

THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL IDENTITY ON THE LOCAL BRAND OF GUILIN, CHINA: A CONCEPTUAL STUDY

Huang Xi

Faculty of Creative Technology and
Heritage(FTKW), UniversityMalaysia Kelantan

Tengku Fauzan Tengku Anuar

Faculty of Creative Technology and
Heritage(FTKW), UniversityMalaysia Kelantan
Institute for Poverty Research and Management
(InsPeK), UniversityMalaysia Kelantan

Corresponding Author
460577379@qq.com

Abstract : In today's global tourism and urban development context, the relationship between cultural identity and place branding has become a key area of research. This study explores the intricate interplay between cultural identity and place branding strategies using Guilin, a city renowned for its natural landscapes and rich cultural heritage, as the primary case study. This study seeks to gain a comprehensive understanding of how cultural identity influences place branding strategies and outcomes. The study adopts a qualitative approach, primarily through in-depth interviews with Guilin residents, tourists, and stakeholders, and supported by secondary data analysis. The findings are expected to highlight the important impact of cultural identity on place branding, enhance brand equity, promote place attachment, and influence stakeholder engagement. This study aims to facilitate the development of more authentic, culturally resonant, and effective place branding plans to enhance Guilin's global competitiveness and promote the long-term sustainability and preservation of its cultural assets and traditions.

Keywords: Cultural identity, Local brand, Guilin, China

1. INTRODUCTION

In destination marketing and tourism, place branding has received widespread attention as cities and regions strive to stand out in a competitive global environment. Place branding encompasses the essence, values and unique attributes of a destination, shaping its identity and influencing the perceptions of potential tourists and stakeholders (Kavaratzis, 2005). Cultural identity is a fundamental component of a destination's characteristics and plays a vital role in this branding process. Cultural elements such as traditions, customs, history and local practices contribute to the uniqueness of a place. They are key drivers in attracting tourists and fostering a sense of belonging among residents (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003).

Guilin, located in China's Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, offers a compelling case study for exploring the relationship between cultural identity and place branding. Famous for its stunning scenery, including the iconic karst mountains and the winding Li River, Guilin has long been renowned for its natural beauty. Beyond its picturesque charm, Guilin also boasts a rich cultural heritage characterised by unique customs, ethnic diversity, and historical significance. The city's cultural identity, which is deeply rooted in its local traditions and values, has the potential to greatly influence its place branding efforts and shape the perceptions of domestic and foreign tourists. Despite the recognised importance of cultural elements in destination branding, there is limited understanding of how to integrate these elements into place branding strategies, particularly in the context of Guilin. Existing literature tends to focus on the economic aspects of tourism or general branding principles while neglecting the subtle interplay between Guilin's unique cultural characteristics and place branding (Freeman, 1984). As China continues to position itself as a leading global tourism destination, there is a growing need to explore its cities' and regions' unique cultural attributes to develop effective and sustainable place branding strategies.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The Influence of Cultural Identity on Place Branding

This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the impact of cultural identity on the Guilin's place brand. By examining the perceptions, experiences, and narratives of key stakeholders, including residents, cultural experts, and tourism professionals, this study aims to reveal how cultural identity influences Guilin's place branding. By adopting a qualitative research approach that includes in-depth interviews and document analysis, this study provides valuable insights into the complex relationship between Guilin's cultural identity and place branding.

The theoretical basis of cultural identity covers multiple frameworks, including consensus theory, symbolic interaction theory, and language theory. Cultural identity is a deep sense of belonging and identification with specific cultural elements influenced by historical, social, and geographical factors. It profoundly affects individuals' self-cognition and group cohesion and is important in shaping and spreading local brands. In Guilin, China, how cultural identity affects its brand shaping and dissemination has become a topic worthy of in-depth discussion.

On the other hand, place branding involves creating a recognisable identity for a place and using that identity to advance various ideals, such as financial investment and political capital. The formation and development of place brands rely on unique natural resources, historical traditions, and cultural heritage. Guilin's cultural identity, characterised by its rich history, natural landscapes, and cultural customs, provides unique resources for its place branding. This paper explores the impact of cultural identity on the place brand of Guilin, China, by combing through relevant literature.

Cultural identity often serves as a foundation for local branding strategies. Brands strategically integrate cultural elements to create a connection with the local population, fostering a sense of authenticity and belonging. For instance, the use of local symbols, folklore, or historical references in branding can create a strong association with the cultural heritage of a place. This practice is evident in the branding of cities like Guilin, China, where local symbols such as the Li River and traditional Chinese aesthetics are central to its identity as the "Heartbeat of China" (Zhou, 2021). By leveraging these cultural symbols, Guilin's branding resonates with both locals and tourists, enhancing its appeal as a culturally rich destination.

