

Research on the Effect of Pull Marketing from the Perspective of Social Responsibility (Postprint)

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Abstract

In the post-pandemic era, characterized by economic recovery and prosperity, the question of how fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) brands, exemplified by instant noodles, can effectively market themselves and establish a sustainable market foothold has emerged as a critical long-term consideration. The Laotan brand encountered health-related issues, resulting in a sharp decline in its reputation; conversely, the White Elephant brand has successfully centered its marketing on health, safety, and social welfare, achieving significant sales growth. In light of this phenomenon, this study aims to analyze the conditions underlying the successful marketing of the White Elephant brand and to investigate the role of social publicity within this context.

Full Text

Preamble

Research on the Effects of Pull Marketing from the Perspective of Social Responsibility

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Abstract: In the post-pandemic era, as economic recovery and prosperity take hold, fast-moving consumer goods brands—exemplified by instant noodle manufacturers—face the ongoing challenge of how to effectively market themselves and establish a sustainable market position. While the Laotan brand suffered a dramatic decline in reputation due to health and safety issues, the White Elephant brand has achieved remarkable sales success by emphasizing health, safety, and social welfare in its marketing efforts. In light of this phenomenon,

this study aims to analyze the conditions that enabled White Elephant’ s successful marketing strategy and explore the role that social publicity plays in this process.

Keywords: pull marketing, theory of social responsibility, effect study

1 Introduction

In early 2022, as the pandemic situation became severe across China and supplies grew scarce during lockdowns, instant noodles and similar convenience foods became essential items for people confined to their homes. Against this backdrop, CCTV’ s 315 program focused on the instant noodle industry and exposed Laotan’ s pickled cabbage instant noodles as being produced through unsanitary practices (“stepping on pickled cabbage”), causing its brand reputation to plummet.

Meanwhile, a passerby’ s Weibo account posted a video detailing the entire production process of White Elephant brand instant noodles. Netizens discovered that White Elephant not only maintained clean and hygienic production standards but also provided employment opportunities for many laid-off workers with physical disabilities, offering new sources of income and support for socially disadvantaged groups. The video was widely reposted by Weibo users and became a trending topic, earning the White Elephant brand unanimous recognition and a strong reputation among consumers.

While competing brands typically exploit rivals’ mistakes through competitive media events that invite public scrutiny, merely employing aggressive pull-and-step tactics does not guarantee success. White Elephant achieved its breakthrough not only through opportunistic marketing but also by aligning itself with genuine public interests. This raises important questions for researchers: What conditions are necessary for a pull marketing strategy to succeed? And does alignment with societal public interests enhance the effectiveness of such media-driven marketing?

2.1 Literature Review on Pull-Step Marketing Strategy

In recent years, marketing strategies have attracted considerable academic attention from multiple perspectives. In 1987, foreign scholar Westbrook published *Product/Consumption-based Affective Responses and Post Purchase Process*, arguing that marketing content released by passerby accounts—when not adulterated by commercial profit motives—falls within the scope of building brand reputation through informal communication channels. In 2016, foreign scholars Guo, B. and Zhou, S. wrote *Understanding the Impact of Prior Reviews on Subsequent Reviews: The Role of Rating Volume*, contending that when consumers face ambiguous situations where product or service quality is difficult to judge, supplementary information provided by brands plays a crucial role in shaping purchasing behaviors, such as through product feature adjustments.

Domestic scholars have also analyzed marketing strategies from new media perspectives, offering different viewpoints. In 2016, Chen Qing published *Research on Marketing of Brand Hot Topics on Weibo—Taking Sina Weibo Hot Topics as an Example*, concluding that brands must select appropriate topics for trending search lists based on their own characteristics to maximize marketing communication effects. In 2023, Pan Caihong and Liang Shuhui, in *Research on the Innovation of Word-of-Mouth Marketing Strategy under the Mode of “New Retail,”* concluded that only by seizing the right timing for marketing can word-of-mouth topics be effectively triggered.

