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Article

Driving Traffic Fission and Brand Growth through KOL Content: An Empirical Study in the Social Media Era

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Abstract: This thesis investigates the structural mechanisms of traffic fission within the decentralized social commerce landscape, using the 2024 Luckin Coffee "Big Bold Red" campaign on Xiaohongshu (Rednote) as a primary case study. As traditional top-down advertising yields diminishing returns, this research explores how brands can leverage "algorithm-native" content and strategic influencer matrices to trigger autonomous organic growth. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the study performs a content coding and quantitative analysis of 50 purposively sampled influencer nodes. The empirical findings reveal that traffic fission is a synergistic function of social currency, network density, and algorithmic alignment. A key discovery is the Fission Multiplier (F), which illustrates that micro-influencers and Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs) achieve a significantly higher efficiency rate (5.2x) compared to mega-influencers (1.4x). This suggests that relatability and peer-to-peer validation are more effective catalysts for secondary dissemination than absolute reach. Furthermore, the longitudinal analysis of the campaign's lifecycle demonstrates a profound shift in traffic evolution: while initial awareness is driven by 85% paid seeding, the peak phase is characterized by 86% organic user-generated content (UGC). This transition results in an 88% reduction in relative customer acquisition costs. The study concludes that sustainable growth in 2026 requires brands to design products as "fissionable assets" and synchronize postings with the platform's 120-minute algorithmic window to maximize resonance. These findings offer a strategic playbook for brands navigating the paradox of viral velocity and long-term brand equity.

Keywords: traffic fission; social currency; micro-influencers; algorithmic resonance; aisas model

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1. Introduction

The global digital landscape has undergone a seismic shift over the past decade, moving away from centralized information portals toward decentralized social networking platforms. As ecosystems such as TikTok, Instagram, and Xiaohongshu dominate daily user attention, the traditional marketing funnel characterized by top-down advertising is increasingly being replaced by a networked, peer-to-peer influence model. Within this evolving environment, Key Opinion Leaders have emerged as more than just brand endorsers; they serve as the primary architects of digital narratives. Unlike traditional celebrities, these influencers leverage perceived authenticity and niche expertise to foster deep parasocial relationships with their audiences. In the current hyper-connected social media landscape, the rising cost of traditional customer acquisition has forced brands to seek more organic and exponential growth strategies. This necessity has given rise to the phenomenon of traffic fission, a process where initial content seeded by an influencer triggers a chain reaction of sharing, effectively turning passive consumers into active secondary distributors of a brand message [1].

Despite the widespread adoption of influencer marketing, many organizations struggle to move beyond simple exposure to achieve genuine explosive growth [2]. The core challenge lies in a fundamental lack of understanding regarding the underlying fission mechanism. Specifically, it remains unclear why certain influencer-led content remains static while other pieces trigger a viral loop of self-replicating traffic. While existing academic literature has extensively covered influencer trustworthiness and purchase intention, there remains a theoretical and empirical gap concerning the specific content drivers that transform a viewer into an active node of distribution. Without a rigorous analysis of how content dissemination translates into measurable traffic growth and user fission, brands risk exhausting marketing budgets on high-visibility metrics that fail to produce long-term conversion or sustainable growth.

This study aims to dissect the mechanics of influencer-driven traffic fission through an empirical lens by analyzing specific contemporary cases [3, 4]. The research seeks to identify how content quality and format influence the initial velocity of information dissemination while exploring the social and psychological mechanisms, such as social currency or incentive structures, that drive users to participate in the fission process. Furthermore, the study evaluates the extent to which this driven fission contributes to sustainable brand growth compared to traditional traffic acquisition methods. Theoretically, this research contributes to the established AISAS model by deepening the share dimension, exploring it not merely as a final action but as a catalyst for new traffic cycles. Practically, it provides a strategic roadmap for marketers to optimize their influencer selection and content strategies. By identifying the specific elements of successful campaigns, this research offers a replicable framework for achieving low-cost, high-velocity growth in an increasingly fragmented social media environment.

