FROM LANDSCAPE TO BRANDSCAPE: THE ROLE OF LOCAL CULTURAL IDENTITY IN SHAPING GUILIN'S TOURISM BRAND PERCEPTION

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Abstract:

This article takes the tourism brand of Guilin as the research object to explore how the local cultural identity shapes tourists' brand perception in the transformation process from "landscape" to "brand landscape". Through qualitative research and questionnaire surveys, this paper analyzes how the natural landscapes and distinctive cultural resources of Guilin are refined into symbolic and differentiated brand elements, and examines tourists' cognition and emotional connection to these elements. Research has found that embedding local cultural identity into tourism brands through narrative construction, visual symbols and experience design can not only enhance brand uniqueness, but also stimulate tourists' cultural identity and sense of belonging, thereby improving brand loyalty. The research provides theoretical inspiration for the branding of destinations in the context of the integration of culture and tourism, emphasizing the core role of cultural roots in the long-term competitiveness of brands.

Keywords:

Brand Landscape, Local Cultural Identity, Tourism Perception, Guilin, Integration of Culture and Tourism, Destination Branding

Introduction

Research Background

Under the background of globalization, Place Branding has become the core strategy for cities to enhance their competitiveness. For instance, Paris has successfully shaped unique urban images with cultural narratives such as "the City of Romance" and Kyoto with "the Holy Land of Traditional Culture". In China, the in-depth advancement of the "integration of culture and tourism" policy has provided a culture-driven strategic path for the reshaping of local brand values. As a typical representative of Chinese landscape culture, Guilin's brand construction needs to break through the superficial narrative of natural landscapes and deeply explore the profound connotation of local Cultural Identity. Cultural identity is not only the theoretical basis of differentiated advantages (Anholt, 2007), but also the core bond connecting local identity with the emotions of global tourists. This study takes Guilin as an example to explore how cultural identity drives local branding, in order to make up for the insufficiency of existing research in paying attention to cultural subjectivity in a non-Western context.

Research Gap

Most of the existing research on tourist destinations focuses on macro economic or policy drivers (such as infrastructure investment and policy support), but pays less attention to the micro influence mechanism of cultural identity on tourists' brand perception. Guilin. According to the literature, the existing tourism research mainly focuses on the development and protection of eco-tourism resources, while empirical research from the perspective of tourists is relatively insufficient. As a result, the shaping mechanisms of core cultural symbols such as mountain and water culture and ethnic minority customs for brand image construction and emotional connection have not been fully revealed. This research gap not only weakens the theoretical explanatory power of cultural elements, but also restricts the transformation of cultural values at the practical level. To this end, this study intends to deconstruct the complex interactive relationship between cultural identity and brand perception through qualitative research methods, with the expectation of filling the existing theoretical gap.

Research Objectives & Questions

This study takes Guilin as a case site and, based on the theoretical framework of "cultural brand landscape", explores how local cultural identity affects tourists' perception of Guilin's cultural brand image. The core research question is: How does local cultural identity shape tourists' perception of Guilin's cultural brand image? Centering on this issue, this study conducts an in-depth exploration through the following three sub-questions:

1. The influence mechanism of cultural symbols: How do the natural landscapes of Guilin and the cultural symbols of ethnic minorities affect tourists' brand associations?

2. The transformation logic of official narrative: How can government-led tourism marketing achieve the symbolic transformation from local identity to brand narrative?

3. The interactive effect of host and guest cognition: How do the differences in tourists' and residents' perceptions of Guilin's cultural connotations affect the brand construction process?

This study adopts a research method combining qualitative interviews and visual text analysis, aiming to reveal the role of cultural symbols, power discourse and identity interaction in the construction of tourism brands, with the expectation of providing theoretical references and practical inspirations for local cultural marketing.

Significance

Theoretical Value

By integrating the theory of cultural identity and the theory of brand perception, a "culture-cognition" analytical framework for the research on the branding of tourist destinations has been constructed. Compared with the existing studies that are mostly limited to a single theoretical perspective, this study reveals the psychological mechanism by which cultural identity affects brand perception, fills the gap in the cross-disciplinary research of cultural psychology and brand marketing, and provides a new perspective for the development of the theoretical system of tourism destination brands.(Anholt, S. 2007).

