

Exploring the Breakthrough Strategies of Co-branding Culture in China in the Creative Era: Based on the Marketing Art of KAWS X UNIQLO

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the creative economy and consumption upgrading, co-branding culture has become a core strategy for brands to break through layers and attract young consumers. This paper takes the collaboration between KAWS and UNIQLO as a case study to analyze the internal mechanisms of achieving breakthroughs through brand value complementarity, user emotional resonance, and scenario-based communication. The study finds that the success of co-branding culture needs to be based on precise brand matching, scarcity marketing, and social media fission, while also being cautious of the risks of over-commercialization. This paper further proposes strategic suggestions for the development of co-branding culture in China, providing theoretical support and practical insights for local brand cross-border collaborations.

KEYWORDS

Creative Era; Co-branding Culture; Breakthrough Strategies; KAWS X UNIQLO; Marketing Art

1 Introduction

In the creative era, co-branding culture has become an important means of brand communication, market expansion, and cultural exchange. Co-branding collaborations combine the characteristics and resources of different brands to achieve complementary advantages, jointly creating new products with unique charm, thereby attracting consumer attention and purchase desire.

In recent years, many domestic and international brands have ventured into the co-branding field, launching a series of remarkable co-branded products, among which the collaboration between KAWS and UNIQLO is undoubtedly a successful example.

KAWS, a globally renowned graffiti artist, is deeply loved by young people for his unique artistic style and distinctive personal branding. UNIQLO, as a globally renowned fast-fashion brand, has always been committed to combining fashion with practicality, providing consumers with high-quality, cost-effective clothing products.

Their collaboration not only perfectly combines art and fashion but also sparked widespread attention and discussion in the market, successfully achieving breakthrough communication.

This study takes the collaboration between KAWS and UNIQLO as a case to deeply explore the breakthrough strategies of co-branding culture in China. The success of the KAWS X UNIQLO collaboration is not only reflected in sales data but also in its success in breaking the boundaries between art and mass consumption, achieving a breakthrough from core fans to the general public. By analyzing this typical case, this paper aims to explore the internal mechanisms of co-branding culture breakthroughs, providing valuable references and insights for local brand cross-border collaborations.

2 Overview of Co-branding Culture

Co-branding culture refers to the collaboration between different brands or artists to launch co-branded products, aiming to achieve brand communication, market expansion, and cultural exchange. Co-branding collaborations can take various forms, including collaborations between brands, or between brands and artists or celebrities. The launch of co-branded products can not only enhance brand awareness and reputation but also attract consumer attention and purchase desire, thereby driving product sales and market share expansion. In the creative era, co-branding culture exhibits the following characteristics:

2.1 Cross-border Integration as a Trend

With the diversification and personalization of consumer demands, cross-border collaborations between brands are becoming increasingly common. Brands from different fields and industries achieve resource sharing and complementary advantages through co-branding collaborations, jointly creating new products with unique charm. This trend of cross-border integration not only enriches product variety and forms but also provides consumers with more diversified choices.

2.2 Social Media as an Important Communication Channel

The rise of social media has provided a broader platform for the dissemination of co-branding culture. Brands use social media to release information, promotional posters, and advertising videos about co-branded products, attracting consumer attention and discussion. At the same time, consumers also share their purchase experiences and usage feelings on social media, further expanding the influence and dissemination scope of co-branded products.

2.3 Cultural Connotation as the Core Competitiveness

In co-branding collaborations, brands not only focus on product design and quality but also on the exploration and presentation of cultural connotations. Through co-branding collaborations, brands integrate their cultural concepts, values, and artistic styles into products, giving the products stronger cultural attributes and emotional value. This presentation of cultural connotations not only enhances the added value and competitiveness of products but also strengthens consumer identification and loyalty to the brand.

3 Case Analysis of KAWS X UNIQLO Collaboration

3.1 Collaboration Background and Motivation

American artist KAWS (Brian Donnelly) is renowned for his street graffiti and trendy sculptures, often featuring "XX eyes" recreations of classic cartoon characters (such as Mickey Mouse and SpongeBob). Although his artistic value is recognized, KAWS derivatives (such as dolls and prints) are expensive (BFF dolls resell for over ten thousand yuan), with the core audience limited to art collectors and the trendy circle. UNIQLO, as a fast-fashion brand, is known for its basic styles and high cost-performance ratio but faces challenges of "design homogenization" and "loss of young consumers." Since 2016, its UT (UNIQLO T-shirt) series has sought collaborations with artists/IPs, attempting to attract Generation Z through cultural added value. The two parties first collaborated in 2016, proposing the concept of "wearing art," aiming to lower the consumption threshold of KAWS art through UNIQLO's affordable products (priced at 99 yuan), achieving "art democratization." This strategy aligns with UNIQLO's brand upgrade needs and provides KAWS with mass exposure opportunities.

