

Modeling the Impact of Cultural Marketing on City Brand Attractiveness: Evidence from Shijiazhuang, China

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Abstract

This study quantitatively investigates how cultural marketing influences city brand attractiveness in Shijiazhuang, China. Research Objectives To establish a city brand attractiveness evaluation model from the perspective of cultural marketing. 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". Design tiered marketing strategies targeting different audiences (youth groups, business people, local residents). Establish a cultural marketing coordination mechanism that is government-led, market-driven, and involves public participation. through the mediating role of customer perceived value. A structured questionnaire was distributed to 350 valid respondents, measuring four dimensions of cultural marketing—historical, artistic, sports, and commercial—along with perceived value and brand attractiveness using a five-point Likert scale. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to analyze the data. Results revealed that all four cultural marketing dimensions significantly enhance perceived value, which in turn positively affects city brand attractiveness. The findings underscore the importance of integrating cultural marketing strategies to strengthen Shijiazhuang's urban brand identity and competitiveness. The study contributes empirical evidence to urban marketing literature and offers strategic implications for city brand managers.

Keywords: Cultural Marketing, City Brand Attractiveness, Perceived Value, Urban Branding, Quantitative Research

Introduction

Globalization and Urban Cultural Competition With the deepening of globalization and informatization, competition among cities has intensified beyond traditional dimensions of economy and technology. Contemporary urban rivalry increasingly revolves around cultural soft power—the ability of cities to project identity, creativity, and emotional resonance. In this context, the city brand has become a vital vehicle for communicating urban image and enhancing competitiveness. City branding not only reflects a city’s tangible achievements but also conveys its cultural vitality, distinctiveness, and aspirational values. As an emerging marketing approach, cultural marketing emphasizes building brand value through the uniqueness and attractiveness of local culture, offering new pathways for cities to strengthen their global and domestic presence.

Urban development and urban marketing are inseparable and mutually reinforcing. Urban development provides the foundation for marketing efforts, while effective marketing catalyzes further development, forming a positive feedback loop. Theoretical exploration of this relationship can be traced to Ashworth and Voogd (1990), who proposed that urban marketing integrates urban planning and management with market-oriented strategy, enabling cities to design and communicate their identities through systematic analysis and planning. Cochrane (1995) later emphasized that cities often “sell themselves” to attract investment and talent by manipulating intertwined cultural and historical attributes to craft compelling images and lifestyles.

Building upon these foundations, Kotler (1993) conceptualized cities as enterprises operating in competitive markets, suggesting that they should be “packaged” into attractive products through four regional marketing strategies: image marketing, infrastructure marketing, landmark marketing, and people marketing. Fretter and Dangschat (1993) further argued that city positioning and target market selection must align with the long-term vision of urban development and industrial structure to enhance overall competitiveness. Dril (2016) expanded this notion by stressing that urban marketing should select appropriate planning methods and organizational mechanisms to meet the needs of diverse target groups during development. Collectively, these studies establish a theoretical framework in which urban branding serves as both a developmental tool and a reflection of soft power, focusing on satisfaction, loyalty, and emotional connection rather than mere economic output.

Current Cultural Marketing Practices in Shijiazhuang Shijiazhuang’s cultural marketing strategies span several domains.

Historical and cultural tourism: The city has advanced the revitalization of Zhengding Ancient City, promoted Xibaipo Red IP, and developed cultural and creative towns to reinforce its identity.

- Performing arts and music: Initiatives such as “Rock City China”, the creation of the “Northern Opera Nest”, and heritage-themed performances like The Liberation of Shijiazhuang have deepened the city’s artistic profile.
- Sports and festivals: The Shijiazhuang Marathon, sports exhibitions, and seasonal sports consumption campaigns have expanded public engagement and urban visibility.
- Exhibitions and entrepreneurship: The International Convention and Exhibition Center hosts major events, while entrepreneurial competitions and investment forums highlight Shijiazhuang’s economic openness.
- Youth and talent orientation: City planners have also emphasized creating a youth-friendly and innovation-oriented environment to attract skilled professionals and creative industries.
- These initiatives collectively demonstrate a growing awareness of cultural marketing as a means to enhance city brand attractiveness. However, the degree of integration among initiatives remains limited, suggesting the need for a more cohesive and research-based framework.

