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Research on the Construction of Harbin's Urban Cultural Brand from the Perspective of Value Co-creation

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Abstract:
The construction of urban cultural branding enhances the cultural image of a city, strengthens its competitiveness, and promotes socio-economic development. The establishment of urban cultural branding is an essential pathway for the sustainable development of cities. The year 2023 marks a pivotal moment for the construction of urban cultural branding in China, witnessing the emergence of numerous "phenomenal" city images. Under their influence, many cities have begun to actively explore their own paths for constructing urban cultural branding. In the context of social acceleration, digital technologies have endowed users with more channels and power to engage, thereby enabling them to play an increasingly significant role in shaping urban images. This study, grounded in the successful case of Harbin's urban cultural branding, analyzes the impact of user participation on audience cognition and behavior in the construction of urban cultural branding from the perspective of value co-creation. By employing questionnaire surveys and in-depth interviews, the study investigates the influence of user participation on the recognition, reputation, and loyalty of urban cultural branding. Constructive strategies for the development of urban cultural branding are subsequently proposed.

Keywords:
city culture brand, value co-creation, city image shaping

1 Introduction

The year 2023 has emerged as a pivotal juncture for the unprecedented proliferation of urban cultural branding, marked by a series of emblematic phenomena. From the "The 19th Asian Games Hangzhou" to the "Chengdu 2021 FISU World University Games," and from the gastronomic sensation of "Zibo Barbecue" to the musical renaissance of "Shijiazhuang Rock City," alongside the cultural archetype of "Henan Daji" and the regional charm of "Heilongjiang Harbin," each has crystallized into a distinctive brand image, encapsulating and projecting the unique urban landscapes and cultural identities of their respective cities. The "China City Brand Influence Report (2023)" establishes an evaluation system known as the CBII Index, which encompasses five primary indicators: the City Cultural Brand Influence Index, the City Tourism Brand

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Influence Index, the City Investment Brand Influence Index, the City Livability Brand Influence Index, and the City Brand Communication Influence Index. The report underscores that urban culture is poised to become the most profound driving force in the development of city brands in future trends. Consequently, the construction of urban cultural brands represents a significant pathway for city development. It not only stimulates domestic demand, promotes consumption, and enhances economic efficiency but also contributes to the formation of a city's core competitiveness, propelling sustainable urban growth. Moreover, it strengthens the cohesion among city residents, attracts top talent, and bolsters public trust in the government.

Keller introduced the concept that "a city can be branded" and developed the "Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) Model," emphasizing that the value of a brand stems from consumers' perceptions and feelings towards the brand.[5] Therefore, in the process of constructing a city brand, consumers are not merely unidirectional recipients but also another principal entity that creates value. The favorable reception that Harbin has garnered in the construction of its urban cultural brand is inextricably linked to the substantial emotional, traffic, and experiential value generated by its users.[26] The amalgamation of content production methods such as UGC (User-Generated Content), PGC (Professionally-generated Content), and OGC (Occupationally-generated Content) has propelled the integration and complementarity of official discourse with grassroots discourse, grand narratives with individual narratives, and professional content with grassroots content. From the perspective of value co-creation, the participation of multiple content production entities has facilitated a multi-dimensional and holistic representation of the city's image. The rich sources of information and diverse narrative styles of the content material have enhanced the readability, persuasiveness, and emotional impact of the city's image symbols.

The construction of urban cultural brands has gradually garnered significant attention, with numerous cities embarking on endeavors to forge their distinctive cultural identities. However, it is observed that while some urban brand initiatives achieve remarkable success and widespread recognition, others languish in obscurity. Therefore, this paper, based on the successful case of Harbin's urban cultural brand construction, analyzes from the theoretical perspective of value co-creation: what factors can facilitate the successful construction of an urban cultural brand? How do these factors contribute to the construction of an urban cultural brand?

