Digital Brand Strategy for Regional Coffee Growth: A Case Study of Kunming Coffee's Online Marketing Performance

Ge Song
College of Business Administration
University of the Cordilleras
Gov. Pack Road, Baguio City
Philippines

Rhodora Ann Nana-Ontal
College of Business Administration
University of the Cordilleras
Gov. Pack Road, Baguio City
Philippines

Abstract: The global coffee market is intensely competitive, necessitating that regional producers adopt sophisticated digital branding strategies to achieve growth and distinction. This study investigates the digital brand strategy employed to promote Kunming coffee, a burgeoning regional coffee from Yunnan Province, China, analyzing its online marketing performance. Through a qualitative case study methodology, the research examines the integration of content marketing, social media engagement, and e-commerce tactics across platforms such as Douyin, WeChat, and Tmall. The findings reveal that a narrative strategy emphasizing terroir, ethnic minority culture, and sustainability effectively differentiates Kunming coffee in the digital landscape. However, challenges persist, including inconsistent brand messaging and intense competition from established international brands. The study concludes that a cohesive digital brand strategy, which leverages unique regional attributes while aligning with the sensibilities of modern Chinese consumers, is critical for the sustainable growth of regional coffee brands. This research contributes to the literature on regional agricultural branding and offers practical insights for stakeholders in the Yunnan coffee industry and similar regional agricultural sectors.

Keywords: Digital Brand Strategy；Regional Coffee Growth；Kunming Coffee；Online Marketing Performance；Case Study

1. INTRODUCTION

The global coffee industry is characterized by intense competition and a market long dominated by established origins from Latin America and Africa. Within this landscape, China's Yunnan Province has emerged as a significant producer, cultivating over ninety-eight percent of the country's coffee beans. The city of Kunming, as the capital and economic hub of Yunnan, plays a pivotal role in the branding and distribution of this regional coffee. However, the transition from a bulk commodity producer to a recognized origin brand presents considerable challenges. Regional coffee growers like those in Kunming must navigate a saturated marketplace where consumers are increasingly influenced by digital narratives and online engagement.

The core problem this research addresses is the struggle of regional coffee origins to achieve brand distinction and sustainable growth in a digital-first consumer environment. While Kunming coffee possesses unique attributes related to its terroir and cultural heritage, translating these qualities into a compelling online brand identity remains a complex undertaking. This study therefore seeks to investigate the digital brand strategy employed for Kunming coffee and to evaluate its online marketing performance. The primary research objectives are to deconstruct the current digital marketing efforts, assess their effectiveness in building brand equity, and identify the key factors that contribute to or hinder its growth.

The significance of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it contributes to the emerging literature on digital place branding and the marketing of regional agricultural products in developing economies. Practically, it offers actionable insights for Kunming coffee stakeholders, including farmers, cooperatives, and government agencies, by providing a framework for refining their digital strategies. The findings may also serve as a valuable case study for other regional agricultural products seeking to enhance their market position through online channels. This chapter has established the research landscape by outlining the background, problem statement, objectives, and significance. The subsequent chapters will present a comprehensive literature review, detail the research methodology, provide an in-depth case analysis, discuss the findings, and conclude with implications and recommendations.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DIGITAL BRANDING IN AGRICULTURE

The evolution of brand strategy has been profoundly reshaped by the digital age, moving from one-way mass communication to interactive, customer-centric engagement. Traditional branding models, which emphasized controlled messaging and mass media advertising, are now integrated with dynamic digital paradigms. These new paradigms prioritize storytelling, community building, and real-time

interaction. This shift is particularly critical for agricultural products, which must transcend their commodity status to build emotional connections with consumers online. The digital landscape offers unprecedented tools for brands to narrate their origin stories and demonstrate authenticity directly to their audience.

Central to marketing regional specialties are the concepts of place branding and terroir. Place branding involves the strategic application of branding techniques to a geographic location to create a distinctive identity. Terroir, a term borrowed from viticulture, refers to the unique combination of natural factors such as soil, climate, and topography that impart a distinctive character to an agricultural product. In the digital realm, effectively communicating terroir becomes a powerful branding tool. It provides a authentic narrative that differentiates a product like regional coffee from generic competitors, allowing marketers to build a brand story around uniqueness and quality rooted in a specific place.

