

Marketing Audit of Chagee Based on Playbook Framework: Consumer Decision-Making Journey as a Key Component

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Abstract. The boom of social media platforms, the popularization of mobile e-commerce and the shift in residents' daily consumption lifestyles have jointly driven comprehensive digital transformation within China's fresh tea beverage industry. Fierce competition fills this market, and digital marketing now acts as a decisive factor affecting brand recognition, consumer participation and long-term customer loyalty. This paper conducts a comparative marketing analysis of two well-known domestic tea brands, Chagee and Heytea, covering their brand building paths, social media promotion plans, influencer cooperation schemes and user-generated content operation modes. The research draws a clear strategic contrast: Chagee builds market competitiveness through cultural storytelling and high-end positioning, while Heytea centers its operation on hot topic marketing and accessible mass market positioning. By dissecting Chagee's complete consumer decision-making journey, this paper compares its competitive strengths and existing deficiencies against Heytea, and finally points out that balancing cultural brand shaping and broad public participation is the core condition for brands to achieve sustainable long-term development.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, CDMJ, Brand Loyalty, Playbook framework

1. Introduction

Over the past ten years, China's fresh tea consumption market has undergone tremendous changes, shifting from traditional bulk tea sales to a highly commercialized and digitally operated consumer industry. Changes in national tea output can intuitively reflect the continuous growth of domestic demand for tea drinks. Relevant data shows that China's annual tea output rose from about 2.31 million tons in 2017 to an estimated 3.92 million tons in 2025, with a total growth rate close to 70% within a decade [1].

This paper takes Chagee and its core competitor Heytea as dual research objects to complete a targeted marketing audit. The research first compares the two brands' operation methods on mainstream Chinese social media platforms, then sorts out Chagee's consumer decision-making journey system, so as to identify Chagee's unique competitive advantages and market operation weaknesses. On the basis of cross-brand comparison, this paper puts forward targeted market positioning suggestions for Chagee. The research is supported by multi-dimensional data, including age-based consumer segmentation, behavioral analysis of the whole purchasing process, and quantitative statistics of social media interaction effects.

This study further evaluates Chagee's brand equity and market coverage through a multi-angle evaluation system, which includes brand attraction indicators, digital brand popularity data, advertising conversion efficiency and long-term customer retention rate. All evaluation standards are derived from real interaction data of social platforms and transaction records of e-commerce channels. Corresponding targeted marketing optimization suggestions are put forward according to the evaluation results, together with measurable performance indicators covering social media interaction volume, order conversion improvement and customer lifetime value growth.

In general, this paper forms a complete academic analysis on Chagee's profit growth path under the background of digital marketing. It compares the two brands' online promotion channels and content operation modes, analyzes the whole process of consumers' decision-making when purchasing Chagee's products, and systematically sorts out the brand's competitive advantages and development bottlenecks.

2. A comparative audit of digital media strategies

2.1. Platform-specific tactics: Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Wechat

Table 1. Strategic positioning and practical operation comparison of Chagee and Heytea

Dimension	HEYTEA	CHAGEE
Brand Positioning	Trendy,modern,innovative tea brand	Premium,oriental tea brand
Core Strategy	Trend-driven,viral marketing	Cultural narrative-driven
Douyin Strategy	High-frequency viral content	Curated,aesthetic content
Xiaohongshu Strategy	Product reviews+lifestyle sharing	Lifestyle &cultural sharing
WeChat Strategy	Service notifications,promotions	Strong CRM & membership system
Influencer Approach	Use KOLs(Key Opinion Leaders)	Multi-layered:KOLs+KOCs+UGC
Content Style	Fun,trendy,visually striking	Elegant,aesthetic,culturally-rich
Product Innovation	High frequency of limited editions	Carefully curated product line
Consumer Engagement	Encourage trial &sharing	Encourage participation &belonging
Overall Goal	Become an internet-famous brand	Become a culturally iconic tea brand

Table 1 shows that both Chagee and Heytea rely heavily on China's mature digital social ecosystem, yet they make differentiated use of the characteristics of each platform. Douyin focuses on content recommendation and traffic discovery; Xiaohongshu forms word-of-mouth communication relying on real user evaluation; WeChat serves as the core private domain carrier to maintain stable customer loyalty.