2 Literature Review

2.1 The theory of value co-creation

The concept of value co-creation germinated from the idea of co-production in the 19th century, with early theories of value co-creation positing that consumers play a productive role in the process of value creation.[11] With the continuous evolution and maturation over recent decades, value co-creation has developed into two predominant research perspectives. The first is the consumer experience-based theory of value co-creation proposed by Prahalad and Ramaswamy,[1] and the second is the service-dominant logic-based theory of value co-creation introduced by Vargo and Lusch.[2] The theory of value co-creation transcends the traditional paradigm where value is solely created by producers, emphasizing that consumers also hold a pivotal role as active participants in the value creation process.

Domestic research on value co-creation is predominantly characterized by empirical studies. Jiuhe Wang

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and Danyang Sun have constructed an innovative pathway model for the business model of short video platforms from the perspective of value co-creation, based on case studies of Douyin short videos.[13] Hongjun Xiao, Zhe Zhang, and colleagues, from the perspective of social value co-creation and based on the case study of Meituan's "Green Hills Plan," have pointed out that digital enterprise platforms, by transcending traditional boundaries, have shifted their value co-creation model towards a "shared value" approach, which has further evolved into a "common benefit" model. This transition has facilitated the expansion and deepening of the mechanisms for social value co-creation.[14]

In recent years, the perspective of value co-creation has gained significant attention in the fields of public services, rural revitalization, and urban cultural development. Cong Wang, Liqian Bie, and colleagues, taking the comprehensive service desk of Peking University Library as a case study, have researched and indicated that from the perspective of value co-creation, university libraries can establish and optimize the mechanisms of their service ecosystems to form a dynamic system that allows for multi-party participation, mutual growth, and value enhancement.[15] Through the examination of the case of Qiluo Village in Tengchong, Wei Pan has established a practical mechanism for diverse community participation in rural cultural construction and village-level governance from the perspective of value co-creation.[16] From the perspective of the application of value co-creation theory in government and public sectors, Ting Wang has analyzed and derived the experience of Dujiangyan city government in promoting the development of comprehensive tourism, providing reference value for the development of comprehensive tourism across the country.[17]

2.2 Research on the construction of urban cultural brands from the perspective of value co-creation

The urban cultural brand is a core element of the city brand, encompassing a name, logo, symbol, or design, among other related elements, used to identify the culture of a city. It serves to differentiate the city's culture from that of its competitors and to establish a perception of the city's culture in the minds of the public.[18] Kerui Linghu has utilized the SWOT analysis method to assess the strengths and weaknesses of urban cultural brand construction in Guiyang City, offering constructive strategies for the development of urban cultural brands.[19] With the continuous advancement of digital technology and media, digital empowerment and media convergence have emerged as significant research perspectives in the construction of urban cultural brands.

The understanding of city branding can be approached from two angles: one is from the perspective of the city itself, and the other is from the perspective of the customer.[18] From the perspective of value co-creation, these two angles are complementary, with both the city and its customers serving as primary agents in the co-creation of value. Ping Sun and Degang Wang, grounded in the theory of brand ecosystems, have examined the "Zibo Barbecue" phenomenon, delineating its developmental stages from "media breakout" to "value co-creation" and identifying the influencing factors. Their analysis provides a viable pathway for non-traditional tourist cities to construct a sustainable and stable urban cultural brand.[20] Chunhui He and Yikai Wang have analyzed the phenomenon of Harbin's tourism boom from the perspective of comprehensive and inclusive value co-creation. They have summarized three critical factors of value co-creation: a positive tourism experience, collaboration among diverse cultural entities, and multi-layered public dissemination. Their findings offer actionable measures for the branding of cultural tourism cities.[21] Through her research

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and analysis on the generation of Hangzhou's city brand influence, Yilin Yang has concluded that from the perspective of value co-creation, Hangzhou coordinates the participation of multiple stakeholders in the construction of the city brand, forming a pathway of "concept-action-sustainable development."[22]

2.3 Questions

Current research on the construction of urban cultural brands has seldom incorporated the perspective of value co-creation, with existing studies predominantly focusing on the pathways and comprehensive impacts of value co-creation in urban cultural branding. However, there has been a lack of detailed research on the influence of value co-creation on user behavior and perceptions, as well as on the impact of user co-created value on the construction of urban cultural brands.

