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Research on the Brand-Building Effect of Internet-Famous Cities in Short Videos (Post-print)

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Abstract

In the Internet era, short video platforms have given rise to numerous Internet-famous cities, among which “Zibo barbecue” and related topics have maintained popularity for several consecutive months, evolving into a phenomenal IP. From the perspectives of brand building and audience selective psychology, this paper conducts a detailed investigation into the brand building effects, audience psychological mechanisms, and reinforcing factors within the communication process of Zibo Barbecue through experiments and in-depth interviews. Through this research, this paper concludes that brand promotion can influence audience cognition and emotion. Compared with singular brand promotion, brand promotion characterized by conflict and opposition can more significantly influence audience cognition and emotion. The synchronous resonance between official and folk public opinion spheres, along with the immersive experience offered by short video platforms, constitute important factors that amplify the dissemination of Zibo Barbecue. By examining the brand construction effects of Zibo Barbecue, this paper distills valuable insights for countless small and medium-sized city brands seeking to “break out of their circles.”

Full Text

Preamble

Research on the Brand Building Effects of Internet Celebrity Cities in Short Video Platforms

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Abstract: In the Internet era, short video platforms have created numerous Internet celebrity cities, among which “Zibo Barbecue” and related topics have

remained popular for several months, becoming a phenomenal cultural IP. From the perspectives of brand building and audience selective psychology, this paper conducts a detailed investigation into the brand building effects, audience psychological mechanisms, and reinforcing factors in the communication process of Zibo Barbecue through experiments and in-depth interviews. The study concludes that brand promotion can influence audience cognition and emotion, and that conflict-based brand promotion is more effective at shaping audience cognition and emotion than single-brand promotion. The resonance between official and folk public opinion spheres, combined with the immersive experience of short video platforms, constitutes an important factor strengthening the spread of Zibo Barbecue. By examining the brand building effects of Zibo Barbecue, this paper distills valuable lessons for countless small and medium-sized city brands seeking to “break out of their circles.”

Keywords: Zibo barbecue; Brand construction; Selective psychology

1 Introduction

In the post-pandemic era, people’s willingness to travel has intensified, prompting cultural tourism departments across China to innovate their promotional strategies. Many small and medium-sized cities have seized this opportunity to become viral tourist destinations. Among them, the highly down-to-earth “Zibo Barbecue” rapidly went viral through social platforms, attracting tourists from across the country and even international netizens to check in. Related topics have repeatedly trended on social media, with official and folk media public opinion spheres resonating in unison, sustaining its popularity for several months and transforming it into a phenomenal cultural IP. Short videos deliver an immersive viewing experience, fragmented narratives, high interactivity, and strong social connectivity, which not only facilitate the mobile production of urban media images but also catalyze the emergence of Internet celebrity cities. However, we also observed that simple publicity campaigns are not particularly effective. For instance, Zibo Barbecue’s influence expanded significantly when accompanied by contrasting information such as “No Open-Air Barbecues in Jincheng, Shanxi,” “Tangshan Barbecue Ridiculed for Challenging Zibo,” and “Sichuan Barbecue Ridiculed for Challenging Zibo.” This paper investigates whether conflict-based brand promotion significantly enhances the visibility of both urban brands, explores its underlying psychological mechanisms, and identifies other factors that have strengthened the spread of “Zibo Barbecue.”

2.1 Literature Review of Brand Building

In recent years, with China’s economic development and gradual improvement in national cultural literacy, the concept of “brand” has gained increasing prominence, and academic discussions have become more extensive and in-depth. Scholar Ken Chang, in his paper *Research on the Construction and Communication of Self-media Brands from the Perspective of All Media — Taking*

Xinshixiang as an Example, integrated relevant theories from communication and marketing research to analyze various aspects of Xinshixiang's brand construction, concluding that self-media brand development should prioritize user demand, brand positioning, content production, and communication channels as key operational considerations. Scholar Deng Xing examined brand building shortcomings in Yi'ai Town, Qichun County, arguing that new urbanization should emphasize "distinctiveness" rather than "similarity," making it particularly important to enhance brand awareness and transform numerous small towns into characteristic town brands with culture, connotation, distinctive features, and development potential. Scholar Zhu Jing's article *Brand Construction and Its Value of Henan Satellite TV Festival Gala from the Perspective of Cultural Semiotics* provides a detailed analysis of brand construction methods and communication strategies for Henan Radio and Television's festival galas under media convergence trends, based on traditional festival cultural symbols. However, these studies did not investigate the brand image construction of Internet celebrity cities.