Heytea can gain a large number of user exposures on Douyin mainly because its content operation logic highly matches the platform's traffic distribution rules. The brand continuously launches new limited drinks, cross-border co-branded products and eye-catching promotional activities, all of which conform to Douyin algorithm's preference for high-interaction hot content. The platform will give higher recommendation weight to videos with large amounts of likes, comments and reposts, which fits Heytea's marketing logic perfectly. Most users browse Heytea's content driven by curiosity about new trends, rather than forming deep emotional identification with the brand itself [2, 3]. As a result, Heytea's video works can obtain wider recommendation traffic, drive more browsing, interactive comments and forwarding behaviors, and form a positive cycle of

popularity accumulation and new customer expansion. Even so, this short-term traffic advantage is difficult to convert into stable long-term repeat customers.

Chagee's core competitiveness lies in its high-end oriental aesthetic tonality, which also shapes its unique Douyin content layout. The brand combines oriental visual storytelling with Douyin's recommendation mechanism and user interaction habits to deliver localized high-quality viewing experience. It integrates traditional Chinese tea culture with minimalist modern design to resonate with target consumers, and the core content covers traditional tea-making craft, immersive offline store landscape and oriental daily aesthetic life [4].

The "grass planting" marketing logic of Xiaohongshu relies on spontaneous real evaluation from users to drive other readers to place orders. Heytea makes full use of this mechanism by matching attractive product shooting with down-to-earth lifestyle scenes, and endows milk tea consumption with the attribute of showing personal exquisite taste [5]. Its simple and clean packaging design is highly consistent with Xiaohongshu users' pursuit of high-quality aesthetic pictures [6]. Many bloggers take Heytea drinks as matching props for fashion matching, study scenes and urban sightseeing, so as to shape a trendy daily life image [7].

Different from Heytea, Chagee takes Xiaohongshu's word-of-mouth system as the carrier of oriental cultural communication. It takes exquisite visual design and profound cultural symbols as social communication materials, and builds a three-level promotion matrix composed of KOLs, KOCs and ordinary user sharing, so that the oriental tea lifestyle can be perceived and practiced in daily life. Its operation logic starts with cultural output, redefines tea drinking from commodity sales to lifestyle sharing, and then stimulates mass spontaneous UGC creation. Four core sharing directions are formulated: integrate oriental charm into daily trivialities, shift the brand focus from selling products to telling oriental stories, encourage active sharing behavior of consumers, and connect tea drinking with modern healthy living concepts. In the long run, Chagee hopes to occupy consumers' inner cognition through continuous organic word-of-mouth spread.

In terms of WeChat private domain operation, Heytea mainly relies on official service notifications and preferential reminder messages to solve three major pain points of private domain operation: insufficient user coverage, high activation cost and weak user retention. The brand regards WeChat fans as core private domain assets, and its operation goal is to convert one-time purchasers into long-term retained users.

Chagee's competitive advantage in private domain operation comes from its complete customer relationship management system, which builds cultural and emotional barriers that are difficult for competitors to copy. The brand integrates oriental tea lifestyle into every link of WeChat private domain interaction, enabling users to recognize and share relevant cultural values in daily use. It transforms simple transaction relations into cultural companionship, and realizes the transformation of user stickiness from temporary price attraction to long-term emotional and cultural identity. Data-based refined user management enables the brand to grasp individual consumption preferences in every interaction link, so as to continuously optimize user experience and improve loyalty.

2.2. Content and influencer approaches

The two brands flexibly combine KOLs, grassroots consumer reviewers (KOCs) and user-generated content to carry out marketing, but different strategic priorities bring completely different market effects. KOLs refer to celebrities, industry experts and internet creators with a large number of fans and wide public influence, whose core marketing value is to expand brand popularity and speed up product exposure to a wider audience. KOCs are ordinary consumers with fewer followers, but their released content has stronger authenticity and life affinity. Audiences generally trust their

unmodified trial experience more than paid promotional content of professional influencers, because they can output real drinking experience and objective product evaluation. UGC refers to all original content voluntarily released by consumers, including pictures, short videos, evaluation comments and social media dynamic posts. It forms a digital word-of-mouth communication mode, and peer recommendation information can directly change consumers' final purchase decisions.