Language and communication are also critical components in integrating cultural identity into branding. Brands that incorporate local dialects, proverbs, or culturally relevant narratives in their advertising are often perceived as more relatable. This strategy not only improves brand recall but also deepens the emotional connection between the brand and the consumer (Kotler & Keller, 2016). Moreover, brands that emphasise traditional craftsmanship or local production methods appeal to cultural pride, particularly in industries like fashion, food, and artisanal products. For example, Peruvian fashion brands such as Kuna emphasise the use of traditional Andean materials and designs, which not only appeal to local pride but also attract international consumers interested in authentic, culturally rich products (Garcia & Tellez, 2019).

Local festivals and events offer another avenue for brands to embed themselves in the cultural fabric of a community. Participation in or sponsorship of these events allows brands to be seen as a part of the local culture, leading to enhanced visibility and positive associations. Starbucks in China exemplifies this strategy by integrating

traditional Chinese architectural styles into its stores and offering localised menu items during significant cultural events like the Mid-Autumn Festival (Lin, 2020). This localisation strategy has led to strong brand acceptance and growth in the Chinese market, demonstrating the effectiveness of cultural integration in branding.

The integration of cultural elements into branding significantly influences consumer attitudes and behaviours. When a brand authentically represents cultural elements, it is often perceived as more trustworthy and authentic. This perception fosters consumer loyalty, as consumers are more likely to support brands they believe align with their cultural values (Aaker, 1997). Cultural relevance also plays a crucial role in evoking feelings of pride and identity affirmation. Consumers who see their cultural identity reflected in a brand are more likely to develop a strong emotional connection with it, leading to increased brand advocacy and positive word-of-mouth promotion (Holt, 2004).

Moreover, cultural relevance directly influences consumer purchasing behaviour. Brands that resonate with a consumer's cultural identity are more likely to be preferred over those that do not. This preference is particularly pronounced in markets where cultural preservation is valued, and consumers seek products that reflect their heritage (Schmitt, 2012). However, brands must be cautious in their approach to cultural integration. A failure to respect or understand local cultural nuances can lead to significant backlash. Cultural insensitivity, or worse, cultural appropriation, can result in negative publicity, boycotts, and long-term damage to a brand's reputation (Warren, 2018).

While the benefits of integrating cultural identity into branding are clear, there are several challenges that brands must navigate. One significant challenge is balancing modernity and tradition. Brands must strike a balance between honouring traditional cultural elements and appealing to modern sensibilities. An overemphasis on tradition can make a brand seem outdated while ignoring it can alienate the local market (De Mooij, 2019). Additionally, multinational brands often face the challenge of adapting their global identity to local cultures without losing their core brand essence. Successful localisation requires a deep understanding of the local culture and strategic integration of cultural elements that align with the brand's global image (Levitt, 1983).

Moreover, cultural appropriation poses a significant risk for brands. Appropriation occurs when cultural elements are used in a way that is disrespectful or insensitive, often for commercial gain without understanding or honouring the cultural significance behind them. This can lead to significant backlash and damage to the brand's reputation, as seen in numerous cases where brands have been accused of exploiting cultural symbols or traditions for profit (Root, 1996).

Cultural identity is a powerful force in shaping local brand perception. Brands that successfully integrate cultural elements into their branding strategies can enhance consumer attitudes, foster deeper connections, and positively influence purchasing behaviours. However, this integration must be done with authenticity and respect for local traditions to avoid negative consequences. As global markets become increasingly interconnected, the ability of brands to navigate cultural nuances will be crucial to their success. By understanding and respecting cultural identity, brands can position themselves as genuine parts of the local cultural fabric, leading to long-term brand loyalty and market success.

3. DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESIS

In the context of exploring the impact of cultural identity on the local brands of Guilin, China, the development of hypotheses is a crucial step in the research process. Based on the literature review and theoretical framework, several hypotheses have been formulated to guide the conceptual study.

Hypothesis 1: CULTURAL IDENTITY INFLUENCES BRAND PERCEPTION

Cultural identity shapes individuals' perceptions and interpretations of their surroundings, including local brands. In Guilin, where tourism is a significant industry, cultural identity is likely to influence how locals and tourists perceive local brands. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1.1: Local cultural identity positively correlates with the perception of local brands in Guilin.

Hypothesis 1.2: Tourists' cultural identity affects their perception of Guilin's local brands differently compared to locals.