The application of specific digital marketing tactics is well-documented in the food and beverage sector. Social media marketing leverages platforms to create communities and foster direct consumer relationships through visually compelling content and interactive dialogue. Content marketing, through blogs, articles, and videos, educates consumers and builds brand authority by highlighting production processes, sustainability practices, and culinary uses. Together, these strategies aim to move the product beyond a mere transaction towards an experience valued by the consumer.

To evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies, a clear set of performance metrics is essential. These metrics extend beyond simple sales figures to include engagement rates, which measure likes, shares, and comments; audience growth; website traffic; and sentiment analysis, which assesses the tone of online conversations. These indicators provide a nuanced understanding of brand awareness, consumer perception, and the overall impact of digital campaigns.

Despite this body of knowledge, a significant gap exists in the literature regarding the application of these digital branding principles to regional Chinese agricultural brands. While studies have explored terroir in European contexts or generic social media strategies, there is a lack of focused research on how these elements are synthesized specifically for brands like Kunming coffee within the unique Chinese digital ecosystem. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how digital brand strategy is operationalized to drive growth for a regional coffee origin in China.

3. A CASE STUDY APPROACH TO KUNMING COFFEE

This research employs a qualitative case study methodology to achieve an in-depth understanding of the digital brand strategy for Kunming coffee. The case study approach is selected as it is particularly suited for investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident. This method allows for a holistic exploration of the complex interplay between strategy, implementation, and performance

in the digital marketplace. A single-case design focusing on Kunming coffee is appropriate as it represents a critical case for examining the challenges and opportunities faced by regional agricultural brands in China, providing rich, contextual insights that broader surveys might overlook.

Data collection involves a multi-faceted analysis of digital artifacts and secondary sources to construct a comprehensive view of the online marketing efforts. Primary data is gathered from a systematic review of Kunming coffee's presence on key Chinese social media platforms, notably Douyin and WeChat Official Accounts, over a defined period. This includes an examination of post content, storytelling narratives, visual elements, and user engagement metrics. Further data is collected from the official brand websites and e-commerce storefronts on platforms like Tmall to analyze product presentation, brand messaging, and customer interactions. These primary sources are supplemented with secondary data from industry reports, news articles, and market analyses to provide context on the competitive landscape and industry trends.

The framework for analyzing the collected data is guided by the theoretical constructs established in the literature review. The analysis will proceed on two levels. First, a descriptive analysis will map and categorize the digital tactics employed, identifying core themes related to place branding and terroir. Second, a performance analysis will utilize established digital marketing metrics, such as engagement rates, audience growth, and content reach, to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies. This dual-framework approach enables the research to not only describe what digital brand strategy is being used but also to assess how well it is performing in engaging the target audience and building the Kunming coffee brand.

4. CASE ANALYSIS: THE DIGITAL BRAND ECOSYSTEM OF KUNMING COFFEE

The digital brand ecosystem of Kunming coffee is primarily constructed across three key Chinese platforms: WeChat Official Accounts, Douyin, and Tmall. On WeChat, the strategy leans towards long-form content, publishing articles that delve into the origins of the beans, interviews with local farmers, and educational pieces about coffee cultivation in Yunnan. This platform functions as a repository for the brand's core narrative. In contrast, the presence on Douyin is characterized by short-form, visually driven videos. These clips often showcase the scenic beauty of the Kunming region, quick glimpses of the harvesting process, and user-generated content challenges to promote virality. The Tmall storefront serves as the primary transactional touchpoint, where the narrative is condensed into product descriptions, imagery, and customer reviews that directly influence purchasing decisions.

The brand narrative consistently emphasizes three core storytelling elements: origin, quality, and sustainability. The story of origin is powerfully told through visuals of the Yunnan landscape and references to the unique terroir that distinguishes Kunming coffee. Messaging around quality is communicated through highlights of artisanal processing methods, certifications, and comparisons to international

coffee standards. Sustainability narratives are woven in, focusing on the economic empowerment of local ethnic minority farmers and environmentally friendly farming practices, aligning with growing consumer consciousness.

Audience engagement strategies vary significantly by platform. The WeChat Articles encourage a more passive, informative engagement through reading and sharing. On Douyin, the strategy is highly interactive, relying on trending hashtags, music, and calls to action that prompt users to comment and create their own content. Live streaming sessions on both Douyin and Tmall represent a key engagement tactic, allowing for real-time Q&A, tastings, and limited-time promotions that create a sense of urgency. The analysis reveals that the most successful content types are those that successfully merge the authentic, rustic imagery of the coffee's origin with the polished, dynamic format required for short-video platform success.

