
CULTURAL MARKETING AND CITY BRAND ATTRACTIVENESS: A STUDY OF SHIJIAZHUANG'S DIFFERENTIATION STRATEGY

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Abstract

As the capital of Hebei Province, Shijiazhuang has made significant progress in enhancing its city brand through cultural marketing initiatives such as large-scale cultural events, the promotion of red culture, the development of antique towns, digital campaigns, and the establishment of a youthful "Rock Home Town" identity. These efforts have improved visibility and short-term tourism but have not yet achieved a distinctive and sustainable brand image. The city still faces challenges including unclear cultural positioning, project homogenization, limited IP operations, and weak cultural industrialization. This study argues that Shijiazhuang can leverage its rich cultural heritage, geographic advantages, and cost-effective strategies to pursue differentiated brand development through asymmetric competition. It proposes that the city focus on refining local cultural resources rather than emulating first-tier cities' modern and international images. Based on theories of city brand attractiveness, perceived value, and cultural marketing, this research adopts a mixed-method approach combining questionnaire surveys and large-scale interviews. It constructs an analytical framework encompassing analysis and modeling, data collection, strategic recommendations, and mechanism design. The findings lead to a "Core Symbols, Communication Channels, Experience Scenes" trinity model, applied across four cultural domains: historical, artistic, sports, and commercial. The study further recommends tiered marketing strategies for different target groups, including youth, business visitors, and local residents, supported by a government-led, market-driven, and publicly participatory coordination mechanism. The results contribute to refining the theoretical framework of cultural marketing in regional cities and provide actionable strategies for enhancing Shijiazhuang's city brand attractiveness and sustainable development.

Keywords: City Brand, Attractiveness, Cultural Marketing.

Introduction

Urban development and urban marketing have a mutually reinforcing relationship. Urban marketing, which applies business management concepts to cities, is a strategy for "selling" a city to attract investment, tourists, and residents. This involves creating an attractive image, leveraging a city's unique cultural and historical attributes, and treating the city's environment as a product. The core of urban marketing is to establish a strong brand and image, provide incentives, distribute services effectively, and promote the city's unique strengths. As cities increasingly rely on "soft power" over natural endowments, cultural marketing becomes a critical tool for building brand attraction. This approach focuses on satisfying customer perceived value to foster satisfaction and loyalty. Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei Province, has rich cultural resources like Yanzhao and Xibaipo red culture, but struggles with effective brand building due to a lack of a unified cultural core and insufficient promotion. This study aims to explore how Shijiazhuang can use cultural marketing to enhance its city brand

attraction. The research will analyze the city's current cultural marketing strategies, measure their impact on brand attraction through an empirical study, and propose adjustments and new strategies. The expected outcome is to boost citizen pride and belonging while attracting external talent and investment, thereby promoting the city's overall development.

The scope of this study on Shijiazhuang cultural marketing involves several key steps, including: Analysis and Modeling, Data Collection and Findings, Strategic Recommendations, Mechanism Construction. The study area is Shijiazhuang city and surrounding counties and cities. Research Objectives (1) Establish a city brand attractiveness evaluation model from the perspective of cultural marketing. (2) To refine the theoretical framework of differentiated paths for cultural marketing in regional cities (especially second-tier cities), and propose a three-in-one strategic plan for Shijiazhuang's cultural marketing: "core symbols – communication channels – experience scenarios". (3) Design tiered marketing strategies targeting different audiences (youth groups, business people, local residents). (4) Establish a cultural marketing coordination mechanism that is government-led, market-driven, and involves public participation. Use related theories related to city brand attractiveness, Perceived Value, Cultural Marketing. Use research quantitative research and qualitative research. This research has significant value across several areas. Academically, it deepens cultural marketing theory by applying it to city branding and aims to build a new city brand attractiveness evaluation model. Practically, it offers a roadmap to enhance Shijiazhuang's brand image, attracting investment and talent to drive economic and social development. The study also provides a reference for other cities engaged in similar cultural marketing efforts. Finally, it provides valuable support for policy and decision-making, offering a scientific basis for government decisions and promoting policy innovation for Shijiazhuang's sustainable growth.

Research Objectives

1. Establish a city brand attractiveness evaluation model from the perspective of cultural marketing.
2. To refine the theoretical framework of differentiated paths for cultural marketing in regional cities (especially second-tier cities), and propose a three-in-one strategic plan for Shijiazhuang's cultural marketing: "core symbols – communication channels – experience scenarios".
3. Design tiered marketing strategies targeting different audiences (youth groups, business people, local residents).
4. Establish a cultural marketing coordination mechanism that is government-led, market-driven, and involves public participation.

Research Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research to examine the impact of cultural marketing on Shijiazhuang's city brand attractiveness, with customer perceived value as a mediating variable.