2.2 Literature Review of Selective Psychology

Scholar Liu Na noted in *The Audience's Selective Psychology Behind the Public Opinion Debate of Houlang* that the Houlang controversy resulted from the interaction between video content and audience selective psychology. Bilibili should enhance positive communication effects by understanding audience psychology to maintain brand image development. Scholars Qian Yanbing, Ma Min, and Lan Yuexin, in *Communication and Control of Internet Rumors Based on the Selective Psychology of Internet Audience*, combined the essence and causes of Internet rumors with case analyses of rumor communication processes and motivations. In *Who Constructed Our World — A Probe into the Agenda-setting Function in the Network Environment*, scholar Hu Chen argues that in the new media environment, the openness, interactivity, and immediacy of technology have strengthened audience choice in information dissemination, with the public consciously and unconsciously setting online topics. Consequently, the traditional mass media agenda-setting function has weakened in mass information dissemination. However, these studies did not examine brand image construction effects from the perspective of selective psychology.

2.3 Question Raising

Therefore, this paper addresses the following questions from the perspectives of brand construction and selective psychology: Does conflict-based brand promotion significantly improve the visibility of both urban brands? What is its psychological mechanism? What other factors have strengthened the spread of "Zibo Barbecue"?

3 Research Methods

This study employs in-depth interviews and experiments to investigate these questions.

3.1.1 Research Hypotheses

H1: Brand promotion can affect the audience's cognition and emotion.

H2: Conflicting and contradictory branding is more likely to affect the audience's perception and emotion than single-brand promotion.

The effects of brand construction can be conceptualized into two dimensions: brand cognitive effect (the audience's memory of the brand) and brand psychological effect (the audience's attitude and emotional tendency toward the brand).

The research method consists of two parts. In the first part, 20 respondents were randomly divided into four groups, watched videos, and completed questionnaires. In the second part, interview methods were used to conduct further interviews with respondents who watched conflict videos and had strong memories, investigating their psychological processes and mechanisms.

3.1.2 Basic Information of Interviewees

Table 1 presents the basic demographic information of interviewees, including gender, occupation, and other relevant characteristics.

3.2 Experimental Method

The author created several conflict-based short video combinations, including: "Zibo Barbecue" versus "No Open-Air Barbecues in Jincheng, Shanxi"; "Zibo Barbecue" versus "Tangshan Barbecue Ridiculed for Challenging Zibo"; and "Zibo Barbecue" versus "Sichuan Barbecue Ridiculed for Challenging Zibo."

The first group of respondents watched five different food-related videos, one of which featured "Zibo Barbecue," and completed a questionnaire. The second group watched five food-related videos, including both "Zibo Barbecue" and "No Open-Air Barbecues in Jincheng, Shanxi," and completed a questionnaire. The third group watched videos including "Zibo Barbecue" and "Tangshan Barbecue Ridiculed for Challenging Zibo," and completed a questionnaire. The fourth group watched videos including "Zibo Barbecue" and "Sichuan Barbecue Ridiculed for Challenging Zibo," and completed a questionnaire.

Table 2 presents the questionnaire on cognition and memory of Zibo Barbecue, covering questions about video impressions, food pairings, barbecue environment, security atmosphere, pricing attitudes, and overall impressions.

3.3 Description of Sample Characteristics

The author conducted interviews with respondents who viewed conflict videos and had strong memories, investigating their psychological processes and mechanisms. During the interview research, the researchers avoided the four ethical problems and deviant behaviors emphasized by scholar Allen Bleiman: (1) causing harm to research participants; (2) failing to use informed consent documents or materials; (3) violating research participants' privacy; and (4) deceiving research participants. If interviewees had questions or felt dissatisfied and did not wish to answer during the interview, they could remain silent or withdraw midway. Interview materials that respondents declared unwilling to disclose were not included or cited in this study.

This study conducted semi-structured depth interviews lasting 15 minutes with 20 interviewees aged 18-60. Interviews began in March 2023 and concluded in May 2023. Respondents initially included college students, teachers, and other professionals, with additional samples collected through social networks. Following the maximum sampling principle of qualitative research methods, sample collection concluded with the 20th interviewee, as all interview content sufficiently answered the research questions. Respondents varied in age, region, and upbringing, with low homogenization. Interviews were primarily conducted through one-on-one face-to-face meetings, with some conducted via online WeChat communication. Interview results were transcribed verbatim into manuscripts totaling 15,000 words, processed by the author.