The three marketing channels cooperate with each other to build a complete closed-loop promotion system. Influencers first attract extensive public attention and raise brand awareness; grassroots consumer reviewers enhance brand credibility through real personal trial sharing; mass spontaneous user content further expands the influence of marketing activities, forming a continuous cycle of peer communication and mutual recommendation among consumers.

Heytea builds its internet-famous brand image mainly by frequently launching new products and carrying out comprehensive social media promotion. Its core online marketing idea is to catch up with internet hot trends and create visually attractive content. The brand's relaxed and entertaining promotion tone, striking store and packaging design, plus continuous new product launch rhythm, will encourage consumers to release relevant content on various social platforms. A large numbers of user sharing will quickly form short-term online hot topics, which further drive platform algorithm traffic and increase overall user interaction volume.

In contrast, Chagee takes cultural storytelling as the core marketing clue. It unifies KOL, KOC and UGC resources for coordinated operation, so as to drive public participation, spread oriental lifestyle aesthetics and cultivate the common offline store check-in habit online. To sum up the core difference between the two brands: Heytea's marketing focuses on rapid viral spread and wide market coverage, while Chagee devotes itself to building emotional resonance, shaping unique cultural identity and accumulating long-term sustainable brand value.

Chagee relies on consistent elegant tonality and continuous cultural storytelling in all marketing links to accumulate long-term brand competitiveness. Unlike many competing brands that blindly pursue short-term online heat and frequent discount activities, it adheres to a stable high-end tea brand positioning rooted in traditional culture. Elegant offline store decoration, exquisite packaging and carefully polished social media copy will make consumers naturally associate the brand with high quality, delicate taste and authentic traditional tea culture.

Through continuous cultural content output, Chagee upgrades tea drinking from a simple consumption behavior to an emotional and symbolic lifestyle choice carrying unique cultural identity. In addition, the brand maintains unified presentation standards in product production, physical store operation and all online communication channels, which continuously improves consumers' trust and brand recognition over time. This emotional connection and differentiated positioning are difficult for competing brands to copy, effectively improving repurchase rate and long-term user loyalty. Cultural branding theory supports this operation logic: brands that can deliver consistent cultural values and immersive consumption experience can form stable emotional ties with audiences and obtain sustainable competitive advantages in the market [8, 9].