Problem Statement and Research Gap

Despite possessing rich cultural resources and a strong industrial foundation, Shijiazhuang still faces notable challenges in brand building. Its cultural resources are fragmented and insufficiently publicized, leading to limited visibility and influence. Moreover, the absence of a distinct cultural core and symbolic brand identity makes it difficult for the city to differentiate itself among numerous second-tier Chinese cities. Consequently, the application of cultural marketing strategies remains insufficient or inefficient in enhancing overall brand appeal.

- Existing scholarship identifies several unresolved research gaps in this field.
- Evaluation of city attractiveness – How can we construct an effective indicator system that balances static and dynamic dimensions of urban appeal?
- Integration of marketing and resources – How can cities align cultural marketing with local resource endowments and development priorities?
- Strategic adaptation for second-tier cities – How can regional centers like Shijiazhuang avoid the siphon effect of megacities while leveraging unique cultural assets for competitiveness?

Addressing these questions is critical to both academic theory and practical urban governance, as it contributes to refining models of city brand attractiveness through the lens of cultural marketing.

Research Objectives

1. To 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.

Literature Review

1. City Brand Attractiveness and Cultural Marketing: An Overview

This paper examines how cultural marketing shapes city brand attractiveness. Prior work shows that compelling city brands are typically anchored in distinctive cultural resources, and that strategically designed cultural marketing can amplify a city's appeal to residents, tourists, investors, and talent, thereby strengthening overall competitiveness and managerial decision-making (e.g., Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Cochrane, 1995; Kotler, 2005).

2. City Marketing Theory

Urbanization and globalization have intensified inter-city competition for resources, attention, and investment. In this context, city marketing the deliberate design, communication, and maintenance of urban brand assets has become a core lever for economic, social, and cultural development (Guoqin, 2010). Classic work frames city marketing as aligning urban planning/management with market logic to meet target audiences' needs, such that citizens and firms are satisfied with the city's environment and external audiences' expectations are realized (Kotler, 2005).

Scholars typically identify three building blocks: subjects (government as lead, with enterprises and nonprofits as pivotal actors), products (tangible and intangible urban resources, from land and infrastructure to culture and image), and objects (internal and external "city customers," especially residents, tourists, and investors). Historically, the field evolved from conceptual definitions in the 1960s–70s (e.g., Ashworth & Voogd) to the adoption of STP/segmentation logics in the 1970s–80s, and toward place-specific competitiveness and quality-of-life emphases since the 1990s (Ashworth & Voogd, 1990; Gold & Ward, 1994).

3. City Brand Theory

Brands bundle both tangible identifiers (names, logos) and intangible meanings (associations, values). Foundational work defines brand image as consumers' network of associations and perceptions stored in memory (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993, 2019). Scholars

converge on a working definition: brand image is the overall impression, memory, and response pattern formed by experience. Extending this to places, city brands convey the distinctive personality and value of a location and can deliver functional, social, emotional, cultural, and psychological benefits to “city customers” (Keller, 1993).

Chinese and international perspectives similarly frame city brands as public-recognized names or identities synthesizing historical culture, geography, economy, and distinctive resources; typologies often include political, historical, economic, natural-geographic, cultural, and event-based brand forms (Li Chengxun, 2003; Chen & Jiang, 2004; Li Xiaoxia, 2008; Douglas, 2004). Operationally, governments lead orchestration; enterprises mobilize market insight and capital; nonprofits contribute credibility and social alignment. The carriers of branding range from tangible assets (infrastructure, built heritage) to intangible assets (image, narratives, experiences), integrated as “city products.”