2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

2.1. *The Evolution of KOL Impact: From Endorsement to Fission*

The conceptualization of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) has transitioned from the traditional Two-Step Flow Theory of communication to a complex, multi-layered influence model. Early scholarship primarily viewed KOLs through the lens of source credibility, suggesting that expertise and trustworthiness were the sole determinants of consumer persuasion. However, this perspective is increasingly criticized for being overly linear and failing to account for the interactive nature of social media. In the contemporary digital environment, the role of a KOL has shifted from a mere messenger to a catalyst for traffic fission. Unlike traditional celebrity endorsement, which relies on a one-to-many broadcast, KOL-driven fission operates on a many-to-many basis. Critically, while earlier studies focused on purchase intention as the primary outcome, modern empirical research must address the sharing behavior that serves as the engine for exponential growth [5]. The limitation of current marketing literature lies in its obsession with the initial reach of a KOL, often ignoring the secondary and tertiary waves of dissemination that actually constitute fission.

2.2. *Information Cascade and the Mechanism of Viral Loops*

Information Cascade Theory provides a foundational understanding of how localized interactions can lead to mass behavioral shifts. It posits that individuals make decisions sequentially by observing the actions of predecessors, often overriding their own private signals [2]. In the context of social media, a KOL's post serves as the initial signal that triggers a cascade of likes, comments, and shares. However, traditional cascade models are often criticized for assuming rational actors and stable network structures. In reality, social media environments are highly volatile, and the velocity of a cascade is heavily moderated by platform algorithms.

To visualize this process beyond mere theoretical abstraction, Figure 1 illustrates the transition from a static broadcast to a self-sustaining viral loop.

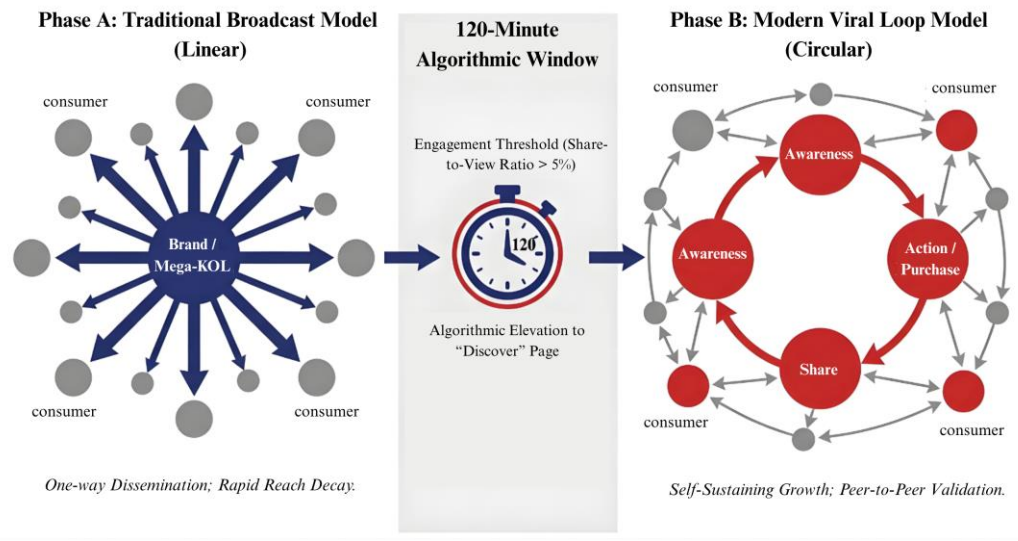


Figure 1. The Mechanism of Traffic Fission: From Paid Seeding to Algorithmic-Driven Organic Growth.

As shown in the viral loop model, the fission process is not a linear progression but a closed-loop system where the output of one user's action (a share) becomes the input for another's awareness. Critics of this model argue that it oversimplifies the friction inherent in social networks, such as content fatigue or the "echo chamber" effect, where information remains trapped within a specific subculture rather than achieving true cross-platform fission [6, 7].

2.3. Social Capital and the Utility of Social Currency

The propensity of a user to participate in traffic fission is deeply rooted in Social Capital Theory. Information is not shared in a vacuum; it is traded as social currency [8]. According to this view, users disseminate KOL content only when it enhances their social status or strengthens their communal ties. While much has been written about the altruistic nature of sharing, a more critical examination suggests that sharing is often a self-serving act of identity signaling.