4 Research Findings and Discussion

During the experiment, I found that the first group of respondents (who watched five different food-related videos, with only one related to “Zibo Barbecue” and no conflicting videos) had relatively poorer cognition and memory of “Zibo Barbecue” compared to other respondents (who watched videos including both “Zibo Barbecue” and conflicting content). However, among the second, third, and fourth groups who watched Zibo Barbecue videos alongside conflicting videos, their cognition and memory about Zibo Barbecue differed slightly. For example, the second group, who watched “Zibo Barbecue” and “No Open-Air Barbecues in Jincheng, Shanxi,” had deeper memories of Zibo Barbecue’s open-air environment. The third group, who watched “Zibo Barbecue” and “Tangshan Barbecue Ridiculed for Challenging Zibo,” felt more positively about Zibo Barbecue’s security atmosphere. The fourth group, who watched “Zibo Barbecue” and “Sichuan Barbecue Ridiculed for Challenging Zibo,” generally perceived Zibo Barbecue as offering good value for money.

When conducting further in-depth interviews on respondents’ attitudes, emotions, topic participation, and understanding channels regarding Zibo Barbecue, I found that most interviewees’ comments were positive, frequently mentioning words such as “warm,” “lively,” “enthusiastic,” “affordable,” and “human touch.” Regarding the psychological mechanism of audience image construction

of “Zibo Barbecue,” interviewees’ answers corroborated my hypotheses: “As a college student, when I see topics about ‘college students going to Zibo for barbecue,’ I naturally pay attention. I’ve never seen this way of eating pancakes with onions and meat before—it’s very novel and has local characteristics. I really want to try it.” “Almost simultaneously, I saw Jincheng banning open-air barbecue alongside Zibo barbecue. The contrast is obvious—I feel Zibo is a small city with human touch.” “The humorous comments from Sichuan BBQ netizens ridiculing high prices resonated with me as a consumer—someone said what I wanted to say but didn’t dare to. I think Zibo barbecue looks more affordable and popular.” “Last year’s Tangshan barbecue assault incident left a deep impression and made me very angry. Now I feel relieved seeing Zibo barbecue becoming especially popular while Tangshan barbecue is ridiculed. Phrases like ‘I’m going to spend money, not get beaten’ and ‘Go to Zibo for 50% off, go to Tangshan for broken bones’ are a bit extreme, but when it comes to barbecue, I can think of these two cities simultaneously.”

4.1 Brand Promotion Can Affect Audience Cognition and Emotion

In the process of building a city brand, not only must all municipal departments work together to provide excellent services, but city brand publicity also significantly influences audience cognition and emotion. Zibo BBQ provides sincere, home-like, and orderly services to floods of tourists. “Through the screen, I feel warmth and friendliness from the distant fireworks and happy people.” At the end of the three-year quarantine period, Zibo barbecue swept away the gloom of depression. In a warm atmosphere, it showcased simple and warm human touch, livelihood security, public confidence, and positive, optimistic expectations for the future. Zibo barbecue has transcended its limitation as merely gourmet food, becoming a personalized city brand image that establishes emotional links with the public, thereby achieving effective city brand construction and communication.

Famous American scholar Kevin Lane Keller believes that city branding enables people to know and understand a city, naturally connecting certain images and associations with the city’s existence, integrating its spirit into every building, and enabling competition and life to coexist with the city. Chinese scholars Hai Jiang and Chen Jianxin argue that city brands emerge from the combination of the city’s material content and the psychological content of citizens and viewers within a specific communication mechanism. A city is not merely a physical entity with natural attributes but also a spiritual existence. Zibo BBQ uses food as the core to build a city brand, endowing it with profound humanistic connotations, impressing broad audiences with emotion and core values, and achieving fission communication on short video social media platforms.

4.2 Conflicting and Contradictory Branding is More Likely to Affect Audience Perception and Emotion than Single-Brand Promotion

In the Internet era of information explosion, users do not blindly follow platform-pushed information but select content related to their interests. When “college students going to Zibo for barbecue” becomes a trending topic, it more easily attracts college students’ attention. Zibo barbecue’s differentiated content of “stove pancakes and green onions” distinguishes it from competitors to some extent. Its affordable and generous portions address pain points in tourism consumption for broad audiences. The homemade gesture of rolling pancakes gives Zibo barbecue strong visual impact, with various factors combining to win substantial attention resources—an important prerequisite for gaining general audience recognition.