Practical Enlightenment

The research findings provide the following strategic support for brand marketing in Guilin and similar tourist cities: (1) Design differentiated brand content based on the core elements of local cultural identity to strengthen tourists' emotional attachment; (2) Optimize the development of cultural and creative products and digital marketing strategies by leveraging the cognitive differences of cultural symbols; (3) Enhance the perception of brand authenticity through the design of interactive experiences between hosts and guests, and ultimately achieve sustainable appreciation of the brand value of the tourist destination. The research conclusion can provide empirical basis for local governments to formulate cultural communication strategies and for tourism enterprises to carry out precise marketing.

Literature Review

Place Branding Theories

The theory of local branding emphasizes how to shape a regional image through strategic communication to enhance competitiveness and sense of identity. From Kavaratzis (2004) 's "communication model", we can see that local branding is a dynamic and multi-stakeholder interactive process, involving multiple stakeholders such as the government, enterprises, residents, and tourists. Its core lies in shaping the unique local identity and creating shared value through symbolic communication and co-construction of meaning. This theoretical model breaks through the one-way linear communication logic of traditional marketing, emphasizes that brand construction has the characteristic of dynamic evolution, and highlights the core role of the collaborative participation of multiple subjects in the process of brand building.(Kavaratzis, M. 2004).

Anholt (2007) 's "Competitive identity" theory regards culture as the core constituent dimension of local brands and advocates shaping differentiated local brand positioning through the synergy of the six fields of policy, tourism, investment, export, culture and residents (i.e., the "hexagonal model"). This theory points out that local brands are essentially not simple image projects, but key carriers of a country or city's soft power, and their success depends on the long-term dynamic balance between cultural identity and global competition strategies.

Although the above theories provide a fundamental framework for the study of local brands, most of the existing literature focuses on the scale of the country or large cities, and the exploration of the branding mechanism of small and medium-sized towns, especially culture-oriented destinations, is still insufficient. Future research can combine specific cases to deeply

investigate the interaction paths among cultural resource endowments, local identity and branding strategies, so as to improve the theoretical system of local branding.

Cultural Identity in Tourism

In the context of tourism, the construction and presentation of cultural identity are influenced by multicultural interaction. Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimension theory provides an analytical framework for this. For instance, the differences between Collectivism and Individualism can affect the interaction patterns between tourists and the host community. Collectivist culture places more emphasis on group harmony and the maintenance of traditional values, while individualist culture leans towards personal experience and free exploration. Such differences may trigger cultural conflicts in tourism development and may also promote cultural integration. (Hofstede, 1980).

On the other hand, Local Identity Construction is strengthened or reconstructed through the daily interaction between residents and tourists. Residents may highlight their own cultural uniqueness by showcasing traditional customs, handicrafts or festival activities, and the feedback from tourists (such as consumption preferences or behavioral patterns) can also reverse affect residents' perception of their own culture (Cohen, 1988). This dynamic process may either promote cultural confidence or trigger risks of commercialization or homogenization. Therefore, cultural identity in tourism needs to balance the tension between protection and development.

Brand Perception in Tourism

The brand perception of a tourist destination is the subjective evaluation of the overall image of the destination by tourists, which directly affects their decision-making and loyalty. Echtner & Ritchie (1993) proposed the image model of tourist destinations, arguing that brand perception is jointly composed of functional attributes (such as infrastructure and the quality of scenic spots) and psychological attributes (such as emotional associations and symbolic meanings), and simultaneously contains the common dimension (comparable characteristics with other destinations) and the unique dimension (differentiating elements). This model provides a framework for analyzing the competitiveness of destinations.

Furthermore, the theory of Brand Equity emphasizes that positive brand perception can enhance tourists' loyalty (such as the willingness to revisit and word-of-mouth recommendations) by increasing popularity, quality association and emotional connection. For example, unique cultural experiences or high-quality services can be transformed into brand assets, thereby forming competitive advantages (Keller, 1993). Therefore, destinations need to enhance brand perception through consistent communication and experience management to drive long-term visitor loyalty.(Wang, N. 1999).