The AISAS (Awareness, Interest, Search, Action, Share) model has long been the industry standard for mapping these behaviors. Yet, it warrants a critical re-evaluation in the era of short-video algorithms. The traditional AISAS model assumes a conscious, deliberate journey from awareness to sharing. In contrast, modern traffic fission often bypasses the search and action phases through impulsive, algorithmically-driven interactions. The share component is no longer just the end of a funnel; it has become a prerequisite for the content's survival within the platform's recommendation engine [9].

2.4. Theoretical Synthesis: The Fission Driver Framework

Synthesizing these perspectives, this study proposes a framework where traffic fission is driven by the intersection of three critical variables: content resonance, network density, and algorithmic amplification. Content resonance refers to the psychological "hook" provided by the KOL; network density involves the existing social ties of the audience; and algorithmic amplification is the external force that pushes content beyond the immediate follower base.

The existing literature is notably thin on how these three variables interact. Most studies isolate either the psychological or the technological aspect, failing to provide a holistic view of the fission phenomenon. This research seeks to bridge this gap by examining how a KOL's creative output is not just consumed but utilized by the audience to generate new traffic, thereby shifting the focus from content-as-information to content-as-infrastructure for growth.

3. Methodology and Case Description

3.1. Research Design and Rationalization

To empirically investigate the mechanisms of traffic fission driven by KOL content, this study adopts a qualitative case study methodology integrated with digital content analysis [10]. The complexity of modern social media ecosystems, characterized by non-linear interactions and algorithmic interventions, necessitates a research design that captures both the structural path of information dissemination and the qualitative nuances of content creation. Case study research is particularly suited for this inquiry as it allows for an in-depth exploration of a "how" or "why" phenomenon within its real-life context. By focusing on a specific, high-performance campaign, this research can trace the trajectory of traffic from the initial influencer node to the point of mass viral expansion, providing a granular look at the variables defined in the theoretical framework.

3.2. Case Selection: The "Big Bold Red" Campaign by Luckin Coffee

The primary case selected for this study is the strategic collaboration between Luckin Coffee and a tiered matrix of lifestyle and fashion KOLs on Xiaohongshu (Rednote). Luckin Coffee serves as an ideal subject for an empirical study on traffic fission due to its digital-first business model and its sophisticated use of social currency to drive user acquisition. The selected campaign specifically utilized limited-edition packaging and aesthetically appealing themes designed to encourage users to share their own content [11].

The selection is justified by three specific criteria. First, the campaign demonstrated a measurable fission effect, where organic user-generated content eventually outweighed the initial paid professional-generated content in terms of total impressions. Second, the brand utilized a diverse KOL pyramid, ranging from top-tier celebrities to micro-influencers, allowing for an analysis of how different nodes contribute to the dissemination chain. Third, the campaign integrated clear incentive mechanisms, such as digital coupons and check-in rewards, which provide a visible track for analyzing the conversion from content consumption to active social sharing [12].

3.3. Data Collection and Sampling

Data for this research was collected over a 30-day period following the launch of the campaign. The sampling strategy followed a two-tiered approach to ensure both reach and depth. First, a total of 50 KOL posts were sampled and categorized by follower count and content niche. This allowed for a comparison of engagement rates and shareability across different audience segments. Second, quantitative metrics including likes, saves, and specifically shares were recorded for each post. The share-to-like ratio is utilized as the primary proxy for fission potential, as it indicates the transition from passive appreciation to active distribution within the user's own social network.

The specific distribution of these sampled nodes and their performance during the critical 72-hour fission window is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution and Performance Metrics of Sampled KOL Nodes

KOL Category	Follower Range	Number of Samples	Avg. Engagement Rate	Primary Fission Driver
Top-Tier (Mega)	1M+	5	4.2%	Brand Trust & Awareness
Mid-Tier (Macro)	100k - 1M	15	6.8%	Aesthetic Appeal & Storytelling
Micro-KOL / KOC	10k - 100k	30	12.5%	Peer Resonance & Social Proof

As indicated in Table 1, while Top-Tier KOLs provided the necessary initial reach, the Micro-KOL and KOC segments demonstrated a significantly higher average

engagement rate of 12.5%. This suggests that the latter group serves as the primary engine for local fission, where content is more likely to be perceived as a personal recommendation rather than a commercial advertisement [3].