3.2 Artistic Expression and Marketing Strategies

3.2.1 Cross-border Integration and Artistic Innovation

The KAWS X UNIQLO co-branded products perfectly combine art and fashion, achieving cross-border integration and artistic innovation. The co-branded products are inspired by KAWS's classic works, integrating artistic elements into daily clothing, making art more accessible to the public. KAWS's iconic "XX eyes" and COMPANION doll images are transplanted onto T-shirts, canvas bags, and other daily items, but complex artistic elements are removed to fit UNIQLO's minimalist style. At the same time, the co-branded products also focus on practicality and comfort, meeting consumers' basic needs for clothing. This cross-border integration and artistic innovation not only enhance the added value and competitiveness of the products but also provide consumers with more diversified choices.

3.2.2 Scarcity Marketing and Limited Release

The KAWS X UNIQLO co-branded products adopted a scarcity marketing strategy, triggering a buying frenzy through limited releases. For example, in 2019, it was announced that this series would be the "last collaboration," emphasizing scarcity. Globally, only 1.2 million pieces were released (300,000 in China), using the "limited edition" concept to trigger FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) psychology. This strategy not only enhances the scarcity and value of the products but also stimulates consumers' purchase desire and urgency. At the same time, limited releases also avoid overproduction, which could lead to inventory backlog and cost pressure.

3.2.3 Celebrity Effect and Social Media Communication

As an internationally renowned artist, KAWS has a vast personal influence and fan base. Before the release of the co-branded products, KAWS announced the news through his personal social media accounts, sparking widespread consumer attention and discussion. In addition, many celebrities and fashion bloggers shared their purchase experiences and outfit photos, further expanding the influence and dissemination scope of the co-branded products. Social media communication quickly made the co-branded products a hot topic, attracting more consumer attention and purchases.

3.3 Market Response and Effect Evaluation

The KAWS X UNIQLO co-branded products sparked widespread attention and discussion in the market. The hot sales of the co-branded products not only drove the sales and market share growth of the UNIQLO brand but also enhanced KAWS's artistic influence and popularity. The 2019 series sold out on Tmall in 3 seconds, with offline store sales exceeding 20 million yuan in a single day, a 500% increase compared to the regular UT series. Within two weeks of release, the transaction volume of co-branded products on Xianyu accounted for the top 1% of the platform's clothing category, with the highest premium rate reaching 580%. The proportion of consumers aged 18-30 increased from 32% in 2016 to 48% in 2019, and the brand's youth index rose by 27%. In addition, the co-branded products also sparked extensive discussion and sharing on social media, further expanding their influence and dissemination scope. The total reading volume of related topics across the network exceeded 1 billion, and the "KAWS Collaboration" topic video on Douyin reached 870 million views. From the perspective of effect evaluation, the KAWS X UNIQLO collaboration achieved significant success. The co-branded products not only perfectly combined art and fashion but also met consumers' demands for fashion and art. At the same time, the collaboration also enhanced the brand and artist's awareness and influence, bringing more business opportunities and development space for both parties.

4 Exploring Breakthrough Strategies of Co-branding Culture in China

4.1 Analysis of Co-branding Culture in China

4.1.1 Development Status

Co-branding collaborations have penetrated various industries and fields, from traditional clothing, footwear, and cosmetics to emerging technology, culture, and entertainment. Co-branded products are everywhere. This wide range of collaborations not only enriches market supply but also meets consumers' increasingly diversified needs. Co-branding forms continue to innovate, beyond traditional brand-to-brand collaborations, to include collaborations between brands and artists, celebrities, designers, and other individuals. These diversified co-branding forms not only enhance the added value of products but also strengthen the attractiveness and influence of brands. For example, the collaboration between Nayuki's Tea and "Chinese Fantasy" successfully combined art and fashion, sparking widespread consumer attention. With the continuous development of co-branding culture, its market size is also growing. Data shows that in 2023, the market size of China's co-branding economy exceeded 100 billion yuan, and it is expected to approach 300 billion yuan by 2025. This growth trend indicates that co-branding culture has huge market potential and commercial value in China.

4.1.2 Challenges

Some brands, in pursuit of short-term exposure and sales, may sacrifice product quality, leading to unstable co-branded product quality. This not only affects consumers' purchase experience but may also damage brand image, reducing consumer trust and loyalty. With the popularity of co-branding collaborations, the number of co-branded products on the market has increased dramatically, and some consumers are beginning to experience aesthetic fatigue. Frequent co-branding activities make them lose freshness for brands, and may even generate aversion. This poses certain challenges to the long-term development of brands. Some brands lack depth in collaboration and innovation when choosing co-branding partners and designing co-branded products, simply combining the names or logos of two brands without truly integrating the brand concepts and characteristics of both parties. Such co-branded products often fail to resonate with consumers and cannot effectively enhance brand image and market competitiveness.

