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How Can Destination Branding in Smart Tourism Move from Information Reach to Immersive Experience

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Abstract:
Smart tourism technologies are rewriting the underlying logic of destination brand communication, but while information can achieve virtually unlimited reach, can experience travel just as far? As virtual reality (VR) places tourists at the center of attractions and algorithms continuously surround them with destination-related content, the explanatory power of a communication paradigm centered on brand awareness and information reach is becoming increasingly limited. This article argues that immersive experience should become the central logic of destination brand communication in the context of smart tourism. Three interrelated rationales support this argument: an epistemological shift from an information-processing paradigm to an experience-generation paradigm; an ontological transformation of brand communication from information transmission to meaning co-creation; and the profound role of immersive experience in fostering both brand identification and civilizational identification. The argument is examined through three cases of smart cultural tourism in Fujian, some of which have approached the threshold of immersive environments, while others remain in transition.

Keywords:
smart tourism; destination branding; immersive experience; civilizational experience; information communication

1. Introduction

"Information can be infinitely replicated, but experience cannot be transmitted." This simple observation provides a useful entry point for understanding the challenges facing destination brand communication in the era of smart tourism. A 2025 report by the Yanolja Research Institute reveals an intriguing contrast: although the number of inbound tourists increased by 48.4%, the overall evaluation of destination brand equity declined [1] (Yanolja Research, 2025). Researchers have characterized this divergence as a disconnect between quantitative growth and qualitative value. More people may know about a destination, yet the significance of the brand in their minds has not increased accordingly. Communication metrics may look impressive, but a persistent gap remains between being seen and actually wanting to visit.

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A similar challenge can be observed in China. The "Fresh Fujian," a brand positioning Fujian as the starting point of the Maritime Silk Road, has gained considerable exposure on Douyin, Weibo, and overseas social media platforms [2]. In the 2026 "Influencers Talk About Fujian" campaign, 20 online influencers collectively reached more than 16 million followers across platforms. Yet the gap between being remembered and actually wanting to visit remains. As information increasingly floods the media environment, an unresolved question is whether tourists' actual perceptions and feelings toward destination brands deepen at the same pace.

The core of this gap lies in the fact that traditional destination brand communication has been built around information reach and cognitive processing as the primary dimensions of effectiveness. Keller's Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model conceptualizes the effectiveness of brand communication as a hierarchical progression, with brand awareness positioned at the starting point of the effect chain [3]. Pike's Destination Brand Equity (DBE) model, developed along similar lines, likewise treats brand awareness as the starting point of effectiveness. These theories were effective in the era of mass media because information was relatively scarce, and reaching audiences itself represented a competitive advantage. In the era of smart tourism, however, information is no longer scarce; attention is. VR and AR enable tourists to enter rather than merely learn about destinations, while short-video platforms are evolving from information channels into experiential spaces. Digital technologies are fundamentally reshaping the underlying logic of brand communication [4].

Existing research remains notably fragmented. Studies of smart tourism focus on how technology creates experiences but pay insufficient attention to the theoretical dimensions of brand communication. Destination branding research examines the effectiveness of brand communication but gives limited consideration to immersive experience. Research on immersive experience focuses primarily on its psychological mechanisms but lacks systematic application within tourism management. The theoretical interface among these three domains has yet to be established, and this is where the present study locates its point of departure.

2. Immersive Experience as the Core Logic

2.1 Conceptual Operationalization

Immersive experience is neither a singular psychological state nor merely a technological outcome. Rather, it is an emergent phenomenon arising at the intersection of technological systems, narrative content, and user psychology. It therefore cannot be readily assigned to a single analytical category. It is neither exclusively a psychological state, as studied in psychology, nor simply a technological effect, as examined in engineering. More precisely, it emerges through the interaction of technological systems, narrative content, and user psychology.

This study operationalizes immersive experience across four levels. Sensory immersion refers to the coordinated engagement of multiple sensory channels and corresponds to the dimension of sensory realism in Witmer and Singer's theory of presence. Emotional immersion refers to tourists' emotional resonance with brand narratives and corresponds to the mechanism of emotional involvement described in Green and Brock's transportation theory. Cognitive immersion refers to a state of highly concentrated attention, corresponding to

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the core state described in Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory. Meaning immersion refers to the process through which brand meanings become internalized as part of one's self-concept and value system, ultimately reaching the deeper dimension of civilizational identification.