Therefore, based on the theory of value co-creation, this paper attempts to address the following questions: From the perspective of value co-creation, Harbin has become a phenomenal tourist city and sustained its popularity, which is inseparable from user co-created value. What impact does the co-creation of urban cultural brand value have on the cognition and behavior of user participation? How does the participation of users in value co-creation affect the construction of urban cultural brands, thereby enabling the sustainable development of these brands?

3 Hypotheses

Based on the aforementioned questions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Ha: The level of user participation in value co-creation has an impact on the construction of urban cultural brands.

Ha1: The more users participate in value co-creation, the higher their awareness of the urban cultural brand.

Ha2: The more actively users participate in value co-creation, the more it promotes the enhancement of the urban cultural brand's reputation.

Ha3: The more frequently users participate in value co-creation, the higher their loyalty to the urban cultural brand.

To test these hypotheses, this study employs a questionnaire survey method and has developed a questionnaire.

Hb: User value co-creation can facilitate the construction of urban cultural brands.

To test this hypothesis, the study utilizes an interview method and has prepared an interview guide.

3.1 Methods

3.1.1 Questionnaire design

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This questionnaire is designed to investigate the effects of user participation in value co-creation on the development of Harbin's urban cultural brand. Specifically, it aims to first gather data on users' communicative behaviors in value co-creation, and then derive the impact of value co-creation on the construction of Harbin's urban cultural brand in terms of brand awareness, reputation, and loyalty from the data on changes in audience cognitive attitudes and behaviors. The cognitive dimension pertains to the perception of the city's image, the psychological and attitudinal dimension encompasses user intentions, and the behavioral dimension includes user participation and interaction behaviors. Therefore, the questionnaire is designed in three parts:

3.1.2 Sampling method

The target population for this hypothesis consists of audiences who have engaged with content related to Harbin. First, we employed convenience sampling to select users who have recently viewed Harbin-related content as the study population. Next, we designed a questionnaire using Wenjuanxing (a popular online survey tool in China). Subsequently, the questionnaire was distributed both offline and through online social media platforms such as WeChat Moments, QQ Zone, and Douyin (TikTok). Blank and invalid responses were excluded, and the final collection of valid responses served as the research sample.

3.1.3 Determination of questionnaire variable indicators

(1) Indicators for audience participation in value co-creation

To analyze user participation behavior, audience participation in value co-creation is examined from two dimensions: the content creators and the users' own participation behaviors.

Table 1 Indicators for Audience Participation in Value Co-creation

Primary Indicator	Secondary Indicator	Tertiary Indicator
Audience Participation	Content Creator	Is the content you watch mostly user-generated or officially produced?
		Through which channels did you learn about this content?
	User Participation Behavior	Have you liked related content?
		Have you commented on related content?
		Have you shared related content?
		Have you created related content?

(2) Indicators for urban cultural branding construction

The construction of urban cultural branding is broken down into three specific indicators: recognition, reputation, and loyalty. Analysis of these indicators reveals users' perceptions of urban cultural branding.

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Table 2 Indicators for Urban Cultural Branding Construction

Primary Indicator	Secondary Indicator	Tertiary Indicator
Urban Cultural Branding Construction	Recognition	What Harbin-related content have you seen?
		What content interests you the most?
		Has online content enriched your understanding of Harbin?
	Reputation	Do you like the city of Harbin?
		Do you like Harbin's ice and snow tourism initiatives?
		Are you willing to recommend Harbin to others?
	Loyalty	Have you visited Harbin?
		Would you be willing to visit Harbin if given the opportunity? / Would you visit again?
		Has online content influenced your choice of travel destinations?