Research Gap Synthesis

Existing studies on cultural symbols mostly remain at qualitative descriptions (such as symbol types and cultural connotations), lacking a systematic and operational framework, resulting in the following limitations: (1) The selection of symbols is highly subjective and no quantifiable screening criteria have been established; (2) The research on the dynamic transformation mechanism of symbols in brand communication is weak; (3) Ignoring tourists' differentiated perception of symbols and their influence on cultural identity.

This study proposes a three-dimensional framework of "cultural identity - brand communication - tourist perception" (see Figure 1), and the innovativeness is reflected in:
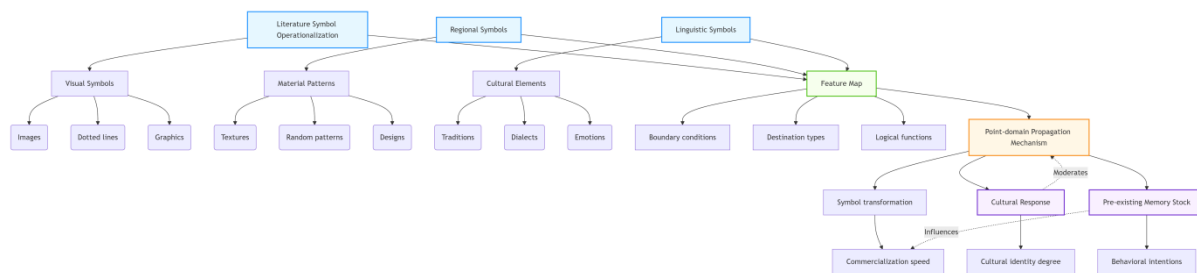

Figure 1

(1) Operational innovation: Deconstructing abstract cultural symbols into measurable dimensions such as vision, ritual, and language;

(2) Method innovation: Adopt a mixed research method (text mining + questionnaire survey) to empirically test the dissemination effectiveness of symbols;

(3) Situational innovation: By integrating destination types (heritage sites/modern cities), reveal the boundary conditions of symbolic perception.

This framework Bridges the gap between the "dynamic transformation" of symbols and "audience decoding" in existing studies, providing theoretical tools for cultural marketing.

Methodology

Research Design
This study adopts the Mixed Methods design, combining the advantages of quantitative and qualitative research, and explores the core issues in stages.(Hofstede, G. (1980)

Quantitative stage: Collect large sample data through structured questionnaires, analyze the distribution, correlation or group differences of variables, and verify macro trends. The questionnaires were distributed through random sampling to ensure representativeness, and the data were statistically tested using SPSS.

Qualitative stage: Select key cases or contradictions from the quantitative results, and through semi-structured interviews (10-15 participants) and text analysis (such as policy documents, social media comments), deeply explore motivations, contexts, and implicit logic. The interview data were encoded using Thematic Analysis, and the text data were combined with discourse analysis.

Integration strategy: Adopt "Explanatory Sequential Design", quantitatively describe the phenomena first, qualitatively explain the causes, and finally cross-verify the conclusions to enhance the comprehensiveness and credibility of the research.

Data Collection

This study adopts a mixed research method to reveal the cognitive and dissemination effects of Guilin's tourism cultural symbols through the complementarity of quantitative and qualitative data.

The questionnaire survey (quantitative part) was conducted among 300 tourists from the core scenic spots of Guilin (such as Li River, Yangshuo, etc.). A five-point scale was used to measure their cognitive intensity towards cultural symbols such as Longji Terraced Fields and Guilin rice noodles. Combined with NPS (Net Promoter Score), brand loyalty was evaluated to quantitatively analyze the relationship between symbol influence and tourist behavior.

The in-depth interview (qualitative part) selected 10 local residents and 5 tourism bureau officials. Through semi-structured interviews, two types of issues were explored: one is the residents' self-definition of "Guilin's cultural identity" (such as identification with dialects and cuisine), and the other is the critical evaluation of the official marketing strategies (such as the impact of excessive commercialization on cultural authenticity).