Empirical streams span brand communication methods (e.g., case studies of Changsha, Shanghai), platform dynamics (e.g., short video/Douyin), and audience-centric analyses (residents, tourists), alongside antecedent conditions and outcomes of city brand identification (Luo Ying, 2011; Zhao Xiaofan, 2013; Gao Xuyang, 2019; Zhang Yao, 2019; Wu Xiaoliang, 2005; Myfanwy, 2004; Bill Merrilees et al., 2008; Paolo Rizzi & Ilaria Dioli, 2010; Ahmadreza, 2019; Salla Jokela, 2020)

4. City Brand Attractiveness

Brand appeal/attractiveness reflects the extent to which brand meanings align with consumers’ self-concepts and values, yielding identification, loyalty, and advocacy (Dutton et al., 1994; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Ahearne, 2005; Currás-Pérez, 2009; Kevin Kam Fung So et al., 2017; Mijeong Noh & Kim K. P. Johnson, 2019; John M. T. Balmer, 2020; Seok-Beom Choi, 2023). In urban settings, urban attraction research highlights comfort and quality-of-life factors (climate, culture, safety, education, consumption amenities) as drivers of population and talent flows (Ullman, 1954; Butcher, 1989; Mordechai, 1991; Clark, 2002; Roberts, 2008).

Talent attraction studies identify macro-environmental (economy, policy, infrastructure), organizational (HR practices, working conditions), and lifestyle/cost dimensions (housing, education, cultural facilities) as core determinants, with context-specific differences across countries and development stages (Zhang Haixiang, 2005; Song Hong, 2006; Weng & McElroy, 2010; Carrs, 2005; Farrell, 2005; Wei Hao, 2012; Liloyd & Clark, 2001; He Jie, 2014; Guo Honglin, 2016; Lin Xiaoyan et al., 2015; Wang Yang, 2019). Place-competition and central-place theories similarly connect scale, accessibility, and competitive dynamics to destination attractiveness (Reilly, 1929; Huff, 1963; Christaller, 1933; Piovani, 2017; Schlaich, 2020). Broader national-attractiveness

research links destination choice to the match between needs and benefits, and to the balance of benefits, costs, and risks (Mayon & Jarvis, 1981; Li Guangxun, 2016; Charles Hill; Barney, 2006).

5. Customer Perceived Value (CPV)

CPV—the consumer’s overall assessment of benefits relative to costs—has long been treated as a strategic foundation for marketing (Levy, 1991; Lagowski, 1991; Hartnett, 1998; Zeithaml, 1988, 1991). Studies distinguish functional/pragmatic, emotional/experiential, and social/symbolic value (Holbrook, 2005, 2006; Mathwick, 1994; Keller, 2008; Sweeney, 2006; Smith & Colgate, 2015). CPV influences satisfaction, willingness to pay, purchase/repurchase, and word-of-mouth, both directly and as a mediator in S-O-R frameworks (Raval, 1996; Spreng, 1997; Liljander, 1997; Bolton, 2000; Maddern, 2007; Pan, 2011; Ardley, 2020). Given that cultural marketing generates symbolic and experiential benefits in addition to functional ones, CPV offers a micro-foundation for how cultural strategies translate into brand attractiveness.