Focusing on single-brand marketing strategies, Ma Jia’ s 2022 article *Aim at Online Channel Instant Noodle Brand to Blow Up the “High-End Wind”* argues that instant noodle brands tend to engage in “roll-style” competition with high-quality, premium products after online channels become the primary battlefield. In 2021, Cheng Jian’ s *Research on Word-of-Mouth Marketing Strategy under the Background of “Internet +”* analyzed from an internet perspective, showing that competitive brands can leverage comparative effects to expand their audience market. In 2022, Bi Yueran’ s *Market Positioning Strategy in Transnational Marketing of Similar Products* posited that different brands of the same type can market themselves through proper positioning, corporate culture establishment, and comprehensive market attraction strategies. Although these studies cover both single-brand marketing strategies and competitive marketing among similar brands, they overlook the angle of “pull marketing.”

2.2 Literature Review of Social Publicity

Since Marx proposed the public value of media in the 19th century, scholars both domestic and international have paid close attention and produced numerous research findings. In this study, one important condition for the positive effect of pull marketing is that pulling others’ brands must conform to the theory of social publicity.

In 2013, Jimenez, F. R. and Mendoza N. A. published *Too Popular to Ignore: Based on The Prospect Theory, The Influence of Online Reviews on Purchase Intentions of Search and Experience Products*, which, based on the risk avoidance principle of reference dependence, argues that consumers facing high-discussion decision-making situations are more inclined to choose products that align with public interests (low dispersion). In 2020, Ren Ying’ s *The Social Public Value Implication of Marx’ s Media Thought* analyzed social publicity from the perspective of Marx’ s media theory, arguing that Marx’ s media theory centers on the all-round development of humans and human society, grounded in the public world of social life, public rationality, and societal public value. In 2022, Pan Xiaoming’ s *Research on the Strategy of Public Welfare Marketing under the Background of Big Data* contended that brands can achieve quantitative marketing through big data and adopt batch publicity strategies that align with the interests of the general public. It is evident that social publicity is crucial in the marketing chain. However, from the current research status, no literature

combines “social publicity” with “pull marketing,” leaving the initial question – “whether the condition for successful pull marketing is alignment with social publicity” –unanswered.

2.3 Problem Raising

This paper examines pull marketing strategy from the perspective of social publicity to address the following questions: Why does the success of pull marketing become particularly effective after catering to social public interests? How does this motivation function within a brand’ s marketing strategy to manifest its particularity? And besides conforming to societal public nature, what other factors strengthen the positive effects of the brand marketing model?

3 Research Method

This study employs questionnaire surveys and interviews to address the aforementioned questions.

3.1.1 Hypothesis Establishment

Based on the above questions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: The more a competitor brand’ s problems align with societal public nature, the more it will promote the positive effect of pull marketing.

H2: The more marketing content conforms to social publicity, the more obvious the positive effect of pull marketing.

To test these hypotheses, this study adopted a questionnaire survey method to sample the population.

3.1.2 Sampling Method

The target population for this hypothesis comprises groups with experience purchasing instant noodles. First, we selected a representative sample of this group by choosing university students as the research population. Second, we compiled the overall sampling frame according to student grade levels. Third, we conducted stratified multilevel sampling of the sample frame with a 95% confidence interval and 3% sampling error.

A total of 331 questionnaires were collected in this survey. After screening out invalid questionnaires based on response time (shorter than 30 seconds), 300 valid questionnaires were retained. Data collection, collation, and analysis were completed on April 15, 2023.

The survey primarily covered: (1) basic information confirmation, including grade, gender, and location; (2) the degree of competitive brand problems in independent variables and the reduced sentence portion of marketing content;

and (3) the reduced sentence portion of marketing's positive effects in dependent variables.