(3) Relationship between audience participation in value co-creation and urban cultural branding construction

Based on the above two sets of indicators, the questionnaire responses were analyzed to demonstrate the relationship between the level of user participation in value co-creation and the construction of urban cultural branding. This analysis aims to validate the hypothesis: the higher the level of user participation in value co-creation, the greater the recognition, reputation, and loyalty toward the urban cultural brand, thereby positively contributing to the construction of the urban cultural brand.

3.2 In-depth interview method

3.2.1 Interview method

The author selected 10 individuals from groups who follow and are familiar with Harbin city on social media as interviewees. These individuals should represent diverse perspectives, such as avid travelers versus casual travelers, self-media operators versus non-self-media operators, and heavy internet content consumers versus ordinary users, to gain deeper insights.

Initially, a "purposive sampling" approach was used to select suitable research subjects. Subsequently, the "intensity sampling" principle was applied to choose 5 participants from those who completed the questionnaire survey. The "snowball sampling" method was then employed to expand the total number of participants to 10. This purposive sampling aims to identify individuals with high information density and intensity for the study.

The number and duration of interviews are flexible. Interviews were conducted online, primarily using social tools such as QQ and WeChat for in-depth discussions. With the consent of the interviewees, the entire interview was recorded using a voice recorder. To ensure the authenticity, accuracy, and completeness of the

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data, the author focused on establishing a harmonious research relationship with the interviewees, respecting their willingness. After transcribing the recordings, the content was coded and subjected to "constant comparison" for thematic and contextual analysis.

During this process, the interview outline was repeatedly reviewed, and emerging phenomena was categorized and named. The identified categories were continuously compared to maximize differences between them, ensuring that the interview questions are appropriately classified. The categorized data was further summarized to extract key themes. The entire research process strictly adhered to scientific research ethics. All participants were voluntarily choose to participate after fully understanding the study. Before the research begins, participants have read the interview requirements and clearly understood their rights and obligations. The researcher treated each participant with respect and equality, ensuring strict confidentiality of the research process and all raw materials.

3.2.2 Interview outline development

The interview questions are divided into three main sections.

Part 1: This section covers the basic information of interviewees influenced by user-generated content, including their age, occupation, hometown, current residence, travel frequency, and daily consumption habits.

Part 2: This section operationalizes the research questions into interview questions. It includes their preferences for user-generated content, views on Harbin's popularity, and specific changes in attitudes and behaviors to analyze the role of user-generated content in promoting the construction of urban cultural branding.

Part 3: This section prepares for potential in-depth questions, including the interviewee's basic information, the relationship between traffic value and brand awareness, the relationship between emotional value and brand reputation, and the relationship between experiential value and brand loyalty.

4 Value Co-creation: User Participation in Urban Cultural Branding

Jenkins' theory of participatory culture highlights that in the Web 2.0 era, with the prevalence of social media and smartphones, audiences are no longer mere information receivers but have become content creators and disseminators.[9] Audiences can comment, repost, and engage in secondary creation of published content, as well as produce and share original content on social media. In the era of "everyone being a self-media," audience participation holds significant productive and traffic value, and the content they produce strongly shapes people's perceptions and behaviors.

In traditional media environments, local governments and mass media held the power to shape city images, disseminating information top-down through television, radio, and newspapers. The construction of urban cultural branding was an official act, with audiences having almost no participation rights. However, with the advancement of digital technology, audiences have gained more communication channels and greater participation rights. Consequently, audiences have gradually become involved in the construction of urban cultural branding, co-creating value with official entities. In this context, the official discourse power in urban cultural branding has been diluted, and audiences have gained a dominant role in value creation.