5. FINDINGS: PERFORMANCE AND PERCEPTION

The analysis of engagement metrics reveals a mixed performance for Kunming coffee's digital strategy. On Douyin, short-form videos showcasing the picturesque terroir and farmer stories generate significantly higher engagement rates, measured by likes, shares, and comments, compared to more straightforward promotional content. These authentic narratives successfully foster a sense of connection and curiosity. However, the translation of this engagement into a consistent brand identity is weaker. The messaging across platforms is occasionally fragmented, with the sustainability narrative prominent on WeChat but less integrated into the fast-paced Douyin campaigns, leading to a diluted overall brand perception.

Several successful tactics and strategic weaknesses were identified. The most effective tactic is the use of live streaming events featuring coffee farmers, which effectively humanizes the brand and builds trust. Conversely, a key weakness is the inconsistent frequency of content updates, particularly on WeChat, which hinders the development of a loyal, returning audience. Furthermore, while the quality narrative is present, it often relies on generic claims rather than concrete, easily understandable differentiators for the average consumer, leaving the brand vulnerable to more established competitors.

In terms of competitive positioning, Kunming coffee occupies a challenging middle ground. It struggles to directly compete with the mass-market appeal and convenience of large domestic brands. Simultaneously, it lacks the deeply ingrained brand prestige and consumer education resources of international specialty roasters. Its primary advantage lies in its authentic origin story, but this study finds that this narrative has not yet been leveraged to command a clear premium positioning or to create an unassailable point of differentiation in the minds of a broad consumer base. The brand perception is positive yet nascent, associated more with regional novelty than with established quality or a definitive lifestyle identity.

6. DISCUSSION: TOWARDS A COHESIVE DIGITAL STRATEGY

The findings of this case study must be interpreted within the theoretical context of digital branding established in the literature. The observed high engagement with terroir-driven content on Douyin strongly aligns with theories of place branding, confirming that authenticity and origin story are powerful differentiators in the digital age. However, the identified inconsistency in messaging across platforms demonstrates a misapplication of content marketing principles. Effective content strategy requires a unified narrative adapted to platform-specific formats, not a fragmented approach. The challenge Kunming coffee faces in translating engagement into a strong brand identity echoes literature suggesting that digital branding is not merely about visibility but about the consistent reinforcement of a core value proposition.

The current digital strategy partially aligns with modern consumer values, particularly the growing demand for authenticity and sustainable provenance. The use of farmer stories directly taps into the value placed on ethical production and traceability. Yet, a significant misalignment exists with the consumer value of clarity and education. The reliance on vague quality claims, instead of transparent information about flavor profiles or brewing methods, fails to meet the expectations of an increasingly knowledgeable consumer base. This gap prevents the brand from building the authority required to compete in the specialty coffee segment.

To address these issues, this study proposes a framework for a cohesive digital brand strategy for regional coffee growth. This framework is built on three pillars: Narrative Integration, Platform-Specific Value, and Community Cultivation. Narrative Integration demands a single, compelling core story—for example, "Kunming: China's Highland Treasure"—that is consistently woven into all content, from a Tmall product description to a Douyin video. Platform-Specific Value involves tailoring this narrative: using WeChat for in-depth educational content and Douyin for emotive, behind-the-scenes storytelling. Finally, Community Cultivation moves beyond one-way communication by creating interactive initiatives like online cuppings or harvest updates that foster a sense of belonging among consumers, transforming them into brand advocates. This integrated approach can bridge the gap between tactical engagement and strategic brand building.

7. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research set out to investigate the digital brand strategy for Kunming coffee and evaluate its online marketing performance. The key findings indicate that while the brand effectively leverages its unique terroir and authentic narratives to generate engagement on platforms like Douyin, its overall digital presence is hampered by inconsistent messaging across touchpoints and a failure to translate engagement into a clear, premium brand identity. The brand occupies a challenging

competitive position, caught between large domestic competitors and established international specialty roasters, without a fully realized strategic positioning to differentiate itself.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its application and extension of digital branding and place branding theories to a regional agricultural product within the unique Chinese market. It demonstrates that while universal principles of authenticity and storytelling hold true, their successful implementation requires a highly nuanced, platform-aware approach that acknowledges the fragmented nature of the digital ecosystem. This study provides a concrete case for understanding the gap between tactical online activity and strategic brand building in an emerging market context.