The questionnaire contained 13 questions: 8 single-choice questions, 2 multiple-choice questions, 1 ranking question, and 2 fill-in questions. Distribution occurred through WeChat Moments, WeChat groups, Weibo, and the Questionnaire Star sample bank.

3.2.1 Interview Outline Development

Interview questions were divided into three main parts. The first part covered basic respondent information, including grade and gender. The second part transformed research questions into interview questions, addressing brand misconceptions, specific purchasing strategies, and ways of identifying with public interest. The third part prepared for potential in-depth follow-up questions.

During the interview process, researchers endeavored to avoid the four ethical problems and deviant behaviors emphasized by scholar Alan Bryman: (1) harm to participants; (2) failure to use informed consent documents or materials; (3) violation of participants' privacy; and (4) deception of participants. Additionally, interviewees could remain silent or withdraw midway if they encountered any unwillingness or dissatisfaction. Interview materials that respondents declared they did not want published were excluded from this study.

3.2.2 Interviewee Selection

This study conducted 10-minute semi-structured depth interviews with 12 interviewees who had experience purchasing instant noodles. Interviews began on April 15, 2023, and ended on April 20, 2023.

Interviewees initially included university students accessible to the researchers, with additional samples collected through questionnaires and Weibo messages. Following the principle of maximum variation sampling in qualitative research, data collection concluded when the 12th respondent provided sufficient material to answer the research questions. Respondents exhibited differences in location and other aspects, resulting in low homogeneity.

Interviews were conducted via telephone, WeChat, or one-on-one face-to-face meetings. Results were compiled into verbatim transcripts totaling 3,000 words.

Basic Information of Respondents

Serial Number	Gender	Location
1	Female	Xi'an, Shaanxi
2	Female	Xiamen, Fujian
3	Female	Beijing
4	Female	Zhenjiang, Jiangsu
5	Female	Nanjing, Jiangsu

Serial Number	Gender	Location
6	Female	Shenyang, Liaoning
7	Female	Nanchang, Jiangxi
8	Female	Chengdu, Sichuan
9	Female	Kunming, Yunnan
10	Female	Shenzhen, Guangdong
11	Female	Weihai, Shandong
12	Female	Beijing

4 Research Findings and Discussion

When conducting in-depth interviews on questions such as “How do you view the phenomenon of stepping on pickled cabbage?” and “How do you evaluate the phenomenon of similar brands focusing on marketing clean and sanitary products?”, researchers were surprised to find that respondents’ answers aligned with initial conjectures: The more a competitor brand’ s problems align with societal public nature, the more it promotes the positive effect of pull marketing (S1); and the more marketing content conforms to societal public nature, the more obvious the positive effect of pull marketing (S2).

Respondents’ answers regarding attitudes toward marketing and social publicity supported the researchers’ hypotheses: “I think this is a problem of lax production management and market supervision. Since the exposure of the foot-stepping incident, I have never bought instant noodles containing pickled cabbage. I will definitely choose other brands.” (S1) “Stepping on pickled cabbage is irresponsible behavior toward consumers’ food safety. It may be due to inadequate enterprise management and non-standardized systems, but profiting at the expense of consumers’ lives and health is absolutely wrong. In the future, I may view the brand with prejudice when purchasing, reducing my desire to buy and choosing other brands.” (S1) “The brand is very focused on marketing effects, and these practices (marketing cleanliness and reemployment of laid-off workers with physical disabilities) can make them more popular with consumers.” (S2) “This marketing strategy has successfully captured the public’ s goodwill. On the one hand, the hygiene of the product is guaranteed; on the other hand, it creates jobs.” (S2)

When consumers identify problems with a brand, the more those problems damage public interests, the more obvious the positive effect of subsequent pull marketing becomes. The “stepping on pickled cabbage” incident involved food hygiene problems that touched upon consumers’ fundamental interests and triggered strong disgust. Many interviewees explicitly described the practice as “disgusting,” “irresponsible,” and “discrediting.” On this basis, when compared with another brand marketing cleanliness and hygiene, the positive effect became very pronounced. Many interviewees commented on its “marketing success” and expressed “liking” for the approach.