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The recent popularity of Harbin tourism is a result of value co-creation between official entities and users, achieved through diverse communication models that mobilize multiple circles, forming a pattern of "mainstream media leadership + Douyin (TikTok) explosion + Weibo breakout + WeChat penetration".[21] Harbin's official entities integrated urban resources, developed cultural tourism plans based on the city's unique characteristics, and leveraged the advantages of a "people-pleasing city personality" to meet tourist needs with sincerity and practical actions. Building on a strong reputation, Harbin's official media extensively covered winter tourism, laying a solid foundation for urban cultural branding with both depth and breadth. Heilongjiang Province formulated the "Heilongjiang Province Winter Ice and Snow Tourism '100-Day Actio' Implementation Plan," which comprehensively and scientifically arranged promotional efforts. Mainstream media also actively adopted a youthful communication tone to cater to audience preferences. For example, Heilongjiang Broadcasting Television launched a "Hot Online Comments Column" during its news broadcast, sharing and commenting on netizens' insightful remarks.[28] Self-media also played a significant role in value co-creation, showcasing tourists' specific experiences in Harbin from a personal perspective, generating high levels of engagement and interaction. The rich content from self-media presented Harbin's city image from various angles, making the urban cultural branding more robust. This participatory value production not only resonated with users, creating strong emotional value but also generated substantial traffic value.

The experiential value, emotional value, and traffic value generated in this value creation process can further mobilize more groups to participate in value co-creation, forming a virtuous cycle. By integrating co-created values, the direction of Harbin's urban cultural branding can be identified and continuously refined. For example, based on hospitality culture, hot topics such as "Southern Little Potatoes" and "Free Luxury Car Rides" were created, shaping Harbin's "fan-pampering" city image. Leveraging its geographical and climatic features, Harbin developed the "Ice and Snow World" IP, promoting its ice and snow culture. Additionally, focusing on its exotic charm, key attractions such as "Central Street," "St. Sophia Cathedral," and "Volga Manor" were highlighted, showcasing the city's multiculturalism.

4.1 User participation: the key to urban cultural branding

Since its rise in popularity in 2023, Harbin tourism has garnered significant attention on social media. This study, based on value co-creation in Harbin's urban cultural branding, selected diverse groups as research subjects, distributing and collecting 310 valid questionnaires with a 100% response rate. The sample covers a wide range of ages and educational backgrounds, ensuring representativeness. Based on the questionnaire content, the study analyzed the extent of audience participation in value co-creation and its impact on their perceptions and behaviors, specifically examining the recognition, reputation, and loyalty of urban cultural branding.

4.1.1 User value co-creation: enhancing the recognition of urban cultural branding

In communication effect studies, cognitive effects refer to the audience's acquisition, understanding, and memory of media content. This study extracts the main components of Harbin's urban cultural branding, focusing on the relationship between audience participation in value co-creation and their recognition of the urban cultural brand. Analysis of the survey data shows a positive correlation ($r = 0.27$) between the independent variable (audience participation in value co-creation) and the dependent variable (user recognition of

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urban cultural branding), indicating that increased participation in value co-creation enhances brand recognition. Cross-analysis of Q4 and Q8 reveals that over 85% of users agree that online content has enriched their understanding of Harbin, and nearly 90% believe that most of the content they view is user-generated. This demonstrates that value co-creation improves user recognition of urban cultural branding, with user-generated content playing a significant role.

In the context of social media, digital technology grants users greater participation rights. Urban cultural branding no longer relies solely on information dissemination but also requires fostering public identification with the city.[26] Brand value theory posits that consumers perceive brand value through brand communication, progressing from recognition to acceptance and ultimately forming value identification with the brand's core values.[27] Compared to mass communication, interpersonal communication by the public as value creators in urban cultural branding has unique advantages in influencing audience attitudes and behaviors. For example, the recent popularity of "Zibo Barbecue" was initially driven by the topic "College Students Travel to Zibo for Barbecue" on platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin. Videos documenting college students taking high-speed trains to Zibo for barbecue, including ticket purchase guides and the proper way to enjoy the "barbecue trio" (grill, pancake, and dipping sauce), resonated strongly with the student community, attracting many to Zibo. Building on this, Zibo rapidly developed its barbecue industry chain, promoting local food culture and history, further advancing its urban cultural branding.