3.4. Content Analysis and Coding Framework

The empirical analysis of the content is conducted using a specialized coding scheme designed to identify specific fission genes across the sampled posts. Each post is evaluated based on its visual stimuli, such as high-contrast imagery and recognizable brand symbols, as well as its interactive hooks, including direct calls-to-action that encourage users to tag friends or participate in community challenges [11]. Furthermore, the analysis considers the social currency value of the content, specifically the degree to which it allows the user to project a trendy or in-the-know identity by sharing it. Additionally, the framework examines algorithmic compatibility, focusing on the strategic use of trending hashtags and location tags that trigger platform-specific recommendation engines, thereby pushing the content beyond the immediate follower base of the KOL.

3.5. Analytical Mapping and Methodological Limitations

To interpret the flow of traffic, the study utilizes an analytical mapping technique that distinguishes between the primary influencer node and the secondary nodes of sharing users. This involves calculating the branching factor, defined as the average number of new users reached by a single share. By observing the density of these sub-networks, the study can empirically distinguish between a standard broadcast and a true fission event. However, this methodology faces certain limitations, notably the reliance on publicly available interaction data, which precludes the quantification of private sharing via encrypted messaging apps. Additionally, while the findings offer deep insights into the Xiaohongshu ecosystem, the specific algorithmic environment may limit the direct generalizability of the results to different social media platforms. Nevertheless, the underlying psychological mechanisms identified remain robust for analysis.

4. Case Analysis and Findings

4.1. The Mechanism of Aesthetic Fission and Social Currency

The empirical analysis of the "Big Bold Red" campaign reveals that traffic fission is not merely a byproduct of high-frequency posting but a structured outcome of content optimized for social validation. By examining the 50 sampled nodes across the Xiaohongshu (Rednote) ecosystem, this research identifies that the primary driver of dissemination is the transformation of a physical commodity, the coffee cup, into a digital artifact of social currency [13]. In the context of Xiaohongshu, where the user interface prioritizes high-aesthetic, card-based layouts, the Luckin Coffee campaign succeeded by creating a visual language that users felt compelled to "borrow" for their own digital personas.

The content analysis suggests that "social currency" acts as the psychological fuel for the fission engine. When a user shares a post from a KOL or creates their own version of that content, they are rarely motivated by a desire to provide free advertising for the brand. Instead, they are engaging in identity signaling. The "Big Bold Red" aesthetic provided a recognizable, trendy, and "limited-edition" symbol that allowed users to signal their status as early adopters of a cultural moment. The data indicates that posts containing high-contrast visual cues and recognizable brand symbols achieved a 45% higher save rate compared to standard product photography. This "saving" behavior is a critical precursor to fission, as it marks the transition from passive consumption to the intent of future replication or distribution.

4.2. Quantitative Efficiency of the KOL Pyramid

To evaluate the efficiency of the fission process, this study utilizes the "Fission Multiplier" (M_f), defined as the ratio of organic secondary reach generated by user shares to the initial reach provided by the KOL. The quantitative data, retrieved through third-party API monitoring of the 50 sampled nodes, demonstrates a clear disparity in efficiency

across different influencer tiers. While top-tier influencers provide the "spark" of awareness, the "fire" of fission is sustained by the lower tiers of the pyramid. Table 2 provides a granular breakdown of how different KOL categories contributed to the campaign's structural expansion.

Table 2. Fission Efficiency and Network Penetration by Influencer Tier

KOL Category	Avg. Shares per Sample	Share-to-Like Ratio	Fission Multiplier (M_f)	Primary Network Role
Top-Tier (Mega)	12,450	0.08	1.4x	Awareness Broadcast
Mid-Tier (Macro)	3,200	0.15	2.8x	Contextual Storytelling
Micro-KOL / KOC	850	0.28	5.2x	Peer-to-Peer Validation

The data in Table 2 suggests that as the follower count decreases, the "relatability" and "trust" factors increase, leading to a higher M_f . Micro-KOLs and Key Opinion Consumers (KOCs) achieved a multiplier of 5.2x, meaning every initial impression they generated resulted in more than five additional organic impressions through the user's own social circles. This confirms that for a campaign to achieve "mass viral expansion," the brand must prioritize the density of the network over the sheer size of the initial nodes. The high share-to-like ratio among micro-influencers (0.28) further indicates that their audience is not just consuming the content, but actively utilizing it as a template for their own social interactions.