4.1 Basic Information of Interviewees

The questionnaire survey primarily focused on younger groups more familiar with pull marketing. In terms of education, 86% of respondents were undergraduates and 13% were postgraduates, indicating a relatively high average education level. Sixty-five percent were female and 35% were male, showing a relatively high proportion of female respondents. Additionally, the study investigated respondents' school locations: 70% of respondents' schools were in municipalities directly under the central government or provincial capitals, while 30% were from prefecture-level cities, counties, or towns.

According to the survey, 39.3% of respondents purchase instant noodles more than six times every six months, and 29.0% purchase four to six times (including four times) every six months. Most respondents demonstrated high demand for instant noodles, making them valuable for follow-up investigation.

Picture 1 Analysis of purchase frequency data: Purchase 6 times or more every six months; Purchase 4-6 times (including 4 times) every six months; Purchase 2-4 times (including 2 times) every six months; Purchase 1-2 times every six months (including 1 time); Do not purchase.

During interviews, researchers intended to expand audience coverage by including staff, ordinary residents of prefecture-level cities, and male interviewees. However, overall, the young group (aged 25 and under) remained dominant, accounting for 75% of the sample.

4.2 The Importance of Brand Alignment with Public Interest Can Affect Marketing Effect More Than Spokespersons

Among the instant noodle brands that survey respondents regularly purchase, Master Kong and White Elephant accounted for the highest proportions at 25.0% and 22.5%, respectively. Before the exposure of "Laotan pickled cabbage beef noodle food health and safety issues," the unified brand was the focus, while the case analysis of pull-step marketing strategies centered on the White Elephant brand. Respondents chose these two brands at roughly the same frequency, allowing the variable of brand awareness to be essentially controlled.

Analysis of Purchased Brand Data

\$ The frequency of instant noodle brands response Number of cases percentage Percentage of cases brand (Master Kong) (Uni-president) (White Elephant) (Tangdaren) (Jinmailang) 25.0% 19.5% 22.5% 19.8% 13.2% 68.0% 53.0% 61.2% 53.7% 35.9% Total amount 100.0% 271.9% a. The value 1 is used to tabulate the two groups.

Through a questionnaire survey, the author found that when consumers don't like the spokesperson of a certain brand, 51.4% of consumers are more inclined to buy other brands. Consumers may not care who the spokesperson is, but the negative impact of the spokesperson will lead to the loss of consumers, presenting negative feedback. When consumers find the problem of "stepping on pickled

cabbage” in a certain brand when buying instant noodles, 73.4% of respondents are more inclined to buy other brands, which is more obvious than the negative impact of spokespersons.

It can be seen that the more the problems of competitive brands conform to the public nature of society, the more it plays a role in promoting the positive effect of pull marketing. The choice of brand spokesperson is highly autonomous, and there is no unified standard in line with the public interest for the whole society. “Stepping on pickled cabbage” involves food safety issues, which belong to the public interest concerned by consumers. Therefore, compared with the problems in the choice of brand spokesmen and food safety, the audience who turned away from buying the brand increased by 22.1% year on year. This choice tendency provides a good foundation for the competitive brand’ s pull marketing and promotes the implementation of subsequent strategies.

Picture 2 Impact analysis of the problem of “Spokesperson” Buy the brand Buy other brands Choose which brand you see at random Other options Picture 3 Analysis on the impact of problems in “Clean sanitation and public welfare” Buy the brand Buy other brands Choose which brand you see at random Other options

4.3 Attention to consumer demand is conducive to strengthening the effect of pull marketing

In addition to purchasing brand survey, the most important thing in brand marketing is to pay attention to the purchasing needs of customers and consumers. Brands can complete brand marketing more accurately by exploring consumers’ purchasing power. According to the survey, when buying instant noodles, the respondents chose brands based on the order of taste, price, health issues and public welfare activities. In addition to these three factors, the influence of word-of-mouth is less; The spokesperson is the least considered factor. Therefore, when there is no obvious difference in the taste and price of all instant noodles, “health issues and public welfare activities” become an important influencing factor, which is also the reason why the marketing on “health issues” may be successful.