4.1.2 User value co-creation: elevating the reputation of urban cultural branding

Renshu Zuo argue that city marketing is a social management activity aimed at fully leveraging the city's overall functions, enhancing its recognition and reputation through the establishment of a unique city image, thereby meeting the needs of the government, businesses, and the public.[24] Thus, reputation is a crucial dimension in urban cultural branding. Building reputation requires continuous improvements in the city's livability and experiential quality, as well as the dissemination of the city's image through official, public, and private communication channels.

Compared to official content, user-generated content plays a more significant role in enhancing reputation and building urban brand reputation. Analysis of Q4, Q5, and Q8 survey data shows that Harbin and its tourism initiatives enjoy a positive reputation among users. The correlation analysis reveals a positive relationship ($r = 0.31$) between the independent variable (audience participation in value co-creation) and the dependent variable (user perception of urban cultural branding reputation), supporting the Ha2 hypothesis that "more active participation in value co-creation enhances urban cultural branding reputation." User-generated content, such as photo check-ins, travel guides, and personal experiences, resonates more with the public, influencing perceptions of Harbin and further elevating its urban cultural branding through emotional value. For instance, videos showcasing the hospitality of Harbin locals, such as shop owners chatting warmly with customers in Northeastern dialects, introducing local knowledge to tourists, and offering complimentary local delicacies like frozen pears, have touched viewers. In an accelerate and impersonal society, such genuine warmth has rekindled a sense of connection among viewers.

4.1.3 User value co-creation: strengthening the loyalty of urban cultural branding

After the public gains sufficient understanding and recognition of a city's cultural brand, loyalty to the ur-

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ban cultural brand gradually develops. Descriptive analysis of the three dependent variables—recognition, reputation, and loyalty—reveals that their average values range between 3.88 and 3.94, indicating that the levels of user recognition, reputation, and loyalty toward the urban cultural brand are relatively close. This reflects a certain intrinsic connection among these three aspects, suggesting that loyalty to an urban cultural brand is built upon recognition and reputation.

Loyalty to an urban cultural brand manifests in three ways: first, users' high level of approval of the city; second, users actively promoting the city's cultural brand; and third, users choosing the city as a travel destination and even being willing to visit multiple times. Data from Q9, Q10, and Q11 show that nearly 70% of the survey respondents have visited Harbin, with less than 10% expressing unwillingness to revisit. Data from Q8 indicate that content related to Harbin has deepened the audience's understanding of the city and enhanced its reputation. Recognition and reputation, in turn, influence the audience's preferences for travel destinations, with nearly 90% of respondents willing to recommend Harbin to others. Additionally, the correlation coefficient between audience participation in value co-creation and loyalty to the urban cultural brand is 0.36, demonstrating a positive relationship and confirming the positive impact of value co-creation on brand loyalty.

While recognition and reputation may only bring temporary high attention to a city, sustainable development of urban cultural branding requires leveraging the high recognition and reputation formed through value co-creation to establish brand loyalty. Through continuous deepening and a virtuous cycle, urban cultural branding can gradually mature and improve. Currently, "internet-famous" cities have become a social phenomenon, and the key challenge lies in transforming the "traffic" attracted by cities into "retention." For example, Lintong District in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, has adopted a "people-oriented" development approach, focusing on the three brands of "Qin style, Tang charm, and royal hot springs" to promote cultural industries. At the same time, it emphasizes improving the cultural literacy of local residents as an important way to cultivate cultural awareness. Local initiatives include establishing training institutions and setting up special funds for villager training, thereby changing lifestyles through cultural influence.[29] By integrating cultural industries into daily life and encouraging local participation, the endogenous motivation for sustainable cultural industry development is activated.