6. Cultural Marketing

Cultural marketing uses cultural symbols, meanings, and experiences to create value for audiences and augment brand equity. Foundational contributions emphasize culture’s role in brand image, market segmentation, and the marketing mix, extending to social marketing and lifestyle/value-based approaches (Sidney Levy, 1955; Wendell R. Smith, 1956; McCarthy, 1960; William Lazer, 1963; Beckman, 1970s). Later work explores culture as shared beliefs and response patterns; it calls for moving from conceptualization to practical, empirical application (Brettl, 2008; Zhu Tao, 2009). Sectoral studies cover arts/cultural organizations, media and music industries, cross cultural communication via emerging media, and strategy mixes across product, price, promotion and channel (Marcel Meler, 2005; Kim Lehman, 2006; Wang Xueyan, 2012; Wang Shenyuan, 2015; Li Feixue, 2015; Paul Haynes, 2016). In parallel, sports culture marketing shows how hallmark events catalyze city image, tourism, investment, and regeneration—while cautioning against over-reliance on headline economics (Waitt, 1999; Dobson, 2000; LIRC, 2004; Madrigal, 1995; Hiller, 1991; Smith, 1991; Foley, 1991; Jones, 2001; Black, 1995). Commercial culture marketing via exhibitions and conventions similarly yields broad linkage effects across hospitality, transport, and trade, especially under strategies like the Belt and Road (Braun, 2002; Fangnana, 2015).

Research Methodology

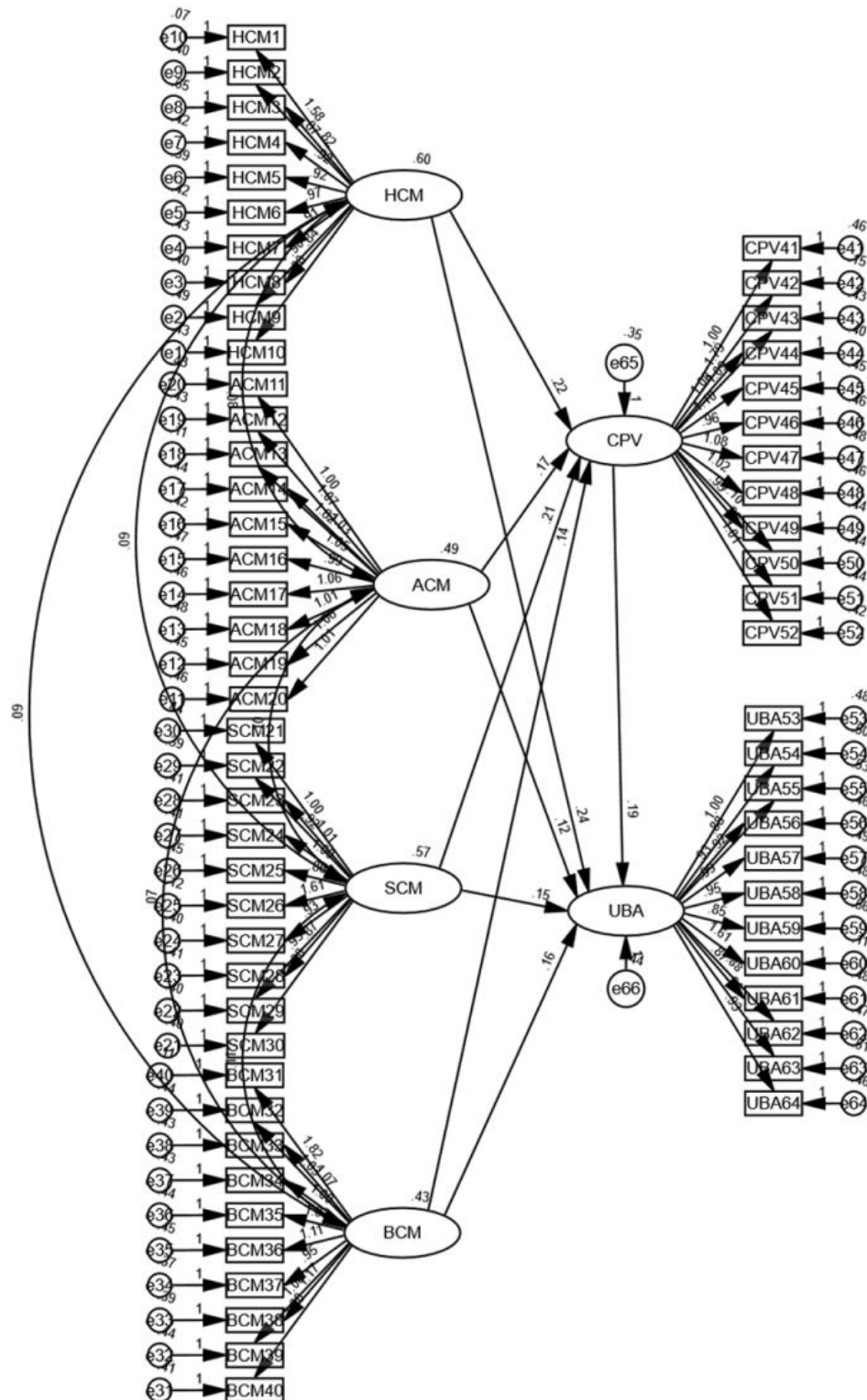
This study employed a quantitative research design using a structured questionnaire. The target population consisted of residents, tourists, and business visitors in Shijiazhuang. Following Hair et al. (2010), a minimum sample size of 200 was required for SEM; a total of 350 valid responses were collected through online and field surveys conducted from May to July 2025.