1. Quantitative Research.

Instrument: Structured questionnaire based on literature and expert input, using a 5-point Likert scale. Content: 40 cultural marketing items (historical, artistic, sports, commercial), 12 customer perceived value items, and 12 city brand attractiveness items. Sample: 400 respondents from different districts of Shijiazhuang, proportionally distributed; selection followed stratified sampling. Analysis Tools: SPSS (descriptive statistics, reliability, validity, correlation analysis) and AMOS (structural equation modeling, mediation analysis via

bootstrap). Reliability & Validity: Cronbach's Alpha > 0.6; KMO & Bartlett's tests; exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses applied.

2. Qualitative Research.

Methods: In-depth interviews with 30 experts and stakeholders, plus field investigations of cultural marketing activities. Focus: Current strategies, implementation challenges, customer segmentation, brand attractiveness, and links to perceived value. Analysis: Thematic analysis of interview transcripts to contextualize and validate quantitative findings.

3. Population.

Local residents, migrant workers, foreign investors, tourists, and cultural marketing experts.

4. Action Plan.

Runs from Jan–May 2025, covering proposal presentation, questionnaire testing, data collection, statistical analysis, qualitative research, writing, plagiarism check, and presentation of results.

Research Results

The significant positive impact of cultural marketing on the attractiveness of city brand. This study confirms through empirical analysis that the implementation of cultural marketing strategies has a significant effect on improving the attractiveness of Shijiazhuang's city brand. Data analysis shows that cultural marketing investment significantly improves the evaluation of city brand attractiveness. This conclusion still holds after controlling for variables such as urban infrastructure and economic development level, indicating that cultural marketing is an independent influencing factor in shaping the attractiveness of city brands.

The key mediating role of perceived value. The study found that the perceived value of urban customers plays a full mediating role between cultural marketing and brand attractiveness. Specifically, cultural marketing improves the convenience of cultural facilities, characteristic cultural activities effectively stimulate tourists' pleasure and sense of belonging, and the dissemination of red culture strengthens the social identity value of the city. This study confirms through empirical data that scientific and systematic cultural marketing can effectively enhance the brand attractiveness of emerging industrial cities such as Shijiazhuang, but attention should be paid to the selection of differentiated strategies and the principle of dislocation development of cultural marketing.

Based on expert advice and the specific context of Shijiazhuang, the paper proposes an asymmetric competitive advantage marketing strategy. This strategy is designed for non-first-tier cities like Shijiazhuang, which can't compete directly with metropolises like Beijing and Tianjin. The strategy involves two main approaches: (1) From a historical and cultural perspective. Position Shijiazhuang as the "Yanzhao Red Culture Capital" by leveraging its unique historical and cultural resources, particularly its "red culture" heritage. Enhance the existing "So close, so beautiful, go to Hebei on weekends" tourism slogan by creating cost-effective tourism products. These products would include themed routes like the "Yanzhao History Exploration" and the "Red Initial Heart Tour" that offer immersive, low-cost experiences. (2) From an art and culture perspective: Establish a low-cost incubation base for arts and cultural talents. This initiative would stimulate creative vitality and boost the city's cultural economy despite limited resources. The paper notes that Shijiazhuang has a good foundation for this but also faces challenges, which are outlined in Table 1.

Based on expert suggestions, this paper proposes an asymmetric competitive advantage marketing strategy for Shijiazhuang, a non-first-tier city. The core idea is to leverage the city's

unique strengths—historical, cultural, and geographical—to avoid direct competition with larger cities like Beijing and Tianjin.

1. **Historical and Cultural Perspective.** "Yanzhao Red Culture Capital": Position the city with a unique brand image by highlighting its historical and "red culture" heritage. **Cost-Effective Tourism:** Deepen the existing "So close, so beautiful, go to Hebei on weekends" slogan by developing affordable, immersive tourism products. Examples include themed routes like the "Yanzhao History Exploration" and the "Red Initial Heart Tour."

2. **Arts and Culture Perspective.** **Low-Cost Incubation Base:** Create a cost-effective arts and cultural incubation base to stimulate artistic creation and boost the city's cultural economy. This will draw on lessons from successful art districts like Dafen Village, Songzhuang, and the 798 Art District.

3. **Business Culture Perspective.** **Leverage Location and Cost Advantages:** Attract small and medium-sized technology companies from Beijing and Tianjin by highlighting Shijiazhuang's low operating costs and its proximity to the region's innovation hubs. **Collaborative Marketing:** Use the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated development strategy to gain exposure and build a strong regional brand. **Build an Entrepreneurial Ecosystem:** Establish incubators and provide support to create a "low-cost but not low-end" entrepreneurial environment, ultimately aiming for a new industrial division of labor where "Beijing-Tianjin-Beijing innovation" is realized in Shijiazhuang. **Sports Culture:** The paper also proposes creating a new sports culture IP, tentatively named the "Hebei Super League," to enhance the city's brand and cultural identity through a popular, low-threshold ball game league. This initiative draws inspiration from the successful "Su Chao" league and would focus on community participation, regional cultural integration, and tourism linkages.