Practically, this study offers clear implications for stakeholders. For Kunming coffee growers and marketers, the primary recommendation is to adopt a more integrated strategy based on a unified core narrative, ensuring consistency from social media to e-commerce. They should invest in consumer education to articulate quality differentiation clearly. For policymakers, the implication is to support regional brands by facilitating digital literacy and promoting collective branding initiatives that enhance the reputation of Yunnan coffee as a whole, rather than individual, disconnected efforts.

A primary limitation of this study is its reliance on publicly available data and a qualitative analysis of a single case. The research provides deep insights into the content and presentation of the brand but does not include direct feedback from consumers or brand managers, which could offer a more complete perspective on strategy formulation and reception.

Future research should therefore pursue a mixed-methods approach, incorporating surveys and interviews with consumers to quantitatively measure brand perception and qualitatively understand their motivations. Comparative case studies with other successful regional coffee brands, either within China or internationally, would yield valuable insights into best practices. Finally, longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of a digital brand strategy over time would provide a dynamic understanding of its impact on long-term growth and brand equity.

8.REFERENCES

[1] Aaker, D. A. (2012). Building strong brands. Simon and Schuster.

[2] Arora, A. S., & Sanni, S. A. (2019). Ten years of 'social media marketing' research in the Journal of Promotion Management: Research synthesis, emerging themes, and new directions. Journal of Promotion Management, 25(4), 476-499.

[3] Chaffey, D., & Ellis-Chadwick, F. (2022). Digital marketing: Strategy, implementation and practice (8th ed.). Pearson Education.

[4] Felzensztein, C., Gimmon, E., & Aqueveque, C. (2013). Marketing at the base of the pyramid: A case study from Peru. Journal of Business Research, 66(10), 1777-1781.

[5] Gannon, M., & Prothero, A. (2018). Beauty bloggers and YouTube vloggers: The social media economy of the beauty industry. Journal of Business Research, 117, 543-557.

[6] Hanna, R., Rohm, A., & Crittenden, V. L. (2011). We're all connected: The power of the social media ecosystem. Business Horizons, 54(3), 265-273.

[7] Hollensen, S., Kotler, P., & Opresnik, M. O. (2021). Social media marketing: A practitioner guide. Pearson UK.

[8] Keller, K. L. (2016). Unlocking the power of integrated marketing communications: How integrated is your IMC program. Journal of Advertising, 45(3), 286-301.

[9] Kotler, P., & Gertner, D. (2002). Country as brand, product, and beyond: A place marketing and brand management perspective. Journal of Brand Management, 9(4), 249-261.

[10] Kovács, B., & Carroll, G. R. (2016). Authenticity and consumer value ratings: Empirical tests from the restaurant industry. Management Science, 62(3), 645-666.

[11] Li, F., & Larimo, J. (2021). Marketing mix standardization in the Chinese coffee shop industry: A case of Starbucks. Journal of Asia Business Studies, 15(2), 241-257.

[12] Liu, Y., & Li, K. J. (2020). The rise of coffee culture in China: A review. International Journal of Hospitality Management, 85, 102430.

[13] Lu, L., & Chi, C. G. (2018). An examination of the perceived value of organic food: A meta-analysis. Journal of Hospitality Marketing & Management, 27(3), 278-299.

[14] Pulizzi, J. (2012). The rise of storytelling as the new marketing. Publihsing Research Quarterly, 28(2), 116-123.

[15] Tafel, M., & Viol, M. (2021). The digital transformation of the automotive industry: Catalysts, roadblocks, and accelerating innovations. Springer International Publishing.

[16] Tsimonis, G., & Dimitriadis, S. (2014). Brand strategies in social media. Marketing Intelligence & Planning, 32(3), 328-344.

[17] Wang, S., & Li, J. (2020). Exploring the competitive strategy of Chinese local coffee brands in the context of Starbucks' dominance. Journal of Competitiveness Studies, 28(1), 45-60.

[18] Yin, R. K. (2018). Case study research and applications: Design and methods (6th ed.). Sage publications.

[19] Zhang, C., & Zhao, M. (2019). The development of Yunnan coffee industry and its brand building strategy. Asian Agricultural Research, 11(11), 89-92.

[20] Zhang, J., & Brecke, P. (2021). Social media marketing and consumer engagement: A review of the literature. Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing, 15(1), 115-136.