Every audience member is not a completely objective information receiver; subjective factors such as emotional tendencies and thinking modes always affect their understanding, evaluation, and attitudes toward received information. Compared with Jincheng, Shanxi Province’s prohibition of open-air barbecue, audiences develop deeper understanding of Zibo barbecue’s urban tolerance, political communication, and human touch contained in its lively atmosphere. Compared with the 2022 Tangshan barbecue incident, Zibo barbecue’s humane and orderly nature can win audience recognition. Audience cognition of Zibo barbecue becomes more diversified and multi-angle through this conflict-based contrastive publicity, making the Zibo barbecue brand more three-dimensional and sensible.

This psychological mechanism reflects the audience selective exposure mechanism proposed by communication studies founder Lazarsfeld in *The People’s Choice*. American scholar Crabbe calls this mechanism selective psychology, refining it into selective attention, selective understanding, and selective memory. Selective psychology indicates that audiences do not receive information indiscriminately but select, understand, and remember content similar to their interests and positions according to their needs. In conflicting information, Zibo BBQ not only conveys food information and serves public life but also fulfills entertainment and cultural value dissemination functions, fitting audience psychology and enabling it to stand out in the information explosion of the Internet.

4.3.1 The Main Body of Communication: Resonance Between Official and Folk Public Opinion Spheres

In in-depth interviews, I learned that a small number of audiences had already learned about Zibo barbecue before watching the experimental videos, either through WeChat friend circles, short video platforms, or official media. Among these, CCTV, as national media, played an especially important role in establishing Zibo barbecue’s image for interviewees. Folk media such as WeChat friend circles and short video platforms primarily promoted Zibo barbecue spontaneously, sharing individuals’ authentic experiences with frequent updates and

diverse patterns and topics. The resonance between official and folk public opinion spheres can continuously guide positive trends in Zibo barbecue topics.

4.3.2 Communication Channel: Immersive Experience of Short Video Platforms

In the new media era, short videos' fragmented narrative mode and vivid content display highlight personal perspectives and emotional attitudes, creating a more immersive viewing experience that enables audiences to more authentically feel a city's cultural atmosphere and human touch. When watching Zibo barbecue-related videos, interviewees "empathized" with the sizzling oil and fireworks at Zibo barbecue scenes, feeling yearning and expectation that resulted in positive imagination about Zibo barbecue. Simultaneously, interactive functions provided by short video platforms—such as comments, forwarding, and messaging—have enabled more audiences to participate in spreading Zibo barbecue.

5 Summary and Reflection

City brand constitutes intangible assets for sustainable urban development. The successful experiences of recent Internet celebrity cities such as Xi'an, Ganzi, and Litang demonstrate that building a strong city brand not only enhances urban competitiveness but also attracts societal attention and secures better development opportunities. In the process of building city brands on short video platforms, Zibo BBQ has explored valuable "breakout" experiences for countless small and medium-sized city brands.

First, differentiated positioning of urban brands forms a city's unique spiritual core. Each city possesses unique scenery, cultural characteristics, and spiritual connotations distinct from other cities. City brand lies in the city's unique core values and spirit, bearing the vision and expectations of official government and the genuine sentiments of city residents. If Zibo barbecue consisted only of a single food item, audiences would eventually experience aesthetic fatigue, and the pursuit of hot spots would gradually fade as heat diminishes. Only by grounding strategies in local urban genes and cultural elements, and deeply excavating urban humanistic connotations through differentiated and personalized approaches, can cities retain their distinctive temperament, build distinctive cultural brands and unique spiritual cores, and provide audiences with brand-new experiences and value resonance on short video platforms, thereby forming long-term, stable brand influence and boosting sustainable urban development.

Second, social media platforms facilitate emotional communication. New media technology development has strengthened public expression and communication capabilities, continuously enhancing audience voice rights. In information transmission processes, urban brands cannot ignore emotional communication on social media platforms. City brands should focus on perfecting narrative and expression methods, weakening advertising nature, reducing audience resistance,

shaping brand images with personality, warmth, and affection, enhancing affinity, and effectively establishing emotional connections between audiences and cities to improve communication efficiency and shape more amiable, lovely, and credible city brands.

It is worth mentioning that official media agenda-setting helps build good city brands. In the initial stage of city brand building, government should play a leading role, actively setting topics, arousing audience attention by creating topics and events aligned with city brand values, operating topics from multiple angles, repeatedly attracting traffic from different perspectives, and maintaining constant innovation.

Meanwhile, as new media technology grants audiences greater voice rights, audiences consciously and unconsciously participate in Internet agenda-setting, gradually diversifying agenda-setting subjects. Urban brand building should effectively utilize resources from all parties to form strong communication power.

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