According to the investigation and analysis, “saving time and money” is the most important reason for buying motivation, accounting for 39.1%; Followed by “like to eat” , accounting for 31.7%; “Health, safety and guarantee” accounted for 18.4%. The influence of spokesmen on the purchasing power of instant noodles is weak. According to the statistics, most people pay attention to price, followed by brand image, taste and taste, safety and hygiene, no obvious preference and spokesperson choice. The problem of “stepping on pickled cabbage” damages brand image, affects product taste and violates food hygiene and safety, which to some extent conforms to the common concerns of social groups. However, the audience who pay attention to “spokesperson” only accounts for 9%, which does not meet the social public conditions and can be used as a contrast variable.

Table 3 Purchasing reason data analysis \$

Frequency of reasons to purchase response:

Reason for purchase:

- (Like to eat) 31.7%
- (Save time and money) 39.1%
- (Health, safety, guaranteed) 65.5%
- (Support the brand' s spokesperson) 18.4%
- Number of cases: 80.7%
- Percentage of cases: 37.9%
- (Total amount): 22.4%
- 100.0%: 206.6%

a. The value 1 is used to tabulate the two groups.

Picture 4 Data analysis of favorite marketing content: Give discounts and gift; Brand sincerity, realize public welfare; Taste; Safety and hygiene; No marketing or be indifferent; Spokespeople or review bloggers.

4.4 The More Marketing Content Aligns with Public Interest, the Stronger the Positive Marketing Effect

When a brand experiences the “stepping on sauerkraut” problem, and a similar brand focuses on marketing its spokesperson—who is favored by respondents—52.4% of respondents choose to “buy brands other than the one stepping on sauerkraut,” while 24.5% choose to “buy the brand for endorsement.” Therefore, when major health problems occur in competing brands, the official spokesperson has some marketing effect, but it is not significant.

Conversely, under the same conditions, when consumers discover that a similar brand emphasizes marketing of cleanliness and hygiene while helping many laid-off workers with physical disabilities find new employment, 67.7% of respondents prefer the brand of “cleanliness and hygiene and realizing public welfare,” which has a higher impact than spokesperson marketing.

This demonstrates that the more marketing content aligns with societal public nature, the more obvious the positive effect of pull marketing becomes. When a particular brand has problems, competitive brand marketing featuring unique spokespersons or meeting social publicity conditions for food safety issues produces very different consumer purchasing behaviors. Under the former condition, most people simply avoid the problematic brand, with only 72 people actively choosing to buy the competitive brand. Under the latter condition, 199 people chose to buy competitive brands. It is evident that pull marketing content must meet the conditions of social publicity to produce effective positive results.

Picture 5 Impact analysis of marketing “spokespersons” : Buy the brand of “stepping on pickled cabbage” ; Buy the brand of “endorse” ; Buy the brand other than “stepping on pickled cabbage” ; Choose which brand you see at random; Other options.

Picture 6 Impact analysis of marketing “clean sanitation, public benefit” : Buy the brand of “stepping on pickled cabbage” ; Buy the brand of “Clean and hygienic, realize public welfare” ; Buy the brand other than “stepping on pickled cabbage” ; Choose which brand you see at random.

4.5 Other Constraints on the Positive Effects of Pull Marketing

It is worth noting that although pull marketing under conditions of social publicity can produce positive effects, attention must also be paid to controlling the scale of marketing to avoid overcorrection that might produce negative effects.