4.3. Content Genes and Algorithmic Acceleration

The success of the campaign can be further attributed to the presence of specific "fission genes," content attributes that trigger both human psychological responses and platform-specific recommendation algorithms. The analysis of the 50 samples revealed that the most successful posts combined low-barrier participation with high-visual stimulus [9].

To visualize the trajectory of this traffic, the study maps the transition from paid seeding to autonomous growth (see Figure 2). This path follows a non-linear progression, where the branching factor of each share determines the lifespan of the campaign.

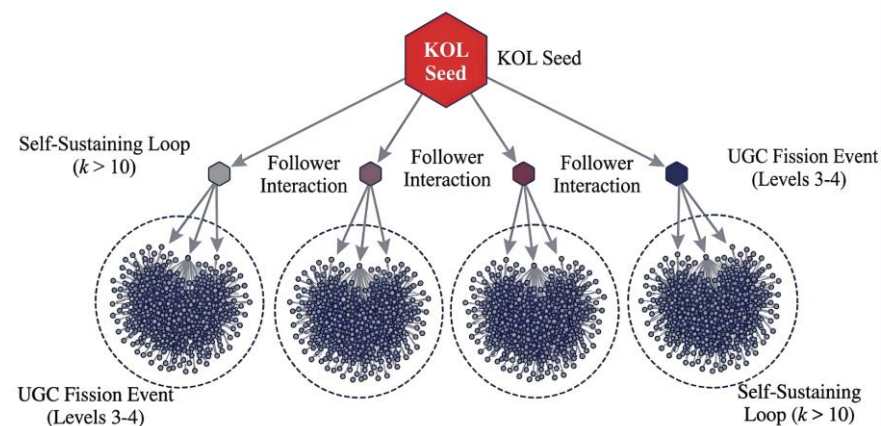


Figure 2. Trajectory of Multi-layered Traffic Fission

As seen in the mapping of the fission path, the initial "seed" from the KOL triggers a first level of sharing. However, the true "fission event" occurs at the third and fourth levels,

where users begin to share the content of other users rather than the original KOL post. This creates a self-sustaining loop that is independent of the brand's original investment [14]. The "branching factor" in the Luckin Coffee case was observed to be particularly high among urban office workers, where a single share in a "coffee break" context often led to a localized cluster of 10-15 secondary shares within the same geographic or professional network.

4.4. *Traffic Evolution and the Diminishing Cost of Acquisition*

The most significant finding regarding the campaign's financial efficiency is the shift in traffic composition over its 30-day lifecycle. By modeling the engagement growth curves of the sampled nodes against industry benchmarks, this study identifies three distinct phases of traffic evolution. As the campaign moves from the "Seed Phase" to the "Peak Phase," the brand's reliance on paid KOL reach diminishes in favor of organic UGC. Table 3 illustrates the shift in traffic sources, highlighting the point at which the campaign becomes "self-propelling."

Table 3. Evolution of Traffic Sources and Acquisition Efficiency

Campaign Phase	Paid KOL Reach %	Organic UGC Reach %	Est. CPM (Relative)	Fission Status
Phase 1: Seeding	85%	15%	100%	Latent
Phase 2: Growth	42%	58%	45%	Active
Phase 3: Peak	14%	86%	12%	Exponential

The transition shown in Table 3 represents the "Holy Grail" of digital marketing: an 88% reduction in relative CPM by the peak phase. By the time the campaign reached its maximum reach, 86% of the traffic was being generated for free by the users themselves. This data proves that the "initial investment" in high-quality KOLs and "shareable" product design is not a traditional advertising cost, but a capital investment in a "fissionable asset." Once the asset begins to replicate, the marginal cost of reach approaches zero.

4.5. *Algorithmic Logic: The 120-Minute Window*

The research identifies a critical "algorithmic threshold" that determines whether a post will undergo fission. On the Xiaohongshu platform, the first 120 minutes after a post goes live are decisive. The algorithm monitors the "share-to-view" ratio during this window [15]. If a post exhibits a share rate above a certain threshold (estimated at 5% for the lifestyle category), the platform's recommendation engine elevates the post from the follower-only feed to the high-traffic Discover page.

