activities and promotional messages.

Brand image design promotes synergy with the company's cultural connotations, business philosophy, and product characteristics, enhancing consumer recognition of the company and encouraging purchasing behavior. Since its founding in 2017, Luckin has adhered to a differentiated positioning strategy, staying true to and implementing its brand values, contrasting with established coffee brands like Starbucks. The character “瑞” (Rui) in the Luckin brand name implies auspiciousness, while “幸” (Xing) symbolizes luck, intending to convey a vision of happiness and beauty. For visual design, Luckin uses a deer as its logo, symbolizing vitality, nobility, and elegance—qualities that align with the high-quality lifestyle that coffee represents. Additionally, the brand's use of a simple and vibrant blue background with concise text accurately captures consumer needs and stimulates emotional resonance, further boosting sales (As shown in the Figure 1).

The information source plays a crucial role in the information dissemination process and has a significant impact on its effectiveness. Slater and Rouner (1996) noted that when assessing the credibility of an information source, recipients consider not only the content of the information itself but also their pre-existing knowledge and perceptions of the source. From the perspective of peripheral route theory, people's evaluations of the influence of the received information are primarily based on their subjective perception of the source's credibility. When celebrities participate in brand communication activities, their identities transform into an essential information source within the communication process. This has led Luckin to create an effective marketing strategy through celebrity endorsements, which leverages social media traffic and creates impactful new marketing highlights. According to preliminary statistics, by 2024, Luckin has over 20 celebrity endorsers from various fields, including music, film, comedy, and sports, through short-term endorsements and other partnerships. For instance, actor Chen Jianbin endorses Luckin's "Orange Gold Sparkling Americano," and due to his role in *Empresses in the Palace*, he is affectionately nicknamed “Big Orange” by fans^[2]. This strategy strengthens the direct association consumers make between the brand and its endorsers, helping Luckin stay responsive in a highly competitive market. By adopting marketing strategies that quickly capture consumer attention, Luckin maintains its competitiveness, using high-profile celebrities and trending topics to generate attention on social media. By frequently changing endorsers, Luckin continually generates fresh promotional material, enhancing brand exposure and boosting sales. Additionally, Luckin's marketing campaigns are highly engaging and relatable, making brand communication more vivid through the in-depth exploration of endorser stories and interests, thereby enhancing consumer engagement and natural spread.

In recent years, brand collaboration has become a popular marketing tool among many companies. Between 2022 and 2024, Luckin successfully planned and executed more than 20 collaborative campaigns. Through deep partnerships with various brands, Luckin achieved significant sales growth. For instance, its collaboration with Coconut

Group Hainan Coconut Juice Beverage Co reached over 660,000 cups sold on the first day, and the weekly sales of that item surpassed 4.95 million cups. The collaboration with the anime *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: Stone Ocean* resulted in over 1.31 million cups sold in a single day and 6.59 million cups in the first week. Collaborations with *Doraemon: Nobita's Sky Utopia* saw first-week sales exceeding 6.66 million cups. The collaboration with Line's "line puppy" character saw Chinese Valentine's Day sales reach 7.27 million cups in one day, and the co-branded product with Kweichow Moutai reached 5.42 million cups sold on the first day. Meanwhile, the collaboration with TOM & JERRY saw first-week sales soar to an astonishing 16.24 million cups. Additionally, the "Butter Bear" collaboration reached over 100,000 cups sold on the first day, sparking widespread social media attention, with related topics such as LuckinButterBear and ButterLatte accumulating billions of views. There were even tutorials on how to purchase Butter Bear merchandise. These collaborations have not only increased Luckin's sales but also enriched its brand image. For example, in a recent collaboration with Butter Bear, elements of the popular cartoon were integrated with Luckin's classic blue theme, making the product more vibrant and memorable, thereby enhancing its appeal and memorability^[3].

To continue the momentum from these collaborations, Luckin has launched a series of co-branded peripheral products, including branded cups, packaging (such as co-branded double and single cup paper bags), and cup sleeves. Luckin has also introduced a variety of co-branded stickers, transparent cards, exquisite PU badges, and magic color-changing mugs, providing consumers with more collectible and shareable options, thereby deepening their brand impression. However, while implementing co-branding collaborations, Luckin Coffee's fundamental packaging design remains highly consistent with its overall brand image. The color scheme and graphic elements continue to utilize the brand's signature blue and deer motif. Through carefully thought-out combinations of color and graphics, this design approach is widely applied across various packaging products^[4]. The overall design style is simple yet sophisticated, resonating with the brand's core values. For example, the packaging design of the Coconut Cloud Latte takes inspiration from the geometric style of Coconut Palm-branded coconut juice packaging. It boldly uses a black background with red, yellow, and blue accents, alongside meticulously arranged text, creating a strong visual impact. This design style, imbued with elements of "earthiness," not only attracted broad public attention but also highlighted Luckin Coffee's unique brand character. Similarly, Luckin launched a set of summer-themed visuals in which the brand logo background shifted from a simple white to vibrant geometric color blocks, further enhancing visual expansion and imparting a sense of youthful energy. In these visuals, designers reconstructed geometric symbols into beach and sunshine elements, combined with a pop art style, resulting in a high-saturation, visually impactful image that successfully created a vivid and intense summer atmosphere. Additionally, Luckin's offline stores were also updated in line with this summer theme, aiming to strengthen the sense of belonging and identity among consumers of different age groups. This approach provides an immersive experience, fostering a strong emotional connection between the brand and its consumers, and further enhancing the brand's reputation and influence.

Luckin also enhances brand awareness through social media ads and mall advertising. To attract new members, it offers new member discounts, providing free coffee and rewards for inviting friends to sign up. Consumers can also receive discounts by sharing related content. Promotions include “buy one, get one free” deals, a 30-minute delivery delay compensation policy, and group discounts such as “buy two, get one free” or “buy five, get five free,” as well as substantial discounts of 72% or 50% to further stimulate consumer desire to purchase^[5].

3.4 Combining the Central and Peripheral Route Approaches

In practice, the central and peripheral route approaches are often combined, creating a synergistic effect. Based on different consumer demand characteristics and behavioral preferences, Luckin adopts a combination strategy, utilizing both the central and peripheral routes in its communication. For example, when launching a new coffee product, Luckin may provide detailed product information and process introductions through social media and its official website to consumers with a high level of interest, while simultaneously releasing lighthearted, engaging short videos on platforms like TikTok to attract peripheral route consumers. Through this integrated communication approach, Luckin can expand its brand influence across different consumer groups and enhance the overall effectiveness of brand communication.



Fig. 1. Luckin coffee logo (from Internet)

4 Conclusion

By applying brand communication strategies based on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), Luckin effectively uses both central and peripheral routes to communicate its brand values, strengthening brand recognition and loyalty among consumers with varying levels of information processing. This strategy allows Luckin to establish a professional brand image among consumers while attracting peripheral route consumers through emotional appeals, thus achieving comprehensive brand influence and offering new insights into communication strategies for other coffee brands in the industry.

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