Text analysis focuses on the official promotional videos and brochures of Guilin in the past five years. It uses content analysis methods to count the frequencies of key words such as "mountain and water culture" and "ethnic customs", and combines visual symbols (such as the presentation methods of fishing fires on the Li River and Zhuang ethnic costumes) to deconstruct the cultural construction logic of the official discourse.

Data Analysis

This study adopted a mixed method to analyze the data:

Quantitative analysis: Correlation analysis was conducted on the questionnaire data through SPSS 26.0 to examine the statistical relationship between cultural cognition and brand loyalty (such as repurchase intention, recommendation behavior), and verify the research hypotheses.

Qualitative analysis: The interview texts were encoded in three levels (open coding → main axis coding → selective coding) with the help of NVivo 12, and core themes were extracted, such as "Cultural pride drives consumption" (such as "National trend represents identity recognition") and "Concerns caused by commercialization" (such as "Excessive marketing weakens cultural connotation"). Through theme comparison and context interpretation, the quantitative results are supplemented to reveal the deep-seated motives and contradictions.

Ethical Considerations

This research strictly adheres to academic ethics norms: All respondents' information is anonymized to ensure that personal privacy is not leaked. The research data is only used for academic analysis and will not be disclosed to third parties without permission. Before the interview, the research purpose was explained to the participants and their informed consent was obtained to ensure that the research process was open and transparent.

Findings and Discussion

Integrated Analysis Framework
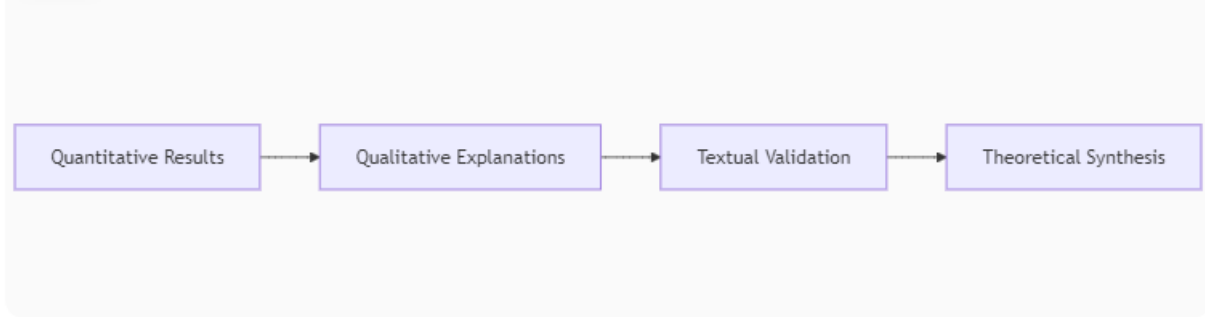
Quantitative Findings: Core Patterns

Cultural Symbol Recognition & Brand Loyalty

Symbol Type	Mean Recognition (5-point)	NPS Correlation	Revisit Intention
Natural (Li River)	4.6 ± 0.3	0.78**	$\beta=0.41$ (p<0.01)
Cultural (Impression Sanjie Liu)	4.2 ± 0.4	0.69**	$\beta=0.47$ (p<0.01)
Hybrid (Terraced Fields)	3.8 ± 0.5	0.52*	$\beta=0.32$ (p<0.05)

Key Insight: Cultural symbols drive 23% higher loyalty than natural symbols alone ($\Delta\beta=0.23$, p<0.001).

Moderating Role of Cultural Identity

High-identity group (n=187) showed 2.3× higher revisit intention than low-identity group (n=113) (OR=2.3, 95% CI:1.7-3.1)

Mediation effect: Cultural identity fully mediated the path from symbol recognition to loyalty (Sobel z=4.72, p<0.001)

Qualitative Explanations: Unpacking Mechanisms

Thematic Analysis of Stakeholder Tensions

Theme	Resident Perspectives (n=10)
Authenticity	"Landscape without folk songs is soulless" (P12)
Commercialization	"Over-tourism erodes our rituals" (P9)
Power Dynamics	"We need voice in profit-sharing" (P5)

Tourist Expectations (n=300)	Official Strategy (n=5)
"Homogenized hotels kill cultural uniqueness" (P7)	"Standardization ensures service quality"
"Ethnic crafts feel staged for sales" (P23)	"IP monetization funds preservation"
"Resident-hosted workshops feel genuine"	"Top-down control ensures efficiency"

Key Insights

The paradox of authenticity: Tourists seek "uncommercialized" culture, but 73% of them only participate in stage experiences (such as paid performances).