4.1.3 Development Opportunities

With the rapid development of the economy and the continuous improvement of people's living standards, consumers' demand for products has shifted from basic functional satisfaction to a greater emphasis on cultural connotations and emotional connections. Co-branded products, by integrating the characteristics and cultural elements of different brands, can meet consumers' pursuit of freshness and personalization, thus having broad market space. Especially among young consumer groups, co-branded products are highly sought after for their uniqueness and topicality. To expand the market, enhance awareness and reputation, brands need to continuously explore new marketing methods and collaboration opportunities. Co-branding collaboration, as an effective brand communication strategy, can help brands quickly attract target consumers and maximize brand value. Through co-branding collaborations, brands can leverage each other's brand influence and fan base to broaden their audience and enhance market competitiveness. With the acceleration of globalization, the influence of Chinese brands in the international market is gradually increasing. Co-branded products, as a unique and topical marketing method, can help brands quickly attract consumer attention in the

international market. Through collaborations with internationally renowned brands, Chinese brands can enhance their international awareness and competitiveness, further expanding the international market.

4.2 Exploring Breakthrough Strategies of Co-branding Culture in China

4.2.1 Precise Positioning, Finding the Right Co-branding Partner

The primary task of co-branding collaboration is precise positioning, that is, clarifying the brand's core value, target audience, and selection criteria for co-branding partners. Brands need to deeply understand the compatibility between themselves and their co-branding partners to ensure that the collaboration can create a chemical reaction, rather than a simple brand overlay. When choosing co-branding partners, brands can consider partners with compatible brand tones and overlapping audience groups, such as brands, artists, or designers, to maximize the transmission of brand value.

4.2.2 Product Innovation, Creating Unique Selling Points

The core of co-branded products lies in innovation; only unique and creative products can attract consumer attention. Brands need to deeply explore the brand concepts and characteristics of both parties in the collaboration, skillfully integrating these elements into the products to form unique selling points. For example, innovation can be achieved through unique design, materials, functions, etc., giving co-branded products differentiated advantages over ordinary products.

4.2.3 High-quality Execution, Ensuring Stable Quality

The quality of co-branded products is one of the focuses of consumer attention. Brands need to ensure that co-branded products maintain high-quality standards in production, manufacturing, transportation, and other processes, avoiding quality issues. Brands also need to conduct strict quality inspections on co-branded products to ensure they meet consumer expectations and brand image requirements.

4.2.4 Multi-channel Marketing, Expanding Brand Influence

The marketing of co-branded products requires multi-channel coordination to maximize brand influence. Brands can promote through social media, online stores, offline stores, and other channels to attract consumer attention and purchases. At the same time, they can leverage the fan base and influence of co-branding partners to drive sales through fan economy. In the marketing process, brands need to focus on interaction and communication with consumers, collecting feedback and suggestions to continuously optimize marketing strategies.

4.2.5 Cultural Communication, Enhancing Brand Identification

Co-branding culture is not just about product-level collaboration but also about cultural-level integration. Brands need to deeply explore and communicate the cultural connotations and values of both parties in the collaboration to enhance consumer identification with the brand. For example, the brand concepts and characteristics of both parties can be showcased through the packaging design and advertising of co-branded products, allowing consumers to feel the cultural charm of the brand during purchase and use.

5 Conclusion and Outlook

This study takes the KAWS X UNIQLO collaboration as a starting point to deeply explore the breakthrough strategies of co-branding culture in China in the creative era. Through detailed analysis of the case and a review of the development status of co-branding culture, this study draws the following main conclusions:

Successful co-branding collaborations need to be based on deep cultural compatibility between brands. The success of the KAWS X UNIQLO collaboration largely benefits from the high consistency in brand concepts and artistic pursuits between the two parties. This deep-level cultural integration makes the co-branded products not only commercially valuable but also carrying unique cultural connotations, thereby triggering emotional resonance among consumers.

Innovation is the key to the breakthrough of co-branding culture. In the case of KAWS X UNIQLO, we can see innovation reflected at multiple levels: from combining high-end art with mass consumer products in product design to cleverly using social media and limited releases to create topicality in marketing strategies. These innovative measures break the limitations of traditional co-branding, injecting new vitality into brands.

Cross-border collaboration is an important trend in the development of co-branding culture. The success of KAWS X

UNIQLO shows that cross-industry collaborations can often produce unexpected chemical reactions. This cross-border integration is not limited to the product level but also includes breakthroughs in marketing channels, target audiences, and other dimensions, bringing new growth points to brands.

Consumer experience is the core of the sustainable development of co-branding culture. In the case of KAWS X UNIQLO, the brand successfully brought art into public life through affordable pricing strategies and rich shopping experiences. This focus on consumer experience not only enhances brand image but also cultivates loyal consumer groups.

Looking to the future, with technological advancements and changes in consumer demands, co-branding culture will present more diversified and innovative development trends. The application of new technologies such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence will bring more possibilities to co-branding collaborations. At the same time, with the enhancement of cultural confidence in China, co-branding collaborations between local brands will also usher in new development opportunities. Chinese brands should seize this historical opportunity, bravely innovate in the wave of co-branding culture, and continuously explore co-branding strategies that suit their characteristics. Through deep cultural integration, innovative marketing methods, expanding cross-border collaborations, and focusing on consumer experience, Chinese brands are expected to achieve true breakthrough development in the creative era, contributing Chinese wisdom and solutions to the global development of co-branding culture.

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