The questionnaire included 54 measurement items across six constructs: four independent variables (historical, artistic, sports, and commercial cultural marketing), one mediating variable (customer perceived value), and one dependent variable (city brand attractiveness). Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Reliability analysis showed Cronbach's alpha values above 0.9 for all constructs, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) validated the measurement model, achieving satisfactory fit indices (CFI $\approx$ 0.96, RMSEA $\approx$ 0.05, GFI $\approx$ 0.92, $\chi^2/df < 3$). Composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) values met recommended thresholds, confirming convergent and discriminant validity. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was conducted using AMOS to test the hypothesized relationships and mediation effects. Bootstrapping with 5,000 samples was applied to assess indirect effects through perceived value.

Results

Descriptive statistics indicated a balanced demographic distribution: 47.5% male and 52.5% female participants, with the majority aged between 24 and 45 years. Education levels ranged from vocational to doctoral degrees, and respondents included students (45%), enterprise employees (14%), civil servants (10%), and self-employed individuals (31%). Local residents accounted for 75% of participants, while 25% were visitors from other regions.



The structural equation modeling (SEM) results demonstrate that four cultural marketing dimensions significantly increase customer perceived value (CPV): historical-cultural ($\beta = 0.220$,

$p < .001$), artistic-cultural ($\beta = 0.173$, $p < .001$), sports-cultural ($\beta = 0.214$, $p < .001$), and commercial-cultural marketing ($\beta = 0.144$, $p = .005$). Each dimension also positively predicts city brand attractiveness for Shijiazhuang: historical-cultural ($\beta = 0.238$, $p < .001$), artistic-cultural ($\beta = 0.124$, $p = .020$), sports-cultural ($\beta = 0.147$, $p = .004$), and commercial-cultural ($\beta = 0.155$, $p = .007$).

Mediation tests indicate that CPV carries significant indirect effects from each cultural marketing dimension to brand attractiveness: historical-cultural ($\beta = 0.042$, 95% CI [0.014, 0.077], $p = .002$), artistic-cultural ($\beta = 0.033$, 95% CI [0.008, 0.068], $p = .003$), sports-cultural ($\beta = 0.041$, 95% CI [0.013, 0.077], $p = .002$), and commercial-cultural ($\beta = 0.027$, 95% CI [0.005, 0.059], $p = .009$). Together with the significant direct paths, these results support a stimulus–organism–response mechanism, where cultural marketing (stimulus) elevates CPV (organism), thereby enhancing city brand attractiveness (response). Notably, effects for historical-cultural and sports-cultural marketing are consistently among the strongest across both direct and indirect paths.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings validate that cultural marketing plays a crucial role in shaping city brand attractiveness. Consistent with prior studies (Anholt, 2007; Kavaratzis, 2015), historical and artistic elements were found to evoke emotional resonance and identity, while sports and commercial marketing fostered active engagement and economic participation. The mediating effect of customer perceived value aligns with the value-based brand equity framework, emphasizing that individuals' positive evaluations of cultural initiatives enhance their perception of the city's attractiveness. For second-tier cities like Shijiazhuang, the implication is that sustained investment in integrated cultural marketing initiatives—such as cultural festivals, creative industries, and brand storytelling—can substantially elevate the city's image and competitiveness.