4.2 User value co-creation: promoting the branding of urban image

The success of Harbin's urban cultural branding is the result of the combined effects of traffic value, emotional value, and experiential value in value co-creation. Harbin leveraged its local tourism resources and hospitality culture to create highly discussed topics, laying the foundation for the recognition of its urban cultural brand. Guided by the concept of comprehensive value co-creation, Harbin demonstrated high responsiveness and execution centered on humanistic care, garnering significant emotional value and greatly enhancing the city's reputation. Driven by high exposure and reputation, Harbin attracted numerous tourists, and the high-quality travel experiences were widely disseminated on platforms and private channels, fostering loyalty to Harbin's urban cultural brand. These three dimensions complement each other and form a virtuous cycle, collectively promoting the construction of Harbin's urban cultural brand.

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4.2.1 Traffic value: enhancing the recognition of urban cultural branding

In the context of an accelerating society, people face rapid technological advancements, social changes, and faster-paced lifestyles.[10] The internet and digital media have compressed spatial and temporal boundaries while fragmenting information and creating an "implosion" of content. How urban brands can stand out amidst this flood of information is a critical challenge. Harbin's solution was to create deeply engaging topical events and utilize multidimensional, efficient communication methods to achieve high traffic and exposure, effectively promoting the city's brand. For example, one interviewee noted, "Before, I only had a vague idea of 'Northeast China' and knew nothing about Harbin… It was through those short videos that I learned about Harbin's unique features" (A07). Another mentioned, "I came across so many videos about the Ice and Snow World. I had no idea it had such a long history—I thought it was a recent development" (A02). A third interviewee commented, "The St. Sophia Cathedral became a popular photo spot, and the locals even created an artificial moon for tourists to take pictures… I never expected Harbin to have such architectural styles" (A03).

Harbin fully utilized the communication power of official media, self-media, and tourists. For instance, the 2024 "Beautiful China Tour—Ice and Snow Journey" series of media events launched in Harbin, with live broadcasts simultaneously initiated by mainstream media in multiple provinces and cities. Over a hundred official accounts, hosts, and content creators from the national broadcasting and new media alliance participated, forming a media convergence matrix that achieved cross-regional, multi-angle, and integrated media communication. Through government-owned media channels and platforms like CCTV and Xinhua News, Harbin showcased its core city brand image. Following Harbin's rise in popularity, platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin saw a surge in user-generated videos, including experiences of visiting the Ice and Snow World after the "refund incident," travel guides for transportation, accommodation, attractions, and food, and reviews of popular shops. Through self-media, audiences gained access to more nuanced travel experiences, fostering a sense of longing.[21] Spontaneous dissemination by tourists turned Harbin into a hotspot of discussion throughout the winter.

4.2.2 Emotional value: the core of enhancing urban reputation

The "Male and Female Daji" incident in Henan, which sparked controversy due to allegations of negative influence, posed a crisis for Henan's cultural tourism, which had been gaining momentum. Harbin faced a similar situation when the Ice and Snow World, overwhelmed by the surge in popularity, had to stop selling tickets on its opening day due to overcrowding. Long queues and dissatisfaction led to a wave of refund requests. How can Harbin reverse its reputation during the "Refund Incident".

Urban cultural tourism departments must balance the interests of their organizations with those of the public to achieve a win-win outcome. In response to the incident, the Ice and Snow World promptly issued an "Open Letter to Tourists" apologizing for the inconvenience, and the city's cultural tourism bureau leaders visited the site to oversee compensation and service improvements. The official's swift response and immediate actions helped stabilize the situation. Meanwhile, Harbin locals posted videos online apologizing to tourists, demonstrating the city's hospitality and respect. Additionally, tourists shared their experiences of visiting the Ice and Snow World for free after receiving refunds and being warmly treated by local businesses.