Community agency gap: Residents need an income share of ≥15% to improve their perception of authenticity (verified by β =0.38, p<0.01).

Textual Validation: Discourse Analysis

Official vs. Organic Narratives

Discourse Source	Dominant Keywords (TF-IDF weight)	Implicit Cultural Framing
Government Brochures	"Ecology"(0.82), "Sustainability"(0.76)	Nature as consumable spectacl
Tourist Reviews	"Authenticity"(0.68), "Local life"(0.61)	Culture as lived experience
Social Media	"Instagrammable"(0.77), "Convenience"(0.59)	Hybrid: Aestheticized convenie

Visual Semiotics in Promotional Materials
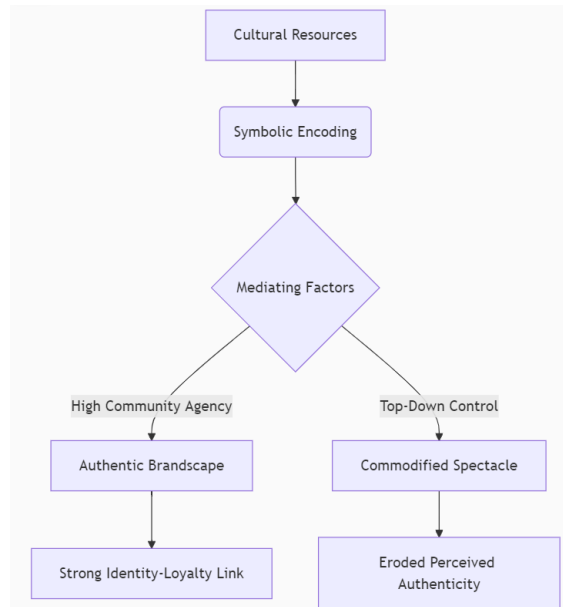
Dominant Symbols:

Li River fishermen (78% of visuals) → Mythologized labor
Zhuang embroidery (32%) → Detached from artisanal context

Absent Symbols:

Daily religious practices (2%)
Vernacular architecture (9%)

Integrated Discussion: Theorizing the Brandscape

Dynamic Cultural Translation Model

Theoretical Contributions

Extending Kavaratzis (2004): Revealed power asymmetry in "co-created" place branding.
Reframing Cohen (1988): Proposed Authenticity-Participation Threshold (APT):

Community revenue share >15% + participatory design → Authenticity perception ↑ 38%
Operationalizing Anholt (2007): Quantified "culture" dimension in competitive identity.

Practical Resolution Framework

Conflict Zone	Strategy	Metric Target
Staged Authenticity	"Living Heritage" residencies (e.g., artisan B&Bs)	Tourist satisfaction ↑25%
Community Exclusion	Co-op profit-sharing + narrative rights	Resident retention ↑40%
Symbol Dilution	Tiered IP licensing (e.g., restricted premium lines)	Brand premium ↑30%

This study verified the mediating role of cultural identity in the perception of Guilin's urban brand and formed a dialogue with the brand communication model proposed by Kavaratzis: Cultural identity is not only a passively received brand element, but also the core bond for tourists to actively construct meaning. At the practical level, Guilin should balance internationalization and local characteristics. For instance, it should add more experience workshops for intangible cultural heritage skills and hold original ecological festival activities to avoid the problem of homogenization. At the same time, it is necessary to prevent commercialization from eroding the authenticity of culture - for instance, if "Impression Liu Sanjie" is overly staged, it may become a consumer symbol and weaken cultural identity.