Placing information communication and immersive experience side by side makes the paradigmatic shift particularly clear. Information communication takes information as its basic unit and asks what tourists know. Immersive experience takes experience as its basic unit and asks what tourists feel. Information communication positions tourists as recipients of information, whereas immersive experience positions them as co-creators of experience [5]. Information communication treats media as channels for transmitting information, whereas immersive experience treats media as environments in which experiences are generated. The difference is not one of degree but of paradigm.

2.2 Epistemological Foundations

The information-processing paradigm conceptualizes brand communication as a process of information processing. Information is produced by marketers, transmitted through communication channels, received and decoded by tourists, and subsequently processed to form brand perceptions. Keller's CBBE model and Pike's DBE model share the same underlying epistemological assumption: the essence of brand communication lies in the effective transmission of information. This logic was well suited to the era of mass media, when audience attention was relatively concentrated and competition in brand communication was primarily about whose information could reach a larger audience.

Smart tourism technologies, however, have fundamentally altered the structure of the information environment and created new forms of brand engagement. Tourists no longer simply read information about a destination; they enter its virtual environment. VR and AR devices can place tourists in the center of a circular courtyard in a Fujian tulou, looking up at the sky, while digital twin technologies can enable them to walk along the stone-paved streets of Sanfang Qixiang in the metaverse.

An epistemology of experience generation therefore emerges. The essence of brand communication is no longer the effective transmission of information but the deep generation of experience. Tourists do not merely know a brand; they experience it. Information is separable: a brand message can be accurately encoded, transmitted, and decoded, with its content remaining essentially unchanged throughout the process. Experience, by contrast, is inseparable: it can emerge only through tourists' interaction with technological systems, narrative content, and social environments in the moment. It must be experienced firsthand to be fully acquired. There is nothing inherently wrong with using an information-processing paradigm to evaluate communication; the problem arises when that framework is applied to the wrong object.

One important qualification is necessary. The argument that immersive experience should serve as the core logic applies specifically to contexts in which smart tourism technologies are deeply integrated, rather than to all tourism communication contexts. In traditional marketing settings where immersive technologies such as VR, AR, and digital twins have not yet been introduced, information-based communication remains effective. Even in relatively shallow technological applications such as short-video platforms, however, the information immersion created through algorithmic curation has already extended beyond the boundaries of traditional information communication.

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2.3 Ontological Basis

Traditional destination branding theories assume that the ontological substance of brand communication is brand information. Brand information is treated as a pre-existing entity, and communication is understood as the process of transporting this entity from point A to point B. Within this framework, the content of brand information is predetermined, and the task of communication is to ensure that the information is transmitted without distortion.

This information-centered ontology becomes somewhat inadequate in the context of VR. Consider a tourist who puts on a VR headset and enters a virtual courtyard of a Fujian tulou. As they look up at the circular roof above them, what they receive can hardly be reduced to a piece of information. The building's construction date, World Heritage designation, and floor area? These details can certainly be extracted, but they are far from constituting the whole experience. Surrounding the tourist is an entire sensory atmosphere: the rough texture of rammed-earth walls, the shifting light and shadows cast into the courtyard, and the echoes of Hakka dialects reverberating through the space. These elements cannot simply be packaged into a single piece of information and transmitted; they can only be experienced firsthand within the setting.

The ontological center of gravity therefore needs to shift. Rather than asking whether brand information has been accurately delivered, it is more meaningful to ask whether brand meaning has been opened up through experience. Prahalad and Ramaswamy's discussion of value co-creation is useful here: meaning is not a finished product unilaterally delivered by the brand, but something that emerges through the interaction between firms and consumers in specific contexts. Technology provides the platform, while immersive experience creates the setting in which the two can genuinely encounter one another. In this process, tourists are no longer the endpoint of communication but co-producers of meaning.

Immersive experience constitutes a critical site for the generation of brand meaning. Only in an immersive state can tourists establish deep meaningful connections with a brand. Such connections go beyond the informational level of "I know what this brand represents" to the level of identification: "I have found a place within this brand that resonates with my own values." When tourists engage deeply with virtual representations of Fujian's Maritime Silk Road culture in the metaverse, they are not merely learning about the Maritime Silk Road; they are also internalizing its cultural values and meanings as part of their own cultural identity. This process of internalization constitutes the ontological foundation of brand meaning.