3. Chagee's consumer decision making journey

3.1. Mapping the consumer decision journey and emotional trajectories

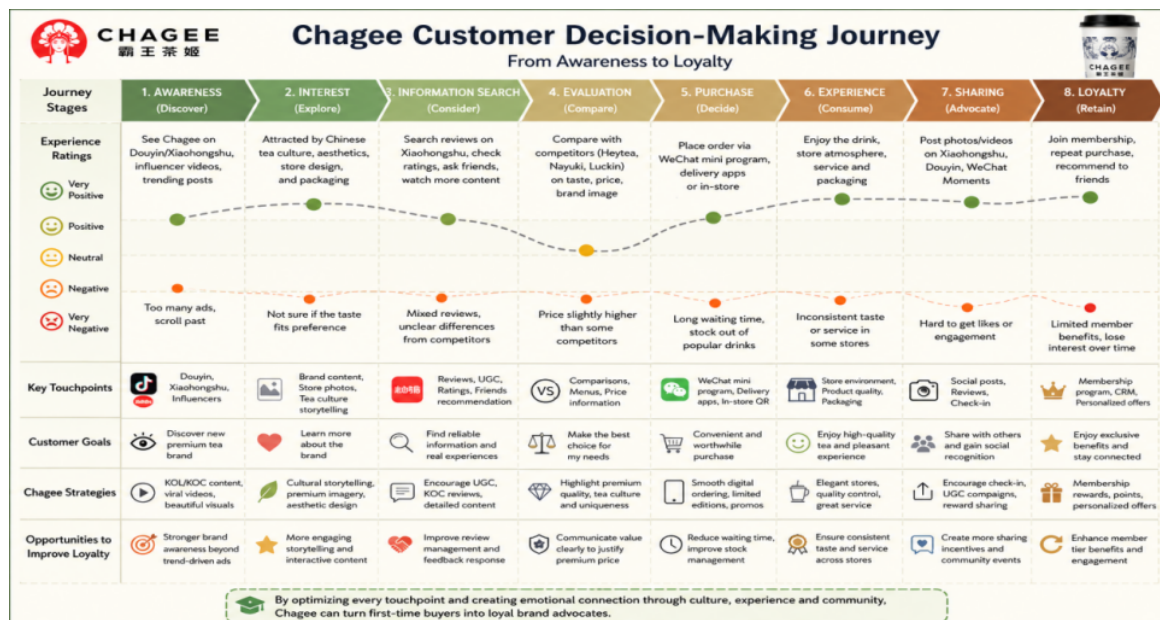


Figure 1. Chagee's customer decision-making journey (CDMJ) map

The chart sorts out Chagee's complete consumer decision path, covering every stage from initial brand awareness to long-term loyal consumption. Consumers first get to know Chagee through social media creators, spontaneous online posts and distinctive offline store design. After generating preliminary interest, they search for real product evaluation content online, compare Chagee's products with other milk tea brands, and complete orders through online channels or physical stores. After tasting the products, consumers share real consumption experience on Xiaohongshu, Douyin and WeChat, register for brand membership activities, and gradually turn into loyal repeat buyers.

This journey chart not only sorts out consumers' complete shopping logic, but also records their real emotional changes at each stage caused by Chagee's marketing behaviors, providing clear optimization directions for the brand to improve long-term customer relations in every consumption link.

In the diagram, the green curve represents consumers with positive experience and emotion in the whole purchasing process, while the red curve represents consumers holding negative attitudes at different stages. Consumers following the green track are easily attracted by social media promotion, elegant store layout and satisfactory tasting experience, and they are willing to buy repeatedly and maintain long-term loyalty to the brand.

On the contrary, consumers with negative emotions may directly skip Chagee's promotional content when browsing social media. Many people hesitate to place orders because they think Chagee's high-end pricing brings high consumption costs, or form bad impressions after bad offline consumption experience. Generally speaking, consumers' feelings will not remain completely positive or negative in the whole decision-making process; emotional attitudes will fluctuate constantly in different stages, and attitude transformation often occurs in the information search and product comparison links.

Among all influencing factors, many potential consumers will give up purchasing plans in the evaluation stage due to Chagee's relatively high pricing. Even though the brand positions itself as a high-end tea brand with profound traditional cultural heritage, consumers will question whether its high price can match practical product value, especially when there are many cheaper alternative milk tea products in the market. This imbalance between price and perceived value will greatly reduce the purchase willingness of consumers sensitive to prices.

In addition to price factors, poor on-site consumption experience will also produce negative feedback in the ordering and tasting links. Long waiting queues, unstable product taste, frequent stock shortage and poor service attitude will trigger consumer complaints. Since Chagee targets the high-end market, consumers naturally hold higher expectations for service quality and overall consumption experience. Once the actual experience fails to meet psychological expectations, the gap between expectation and reality will lead to negative online comments, consumer disputes and the decline of user loyalty.

To sum up, consumers' price sensitivity in the evaluation stage and unstable offline service quality in the consumption stage become two major obstacles that damage customer experience and weaken long-term brand stickiness [10].

4. Strengths and limitations of Chagee vs Heytea

4.1. Core strengths

Chagee's unified visual identification system and consistent elegant brand tonality significantly strengthen two-way interaction between consumers and the brand. It has built a highly recognizable high-end brand image in all online and offline contact links. Exquisite packaging, cultural-themed store decoration and carefully produced social media content will stimulate consumers to take the initiative to release sharing content on Xiaohongshu and Douyin. This consistent aesthetic standard improves brand exposure, tightens emotional connection with audiences and stimulates more spontaneous UGC output, so as to increase overall interaction volume and user loyalty [2].

Most competing milk tea brands focus on developing new flavors and chasing online hot topics, while Chagee regards cultural inheritance and brand story creation as its core competitive point. This strategy endows the brand with unique emotional and symbolic value beyond product functions, consolidating its high-end market positioning. By telling stories around Chinese tea culture and oriental aesthetic life, Chagee forms obvious differentiation with other brands, deepens consumers' recognition of its high quality and original cultural characteristics, and steadily accumulates long-term brand assets and user stickiness.

Chagee wins consumers' favor by creating immersive consumption experience full of cultural charm and aesthetic value. It organically combines traditional tea culture, delicate visual design and standardized customer service, leaving audiences with deep impressions of authenticity, high quality and exquisite taste. These positive impressions continuously strengthen the emotional bond between consumers and the brand, laying a solid foundation for its high-end positioning and sustainable growth of brand value.