The "Core Symbols – Communication Channels – Experience Scenes" Trinity Communication Strategy. This proposes a "trinity" framework for cultural marketing in Shijiazhuang, a second-tier city. The strategy involves three interconnected components: **Core Symbols:** Unique cultural elements that serve as the city's identity. **Communication Channels:** Various platforms (traditional and digital) used to broadcast these symbols. **Experience Scenarios:** Physical and virtual spaces where people can interact with the city's culture. The paper then applies this framework to Shijiazhuang's unique cultural assets: **Historical and Cultural Marketing.** **Core Symbol:** "Backbone of Yanzhao and Cradle of New China," which integrates the Yanzhao spirit and red culture. **Communication Channels:** A "three-dimensional communication matrix" that includes documentaries, advertisements in transportation hubs, and short-video campaigns on platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou. **Experience Scenarios:** Immersive experiences such as restoring historical scenes with holographic projection, creating themed subway carriages, and organizing events like the "Retracing the Road to the Exam" study tour. **Arts and Culture Marketing.** **Core Symbol:** Transitioning from "Shijiazhuang, the City of Rock" to the more inclusive "Shijiazhuang, the City of Sound." This new symbol incorporates diverse sounds from rock music to traditional opera and urban soundscapes. **Experience Scenarios:** Creating mobile "sound buses," "sound stations" in public spaces, and the "Shijiazhuang Sound Festival" to provide a multi-sensory urban experience. **Sports Culture Marketing.** **Core Symbol:** "City of Sports Culture," with the slogan "Move Shijiazhuang" and the "Hutuo River Runner" as a visual identity. **Communication Channels:** Online promotion through short-video challenges and social media accounts, and offline through partnerships with travel platforms and sports brands. **Experience Scenarios:** Transforming urban spaces into sports landmarks, holding city-wide events like the "Shijiazhuang City Marathon," and organizing community-level festivals to foster a culture of fitness. **Commercial Culture Marketing.** **Core Symbol:** "City of Entrepreneurship," reflecting Shijiazhuang's "pragmatism,

openness, and innovation." The slogan "Grow in Shijiazhuang" conveys this brand. Communication Channels: Short-video series showcasing entrepreneurs, social media campaigns, and holding various entrepreneurship competitions and trade exhibitions. Experience Scenarios: Creating commercial and innovation landmarks, organizing an annual "Shijiazhuang Entrepreneurship Festival," and establishing themed blocks with co-working spaces and business exhibition halls. Marketing Strategies for Key Audiences (4Ps)

The paper also outlines targeted marketing strategies for three key groups: Young People (Youth-Friendly City): Products: Creating youth-centric cultural products from renovated industrial sites to youth-friendly night markets. Price: Offering flexible pricing like discounted event tickets and low-rent spaces for entrepreneurs. Channels: A mix of offline "Youth Culture Stations" and online promotion via short-video platforms and Vlogs. Promotion: Using storytelling with short films and event marketing like the "Shijiazhuang Youth Cultural Festival." Local Residents (Happiest Cities): Products: Building a "Happy Shimen·Happy Living" brand with community spaces, "Happiness Parks," and a "Happiness Cultural Tourism Card." Price: Providing low-cost or free community activities and tiered discounts for various groups. Channels: "Happiness service stations" in communities and promotion on local bus and subway systems.

Discussion

Based on an empirical study of Shijiazhuang, this research confirms that cultural marketing significantly enhances a city's brand attraction, with perceived value acting as a key mediator. The study finds that cultural marketing improves the perceived value of a city's cultural facilities and activities, boosting tourists' pleasure and social identity, which in turn elevates the city's brand appeal. To address Shijiazhuang's unique challenges as a non-first-tier city, the paper proposes a strategic framework for asymmetric competition against larger cities like Beijing and Tianjin. This framework includes several key initiatives:

- Historical and Cultural: Position Shijiazhuang as the "Yanzhao Red Culture Capital" and create cost-effective, immersive tourism products like the "Red Initial Heart Tour."
- Arts and Culture: Establish a low-cost incubation base for creative talents, expanding beyond rock to a more inclusive "City of Sound" brand.
- Business Culture: Leverage the city's low costs and proximity to Beijing to attract small and medium-sized technology companies, fostering a "low-cost but not low-end" entrepreneurial ecosystem.
- Sports Culture: Develop a new sports IP, such as the "Hebei Super League," to enhance brand identity through popular community-based sports.

The paper synthesizes these strategies into a "Core Symbols – Communication Channels – Experience Scenes" trinity framework. This model is applied to four key areas (historical, arts, sports, and commercial culture) with tailored content, promotion, and experience-based initiatives. The study also outlines targeted marketing strategies for specific audiences, including young people and local residents, aiming to enhance brand appeal, promote economic growth, and foster a stronger sense of community.

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