2.4 Axiological Basis

Information-based communication treats destination branding primarily as a business endeavor: build awareness, cultivate an appealing image, and ultimately pursue a measurable outcome—whether tourists choose the destination. There is nothing inherently wrong with this logic; its limitation lies in its relatively narrow value dimension. Immersive experience, by contrast, asks whether tourists can find something personally meaningful within the brand.

A concrete scenario may help illustrate the distinction. When immersive technology places a person in a virtual maritime port in Quanzhou during the Song dynasty, surrounded by virtual foreign merchants and sailors and immersed in the sounds of a bustling marketplace, their attention is unlikely to center on factual

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details such as the year Quanzhou was inscribed on the World Heritage List. Instead, they may experience something more diffuse and personal—a feeling that they somehow have a connection with this place. Such a feeling may not immediately translate into a purchase decision, but it is more likely to remain in memory. At a deeper level, if the brand narrative resonates with a particularly salient dimension of Chinese civilization—such as the openness associated with the Maritime Silk Road or the resilience of southern Fujian culture—the tourist may experience more than "I like this brand." They may experience a deeper sense of belonging. This dimension is not easily captured by Western theories of the experience economy. Tourism consumption in China often carries a collective impulse to reconnect with cultural roots, which constitutes a fundamental distinction between the Civilizational Experience Economy and the individualized experiential consumption emphasized in Western theories.

At the deepest level of meaning immersion, when a brand narrative resonates with the historical memory and cultural foundations of Chinese civilization, tourists gain more than the personal experience of "I identify with this brand." Through the experience itself, they may affirm their cultural belonging as members of a shared civilizational community. This represents the ultimate communicative outcome pursued by destination brands such as Fresh Fujian, which carries a broader narrative of the Maritime Silk Road and Chinese civilization. This value shift—from identity-based identification to civilizational identification—allows the logic of immersive experience to move beyond the individualized experiential consumption paradigm presupposed by Western theories of the experience economy. Information-based communication seeks to encourage tourists to choose us; immersive experience seeks to encourage them to identify with us; and at the level of civilizational experience, brand communication seeks to enable tourists to find a sense of belonging within a shared civilization through experience. The former is fundamentally a transactional relationship, the latter a symbiotic relationship, and at its deepest level, an affirmation of membership in a shared civilizational community.

It should be emphasized that information-based communication and immersive experience are not mutually exclusive alternatives but complementary and mutually reinforcing dimensions. Rather than standing in opposition, they constitute two interconnected stages of the communication process. Information-based communication serves as the entry point and foundation for immersive experience: without sufficient brand awareness, tourists may never encounter the immersive experience in the first place. Immersive experience, in turn, deepens and elevates information-based communication, moving tourists from knowing a brand to identifying with it. Their integration therefore constitutes a complete logic chain for destination brand communication in the era of smart tourism.

3. An Examination of Smart Cultural Tourism Practices in Fujian

In recent years, Fujian Province has made substantial investments in smart cultural tourism. The digital marketing matrix for the Fresh Fujian, Starting Point of the Maritime Silk Road brand has expanded across Douyin, Weibo, and overseas social media platforms. Wuyi Mountain, the Fujian Tulou, and the Three Lanes and Seven Alleys have all incorporated various technological applications, providing useful cases for testing the theoretical propositions outlined above: which destinations have genuinely entered the realm of immersive experience, and which remain primarily at the level of information delivery?

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Wuyi Mountain was among the earliest destinations to adopt digital twin technology, using AR overlays on the physical landscape and VR to recreate the entire scenic area in a virtual environment. Visitors standing along the Jiuqu River can scan the landscape with their smartphones to reveal digital layers superimposed on the physical scenery; with a VR headset, they can shift entirely into a virtual world of mountains and rivers. Boating across emerald waters, one travels through a landscape painting—a scene that Chinese literati have depicted for a thousand years can now be entered through technology. More importantly, this immersive effect draws heavily on a deeply rooted Chinese aesthetic tradition: landscapes are not merely objects to be viewed but worlds to be entered. From Confucius's appreciation of water to Ni Zan's sparse forests and distant mountains, the Chinese conception of landscape has long incorporated embodiment and participation. Technology here does not create immersion from nothing; rather, it activates an aesthetic sensibility that has existed within the civilization for centuries. By contrast, some digital twin projects involving natural landscapes in the West may employ more advanced technical parameters yet fail to achieve comparable depth. What is missing is not computing power, but the cultural soil in which such immersion can take root.