4.2. Key limitations

Compared with competitors such as Heytea, Chagee's content has weaker online viral communication ability. Its high-end positioning and prominent cultural characteristics limit its

coverage of mass consumer groups. Over-reliance on visual aesthetic design also makes some audiences think the brand pays too much attention to appearance and lacks substantive connotation.

Chagee adopts a refined and slow content creation logic, with relatively few entertainment-oriented marketing ideas. This operation method stabilizes its high-end cultural image, but weakens its short-term communication influence on platforms such as Douyin. The algorithm mechanism of short video platforms tends to give more exposure to content with frequent updates, strong interaction and close connection with current online hot topics. However, Chagee focuses on cultural narration and aesthetic presentation, rather than blindly following internet hot trends. Although this operation mode can build long-term emotional connection and high-end brand positioning, it is difficult to achieve the same viral marketing effect and rapid online audience expansion as Heytea.

Heytea's marketing system is highly compatible with Douyin's traffic allocation rules. Frequent new product launch, hot topic marketing activities and highly visual short videos can easily attract a large amount of user interaction and algorithm recommendation. In contrast, Chagee adheres to slow cultural communication focusing on story construction and aesthetic display. Although this strategy helps to improve long-term brand value, it restricts short-term audience coverage and platform traffic gain. As a result, Chagee's online content often obtains lower interaction volume and viral spread effect than Heytea, putting it at a competitive disadvantage in the rapidly changing social media environment where traffic largely depends on platform algorithms and user interaction data [3].

Chagee's high-price premium positioning built on cultural inheritance, exquisite aesthetics and high-quality tea drinking experience will also bring challenges to its market expansion. Although this strategy improves brand grade and perceived value, the relatively high consumption threshold will prevent price-sensitive consumers from repurchasing.

On the contrary, Heytea attracts a wider range of consumer groups by frequently launching new products, carrying out eye-catching marketing activities and maintaining an approachable brand image. Its operation logic of chasing hot topics is more likely to attract young consumers and mass buyers who pursue novelty, convenience and social media hot spots. Therefore, although Chagee's high-end strategy forms brand differentiation and accumulates long-term value, its market coverage ability is inferior to Heytea's inclusive and trend-oriented marketing model.

Over-reliance on visual aesthetic design also brings hidden risks of aesthetic fatigue. As more milk tea brands copy similar oriental store styles, packaging design and social media visual styles, Chagee's unique visual competitiveness will gradually decline. Consumers initially attracted by novel visual design will lose interest when the visual experience becomes familiar and repetitive. Since visual design features are easy to be imitated by competitors, relying only on aesthetic differentiation cannot maintain long-term market advantages. Therefore, Chagee needs to continuously enrich cultural story content, upgrade product quality and optimize on-site consumption experience to maintain consumer activity and avoid aesthetic attraction becoming a short-lived competitive advantage.

5. Conclusion

Chagee's core competitive advantage lies in its ability to accumulate long-term brand value through cultural storytelling, high-end offline consumption experience and deep emotional interaction with consumers. However, its high-price positioning limits the coverage of mass market, and over-reliance on visual aesthetics makes it less competitive than trend-chasing competitors in short-term social media traffic and market penetration.

To improve overall customer loyalty, Chagee can optimize its customer relationship management system, launch personalized rewards, exclusive benefits and targeted promotional activities to stimulate repurchase behavior, consolidate customer relations and improve long-term user retention and brand loyalty. Recording each customer's purchase history and taste preference can effectively improve consumer satisfaction and emotional bond with the brand.

Drawing on Heytea's online operation experience, Chagee can appropriately increase the update frequency of Douyin short videos to obtain more algorithm traffic, expand the spread range of viral content and improve public participation. It can integrate more platform-adapted hot content into its existing high-end positioning and cultural narrative system, so as to maintain unique market differentiation while obtaining wider social media exposure.

Organizing offline tea art experience workshops and other activities can strengthen community interaction, help consumers build deeper emotional attachment to the brand and enhance their sense of belonging. In practice, Chagee has launched beverage cups and bottles printed with patterns of China's provincial intangible cultural heritage, which promotes its transformation into a culturally symbolic beverage brand.

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