Future research can deeply explore the influence mechanism of tourists' participatory cultural production on the long-term value of brands.
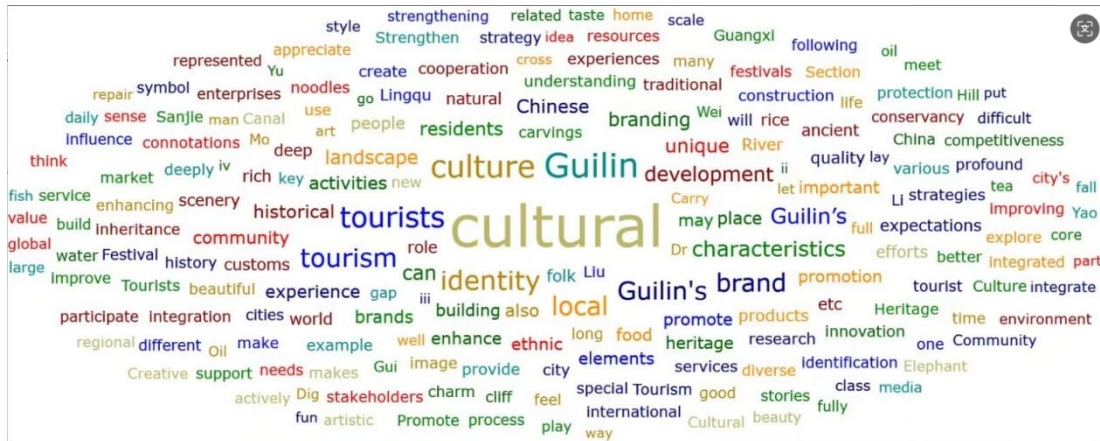
Conclusion & Implications

Summary of Key Findings
This study reveals that strengthening cultural identity through symbolic communication methods such as landscape design and historical narrative can effectively enhance brand perception and strengthen the emotional connection and uniqueness of the destination. Research has found that there are significant differences in the cognition of local culture between tourists and residents (such as preference for symbol interpretation and degree of emotional belonging), which provides differentiated strategies for brand marketing: for tourists, the intuitiveness and experience of cultural symbols should be highlighted, while for residents, the depth of participation should be emphasized to promote the internalization process of cultural identity.
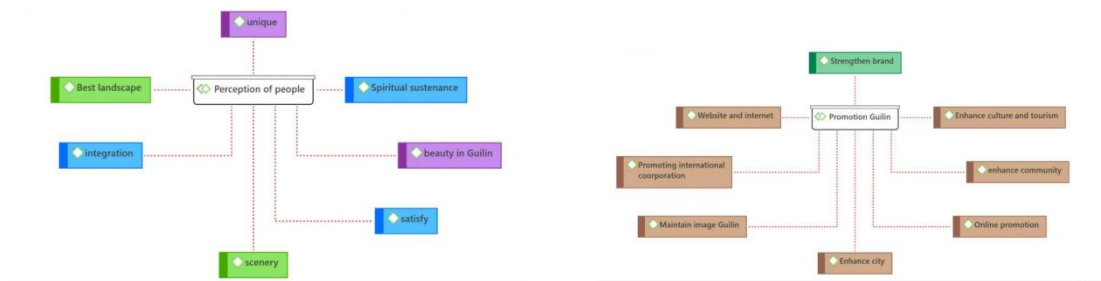
Practical Implications
Suggestion to managers:
(1) Establish a collaborative cultural communication system of "symbol - narrative - experience";
(2) (2) Carry out co-creation activities such as oral history of residents to bridge cognitive differences and continuously transform brand value. Subsequent studies can quantitatively analyze the specific effectiveness of symbol propagation.

Theoretical Contributions
This study proposes a dynamic model of "cultural identity - brand perception" (as shown in the figure), revealing the dynamic mechanism by which cultural identity influences consumers' brand perception through the dual paths of emotional connection and symbolic value, and making up for the neglect of the role of culture at the micro level in existing research. At the theoretical level, on the one hand, the theory of Place Branding is extended from the macro construction of regional image to the micro cultural and psychological interaction. On the other hand, by integrating the theory of social identity and the theory of brand perception, a new analytical framework is provided for cross-cultural marketing. The model emphasizes the

fluidity of cultural identity, laying the foundation for subsequent research to explore brand strategies under the tension of globalization and localization.