The VR experience of the Fujian Tulou, however, remains largely at the level of digitally reproducing architectural parameters and has yet to engage with the warmth of clan life and the ethical order of communal residence—dimensions that represent a microcosm of the Chinese civilizational tradition of integrating family and society. Current immersive scenarios have not yet successfully transformed these abstract cultural values into content that can be experienced immersively. Immersive theatrical projects based on the Tulou attempt to create emotional immersion through narrative, but the depth of the narratives and the richness of their cultural meanings still have room for improvement. The goal should not simply be to use VR to display Tulou architecture, but to allow visitors to experience, within a virtual space, the warmth of Hakka communal life and kinship. This is precisely a dimension that the individual experience-consumption paradigm presupposed by Western experience economy theories has difficulty capturing [6]. The deeper driving force behind cultural tourism consumption in China often points toward a collective experience that transcends individual sensory gratification and is closely connected to civilizational identification.

The smart navigation system and AR reconstruction at the Three Lanes and Seven Alleys likewise remain largely at the stage of information transmission, making it a typical transitional space. Technological tools have been deployed, but immersive experience has yet to fully emerge. Using the historic cultural district as its foundation, the project integrates smart navigation, AR reconstruction of historical scenes, immersive cultural performances, and other technologies in an attempt to transform static historical and cultural resources into dynamic brand experience content. However, tensions remain between the accuracy of reconstruction and the appeal of brand storytelling. This demonstrates that the transition from information communication to immersive experience does not occur automatically; it requires deliberate design and strategic intervention.

How, then, can transitional spaces move forward? The key is to shift the focus of design from historical reconstruction to experience creation. The distinctive value of the Fresh Fujian, Starting Point of the Maritime Silk Road brand does not ultimately lie in how advanced its technology is, but in whether it can transform the historical heritage of the Maritime Silk Road and the everyday cultural vitality of southern Fujian into narrative spaces that visitors can enter and experience. This requires not only technology providers, but also narrative designers with a deep understanding of local culture, as well as operational mechanisms that transform

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visitors from spectators into participants. Visitors should be encouraged to photograph, share, and engage in secondary creation. If immersive experience exists merely as a one-time project, even the most sophisticated installation will eventually become outdated. Only by transforming immersion into a sustainable content ecosystem can such spaces truly come alive.

4. Conclusion

Immersive experience should become the core logic and key lever of destination brand communication in the context of smart tourism. This proposition is grounded in three progressively developed theoretical arguments. At the epistemological level, the shift from an information-processing paradigm to an experience-generation paradigm explains why the mode of cognition must change. At the ontological level, the fundamental transformation of brand communication from information transmission to meaning co-creation addresses the question of what brand communication essentially is. At the axiological level, the deeper role of immersive experience in driving brand loyalty and civilizational identification explains what this transformation ultimately produces.

This shift does not negate information communication; rather, it transcends its traditional boundaries. Information communication remains the entry point and prerequisite for brand communication, but it is no longer sufficient to encompass the full logic of effective brand communication in smart tourism contexts. The theoretical contributions of this article are reflected at three levels. At the propositional level, it advances the theoretical proposition that immersive experience should constitute the core logic of destination brand communication. At the framework level, it develops a progressive three-layer argument encompassing epistemology, ontology, and axiology, while introducing the concept of the transitional space. At the level of theoretical dialogue, it establishes an internal connection with the framework of the Civilizational Experience Economy, offering a new interpretive pathway for understanding the distinctive characteristics of cultural tourism consumption in China.

This article is primarily a theory-building and conceptual study and has not yet systematically tested the validity of the proposed immersion assessment framework through large-scale empirical research. Future research could pursue several directions, including the enhancement of immersive experience through generative artificial intelligence, cross-cultural differences in immersive experience, and the ethical boundaries of immersion. As immersive technologies become increasingly capable of influencing tourists' sensory and emotional experiences, where should the ethical boundaries of brand communication be drawn? The transition from technological immersion to civilizational immersion represents a promising direction for future research on destination brand communication.

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