Conclusion

The results imply that culture is not merely a static background element but a dynamic, strategic resource that contributes to both functional and emotional city value creation. Cultural marketing enhances citizens' sense of identity, pride, and belonging while providing tourists and investors with positive, memorable experiences. Theoretically, the study extends city branding literature by linking cultural marketing with brand performance through CPV, thereby clarifying how cultural strategies transform into measurable brand outcomes. Moreover, the disaggregation of cultural marketing into historical, artistic, sports, and commercial domains reveals that these dimensions differ in strength, scope, and sustainability. This differentiation provides a more

nuanced understanding of cultural marketing's multidimensional impact and emphasizes that soft cultural power complements traditional hard investments in infrastructure and economy.

From a managerial perspective, the findings highlight the importance of developing a diversified cultural portfolio that leverages each dimension's unique advantages. Shijiazhuang should adopt an asymmetric competition strategy, emphasizing its distinctive "Yanzhao red culture," sports heritage, and creative arts to stand out among larger metropolitan areas. The proposed "core symbols–communication channels–experience scenes" framework offers an integrated approach to cultural marketing. Core symbols, such as "Backbone of Yanzhao," "Cradle of New China," "Rock City," "Move Shijiazhuang," and "Grow in Shijiazhuang," represent the city's cultural identity. Multi-channel communication—including traditional media, short video platforms, and interactive events—should ensure broad audience reach, while immersive experience scenes like red tourism, sound festivals, and entrepreneurship fairs deepen emotional engagement and perceived value.

Cultural marketing should also follow a differentiated "4Ps" strategy targeting key audience groups. For youth, low-cost cultural events, night markets, and co-creation programs can enhance participation and retention. For residents, "Happiness City" programs, community art projects, and accessible cultural parks strengthen belonging and satisfaction. For business people, Shijiazhuang can promote a "City of Entrepreneurship" image through innovation incubators, trade exhibitions, and low-cost support services that encourage start-ups and investment. These initiatives should be supported by a coordinated governance mechanism that is government-led, market-driven, and participatory. The government should provide top-level policy direction and funding, the market should commercialize cultural assets, and the public should participate in cultural creation and dissemination. This synergy fosters sustainability and shared ownership of the city's brand identity.

Despite its contributions, this research has several limitations. The sample was drawn primarily from residents and tourists within Shijiazhuang, leading to limited geographic and demographic representativeness. Measurements focused on explicit cultural dimensions, while implicit factors such as policy support and innovation were less explored. The study's cross-sectional design restricts the ability to infer causality or capture long-term effects, and the linear model may overlook nonlinear or threshold dynamics. Future research should adopt larger and more diverse samples, employ longitudinal or panel data, and integrate behavioral indicators such as tourist flow, spending, and online sentiment analysis. Scholars may also explore how digitalization, city typology, and governance structures moderate cultural marketing's effects on brand attractiveness.

In summary, this study empirically verifies that historical, artistic, sports, and commercial cultural marketing significantly and positively influence both CPV and city brand attractiveness, with CPV serving as a critical mediator. These findings contribute to theory by introducing a value-based mechanism linking cultural strategy to urban brand performance and by enriching the multidimensional understanding of cultural marketing. Practically, the results provide a roadmap for Shijiazhuang and other emerging cities to leverage cultural differentiation, symbolic communication, and participatory governance as strategic tools for sustainable city branding.

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