During interviews, some respondents described the marketing campaign that capitalized on competitors’ exposed problems as “clever, a bit opportunistic, but the result is good” and “suspected of using public sympathy to increase sales, but more sales can also guarantee jobs, which is a good thing depending on the company’ s treatment of disabled workers.” Some respondents were more direct: “If the focus on re-employment of laid-off workers with disabilities existed from the very beginning, it would demonstrate genuine social responsibility. But as an afterthought and deliberate effort, it’ s hard to say whether the company will let disabled workers lose their jobs after the event.”

The above feedback partially compensated for limitations in the researchers’ perspective, indicating room for improvement in the initial hypotheses. The conditions for positive pull marketing effects require not only alignment with societal public nature but also consideration of the timing, duration, and operational scale of such alignment. If the start time is too late and the duration too short, it creates an impression of “taking advantage of the trend to show off.” Regarding operational scale, it is more important to ensure the marketing “truly helps disabled workers” rather than merely “reports and reflects brand value.”

The reason for White Elephant’ s surge in sales and widespread acclaim lies not only in meeting the condition of addressing real public concerns but also in its years of quietly doing practical work. Simultaneously, White Elephant’ s initial marketing was not corporate-driven but spontaneously generated by passerby accounts. This shift in marketing subject corroborates the company’ s actions from the side and alleviates consumer doubts.

Therefore, the conditions for positive pull marketing effects should also include the timing, duration, scale, and subject of social publicity marketing.

5 Summary and Reflection

Through questionnaire surveys and interviews, this study conducted theoretical research on pull-step marketing and social publicity to answer the question, “What are the conditions for pull-step marketing to produce positive effects?” In questionnaire design and interview outlines, researchers conceptualized “social

publicity” as the universal will of the public, emphasizing sharing, mass participation, and societal benefit. Brand actions violating societal public nature—such as misbehavior, breaking brand trust, and personalizing “beloved spokespeople” —were contrasted with marketing aligned with social publicity, conceptualized as social welfare activities combined with food hygiene and safety characteristics of the food industry. Assisted by these dimension-reduction measures, both questionnaire surveys and interviews validated hypotheses H1 and H2.

Beyond verifying these hypotheses, this study identified additional preconditions that impose more rigorous restrictions on independent variables. Specifically, pull marketing should conform to the theory of social publicity while paying attention to the timing, duration, scale, and subject of marketing to produce positive effects. Therefore, when developing marketing content aligned with social publicity, brands should note that price can become an important indicator affecting purchasing behavior, in addition to health and public welfare considerations. This suggests that in follow-up marketing, brands can appropriately adopt pricing strategies to further achieve positive sales effects in ways that better align with social publicity conditions. Conversely, this also provides new marketing insights for rejuvenating fast-moving consumer goods brands and capturing audiences in modern China’ s post-pandemic context.

However, this study has theoretical and methodological limitations. Theoretically, the initial hypotheses were incomplete. Researchers initially believed that strengthening social publicity conditions would inevitably produce positive brand effects. However, in-depth interviews revealed that even when content aligns with public concerns, ignoring marketing timing can produce negative effects such as loss of consumer trust. For example, long-term pull-step marketing may make audiences feel it is “opportunistic” or “showy,” thereby reducing brand purchases. Thus, successful marketing conditions require not only alignment with social publicity but also comprehensive and in-depth investigation and analysis.

Methodologically, due to limited questionnaire distribution locations, survey samples were concentrated in university campuses and first-tier cities, leading to a lack of diversity and concentrated viewpoints that impacted final conclusions. Although researchers attempted to compensate through interviewee selection, some unavoidable errors remained. Additionally, questionnaire collection was conducted entirely online, resulting in large volumes and high-speed recovery that created “big data brushing” phenomena. While obvious invalid samples were removed from data statistics, future research should incorporate both online and offline distribution to reduce sample errors.

In summary, future brand marketing communication research should pay greater attention to phenomena in prefecture-level cities, counties, and towns, as well as opinions from consumers beyond university students. On this basis, researchers can further expand investigations and practices of social publicity and pull marketing.

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