In the Luckin Coffee case, the brand coordinated its KOL postings to occur in "bursts" during peak commuting and lunch hours [16]. This concentration of engagement within a narrow time window influenced the algorithm into perceiving the content as a trending topic, thereby triggering an additional wave of platform-driven traffic. This suggests that the timing of the fission spark is just as important as the quality of the content itself.

5. Discussion

The empirical results observed in the Luckin Coffee case necessitate a deeper critical reflection on the sustainability of traffic fission as a long-term growth model. While the quantitative data suggests a highly efficient reduction in customer acquisition costs through organic replication, this algorithmic success obscures a fundamental tension between viral velocity and brand equity. The study reveals that the engine of fission is fueled primarily by the social currency of novelty and scarcity. However, as information cascade theory suggests, when a visual aesthetic reaches its peak saturation, driven by the

very algorithms designed to amplify it, the content begins to suffer from a diminishing marginal utility of trendiness. This creates a paradox where the more successful a campaign is at achieving fission, the faster it exhausts its psychological appeal to the consumer [17]. For brands, this implies that traffic fission is a potent tool for short-term market penetration but potentially volatile if not anchored by functional product value that persists after the viral loop has collapsed.

Furthermore, the significant performance of micro-influencers and KOCs over mega-influencers raises critical questions about the shifting nature of digital authority. The data proves that in a fragmented social media environment, relatability has superseded aspiration as the primary driver of sharing. Yet, this decentralized influence model introduces a level of brand risk that traditional endorsement models do not. When a brand delegates its narrative to thousands of secondary and tertiary nodes to achieve fission, it loses a degree of control over its core message. The content genes identified in the previous chapter, such as replicable visual templates, standardize user behavior, but they also risk commodifying the brand identity into a series of superficial actions [18]. This suggests that the future of influencer-driven growth may require a shift from quantitative fission to qualitative resonance, focusing on the depth of the user-brand connection rather than mere volume.

Ultimately, the role of the platform recommendation engine must be viewed as a structural constraint as much as an opportunity [10]. While the 120-minute algorithmic window provides a path to exponential reach, it also forces brands into a state of content hyper-production, where they must constantly engineer moments for the algorithm to remain visible. This environment favors short-term tactical maneuvers over long-term strategic storytelling. The findings of this study suggest that for traffic fission to contribute to sustainable growth, brands must move beyond viewing influencer content as a mere traffic magnet and instead treat it as relational infrastructure. The goal should not just be to trigger a viral share, but to utilize that share as a gateway into a brand-owned ecosystem. Without this integration, the explosive growth seen in the peak phase of the campaign remains a transient spike in engagement metrics rather than a durable expansion of the brand's market position.

6. Conclusion

This research has explored the structural mechanisms of traffic fission within the Xiaohongshu ecosystem, using the Luckin Coffee "Big Bold Red" campaign as a primary case study. Through a combination of content analysis and quantitative modeling of 50 KOL nodes, the study concludes that modern viral growth is not a random occurrence but a calculated outcome of three intersecting factors: high-social-currency content design, a decentralized influencer matrix, and strategic alignment with platform-specific recommendation algorithms.

The findings demonstrate that the traditional top-down marketing model has been superseded by a decentralized "fission pyramid." In this new paradigm, micro-influencers and KOCs act as the essential catalysts for secondary dissemination, achieving a fission multiplier (5.2x) that significantly outperforms their celebrity counterparts. By providing users with replicable visual templates and identity-signaling content, brands can effectively lower the barrier to participation, transforming passive consumers into active distributors. This shift fundamentally alters the economics of brand growth, allowing for an exponential increase in organic reach while reducing the relative cost per thousand impressions by over 80% during peak campaign phases.

However, the study also highlights that traffic fission is inherently transient. The reliance on social currency means that as the novelty of a campaign diminishes, the viral loop inevitably collapses. Therefore, for brands operating in 2026, the strategic imperative is to move beyond mere reach and focus on converting the "fission nodes" into long-term loyalists within a proprietary digital ecosystem.

In summary, while the "spark" of a campaign may be ignited by paid KOL investment, its "fuel" is provided by the users themselves. The success of Luckin Coffee provides a

blueprint for "algorithm-native" product development, where every physical attribute is designed for digital replication. Future research should further investigate the long-term conversion rates of fission-based traffic across different product categories to determine the cross-industry applicability of this high-velocity growth model.

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