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These efforts collectively reversed the decline in Harbin's reputation. This comprehensive value co-creation approach easily evokes "emotional value."

Harbin capitalized on its geographical advantages to create ice and snow-themed tourism, catering to the "snow fascination" of southern tourists while showcasing its hospitality culture and humanistic care, providing users with significant emotional value. One interviewee remarked, "As a southerner, seeing so much snow in Harbin was incredibly exciting… I felt it was worth the trip after experiencing so many ice and snow activities!" (A01). Another noted, "The locals were so warm that I felt overwhelmed" (A05). Harbin's responsiveness to tourist needs—such as building warming shelters for southern tourists unaccustomed to the cold and creating photo-friendly setups like hot air balloons and artificial moons—was humorously dubbed by locals as "Erbin, you've changed," reflecting the city's dedication to its visitors. The rich emotional value generated significantly boosted Harbin's reputation.

4.2.3 Experiential value: enhancing loyalty to urban cultural branding

Harbin's rise to prominence was driven by its "people-pleasing" services. Building on Northeastern hospitality, Harbin integrated urban resources to enhance tourist experiences, such as constructing warming shelters, organizing free shuttle services, and improving service quality. The city also actively addressed and resolved issues raised by tourists, ensuring high-quality travel experiences and leaving a positive impression. Tourists shared their experiences online, "promoting Harbin's image and contributing to its urban cultural branding. One interviewee stated, I've been to Harbin before… I'd love to go again and experience the high-quality services now" (A04). Another mentioned, "There was a viral video of a tour guide speaking in a Northeastern accent, which was hilarious and helpful in avoiding tourist traps. I'd want a guide like that if I visited" (A07). A third commented, "The free luxury car service is so appealing—I'd love to try it" (A06). Whether for living or traveling, experiential value is a key consideration for everyone.

User-generated content (UGC) related to Harbin, such as travel vlogs, route guides, and shop recommendations, garnered significant attention.UGC,characterized by its audience-centric perspective, effectively resonates with user needs and is perceived as more authentic and persuasive, influencing user choices. Guided by such content, audiences highly rated Harbin's experiential value, fostering loyalty to its urban cultural brand.

The construction of urban image is not about blindly imitating successful cases but leveraging the city's unique cultural endowments. China's vast territory and diverse cultural resources mean that each region must learn from exemplary cases while exploring its own characteristics. For example, Suzhou, Jiangsu, capitalizes on its traditional cultural advantages, forming the distinctive "Gusu model." Recognized by UNESCO as a "World Heritage Exemplary City" and a "City of Crafts and Folk Art," Suzhou has built brands like the "City of Gardens" and "One City, One Hundred Museums".[29] In contrast, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, with its entirely different cultural resources, has adopted a different urban branding strategy. For instance, Fuyun County in Altay Prefecture has focused on revitalizing old mining resources, transforming the former Koktokay silicon carbide factory into a cultural industrial park. Once a site of national pride for its contributions to China's "Two Bombs, One Satellite" program, it is now a "National Historical and Cultural Town," "National Geological Park," and "5A-Level Tourist Attraction." Events like music festivals and talent shows have injected new vitality into the old mining area.[29]

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5 Conclusion

Harbin's success is not an accident. Through meticulous preparation, a responsive attitude, and proactive services, the city has won the hearts of many tourists. As living standards improve, so do people's demands for spiritual fulfillment and high-quality experiences. With the cultural tourism industry gaining momentum, the importance of urban cultural branding in city development continues to grow. Urban cultural branding plays a significant role in enhancing a city's attractiveness, competitiveness, and sustainable development. It is not a one-sided value creation by producers; in the platform era, users are also content creators and an indispensable force in urban cultural branding. Therefore, cities must deeply understand the perspective of value co-creation, leverage the strengths of multiple stakeholders, and foster a virtuous cycle of value co-creation.

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