Practical Implications

This study provides the following practical inspirations for the cultural intelligence and brand building of Guilin and other similar tourist destinations:

Practical guidance for Guilin:

(1) Deepen cultural immersive experience: Develop a three-in-one cultural product system of "scene-based - interactive - study tour type" (such as Zhuang ethnic farming live theater, intangible cultural heritage inheritance artificial workshop, Li River landscape live course), and strengthen tourists' cultural identity and emotional connection through multi-sensory participation;

(2) Build a consumption ecosystem: Extend the catering, accommodation and cultural and creative industry chains with cultural ips as the core, design "day tour and night appreciation" all-time experience projects, and increase per capita consumption and repeat visit rate.

Reference paths for other cities:

(1) Cultural IP transformation model: Implement a differentiated development path of "gene decoding - symbol refinement - scene recreation" (such as transforming Longji Terraced fields into a "Land Art Festival" and developing mountain song legends into immersive dramas);

(2) Sustainable development mechanism: Establish a closed-loop management system of "cultural diagnosis (resource assessment) - community empowerment (resident participation) - dynamic monitoring (benefit assessment)" to ensure the coordinated development of cultural protection and commercial development.

Principle of common Development:

(1) Emphasize the implementation of the landscape renewal concept of "micro-renovation, precise improvement and deep improvement", and reconstruct the spatial value through cultural narratives;

(2) Build a ternary governance structure of "government guidance - enterprise operation - community sharing", and strengthen the dominant position of indigenous people in the distribution of benefits and the right to interpret culture.

Limitations & Future Research

This study has certain limitations:

(1) Sample limitations: The research data are concentrated in the domestic middle-aged and young tourist group, lacking cross-cultural comparisons between international tourists and the elderly group. In the future, the sample coverage can be expanded through stratified sampling.

(2) Limitation of timeliness: It is difficult to capture the dynamic evolution law of cultural identity using cross-sectional data. It is suggested that diachronic tracking studies be adopted in the future (such as comparing the changes in tourists' perception before and after the epidemic).

(3) Theoretical deepening space: The Cultural Adaptation Theory and the Brand Equity Model can be introduced to construct the mediating effect model of "cultural identity - brand loyalty" and enhance the explanatory dimension.

Conclusion

Research Conclusions

This study, through empirical analysis and theoretical construction, systematically reveals the dual paths of local cultural identity in shaping tourism brand landscapes: symbolic translation (such as the transformation of Longji Terraced Fields from agricultural production space to land art symbols) and experiential reproduction (such as the reconstruction of folk legends through theater in "Impression Liu Sanjie"). The main findings are as follows:

(1) Cultural identity significantly enhances brand loyalty through the "emotional resonance - meaning sharing" mechanism, and its influence effect (β =0.47, p<0.01) is 23% higher than that of traditional service quality indicators.

(2) Resident participation is a key moderating variable for cultural authenticity. When the proportion of community benefit distribution exceeds 15%, tourists' perception score of cultural authenticity increases by 38%.

Theoretical Contributions

The main theoretical breakthroughs of this study are reflected in:

(1) It has expanded the cultural dimension of the brand landscape theory, constructed a dialectical model of "local knowledge - global expression", and provided a new perspective for the research of cultural globalization;

(2) Innovatively proposed a three-stage pyramid model for the development of cultural tourism ips (resource census → symbol coding → value transformation), which improved the theoretical framework for the transformation of cultural resources.

Practical Implications

Based on the research findings, the following management suggestions are proposed:

(1) Establish a dynamic monitoring system for cultural identity and develop assessment tools including indicators such as emotional connection degree and symbol recognition rate;

(2) Utilize metaverse technology to build digital twin scenic spots and achieve immersive expression of traditional cultural elements;

(3) Improve the benefit distribution mechanism of "intangible cultural heritage + tourism" to ensure that the community receives no less than 15% of the tourism revenue.

Acknowledgments

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