Hypothesis 2: CULTURAL IDENTITY INFLUENCES BRAND LOYALTY

Brand loyalty is often driven by emotional connections and cultural resonance. Cultural identity can play a pivotal role in fostering or hindering such connections. Hence, it is proposed that:

Hypothesis 2.1: Stronger local cultural identity leads to higher brand loyalty towards Guilin's local brands.

Hypothesis 2.2: Differences in cultural identity between locals and tourists may result in varied levels of brand loyalty towards Guilin's local brands.

Hypothesis 3: CULTURAL IDENTITY SHAPES BRAND POSITIONING AND MARKETING STRATEGIES

Local brands often leverage cultural elements to differentiate themselves from competitors and appeal to specific target markets. Cultural identity, therefore, plays a

crucial role in shaping brand positioning and marketing strategies. It is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 3.1: Local brands in Guilin incorporate cultural identity elements into their brand positioning to resonate with the local community.

Hypothesis 3.2: Local brands in Guilin adjust their marketing strategies based on the cultural identity of their target tourists to enhance appeal and engagement.

Hypothesis 4: GLOBALIZATION AND CULTURAL HOMOGENIZATION CHALLENGE LOCAL BRAND IDENTITY

Globalization has led to the spread of Western consumer culture and the homogenization of cultural identities. This phenomenon may challenge the uniqueness and identity of local brands in Guilin. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 4.1: The increasing influence of globalization and cultural homogenization threatens the distinctiveness of Guilin's local brands.

Hypothesis 4.2: Local brands in Guilin must adapt and innovate to maintain their cultural identity in the face of globalization.

Hypothesis 5: THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY IN PRESERVING LOCAL BRAND IDENTITY

Governments and communities often play pivotal roles in preserving and promoting local cultural identities and brands. In the context of Guilin, their efforts can significantly impact the local brand landscape. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 5.1: Government policies and initiatives support the preservation and promotion of local brand identity in Guilin.

Hypothesis 5.2: Community engagement and support are crucial for maintaining the cultural identity of local brands in Guilin.

These hypotheses provide a structured framework for investigating the impact of cultural identity on the local brands of Guilin, China. By testing these hypotheses, the research aims to gain a deeper understanding of how cultural identity influences brand perception, loyalty, positioning, marketing strategies, and the challenges posed by globalization.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the relationship between Guilin's cultural identity and local brand. The research content includes in-depth interviews - Guilin residents, tourists, cultural scholars and tourism industry professionals are widely invited to participate. Through in-depth exchanges, the aim is to fully capture and deeply understand their unique insights and rich experiences on Guilin's unique cultural charm and local brand value, so as to provide rich and

profound first-hand information and unique insights for the construction of brand-building strategies and cultural communication paths. In-depth dialogue with local authorities and key stakeholders aims to comprehensively analyse the challenges and potential opportunities faced in deeply integrating Guilin's cultural characteristics into the local brand through the collision of collective wisdom. Such discussions not only help us grasp the overall situation but also accurately identify key factors, providing strong support for the formulation and implementation of brand strategies.

This research also includes literature analysis, which is a systematic literature review covering Guilin's local brand promotional materials, extensive online review feedback, and rich cultural heritage literature. This process aims to supplement and enrich our original data collection, thereby achieving a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of Guilin's local brand strategy and providing a solid knowledge base and theoretical support for the strategic planning of brand development.

5. EMPIRICAL RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

5.1 LEVERAGING CULTURAL IDENTITY IN GUILIN: LOCAL BRAND SUCCESS STORIES

Guilin, a city renowned for its breathtaking landscapes and rich cultural heritage, is often referred to as the "Heartbeat of China." This cultural richness has provided fertile ground for local brands to develop strong identities by leveraging unique elements of Guilin's culture. This essay explores examples of local brands in Guilin that have successfully integrated cultural identity into their branding strategies, analyses the impact of this integration, and discusses the broader cultural context of Guilin in comparison to other regions in China and globally.

A particularly striking example is the flagship product of Guilin Sanhua Co., Ltd., Guilin Sanhua Liquor. This brand cleverly incorporates the essence of local culture into its logo. It has not only become the most iconic specialty of Guangxi, but is also known as one of the "Three Treasures of Guilin", and can be regarded as a shining name card of Guilin. The brand not only focuses on inheriting the traditional winemaking culture and exquisite craftsmanship, but also emphasizes the unique use of the unique natural resources - The high-quality groundwater resources of the Li River and the unique karst caves of Guilin serve as the natural storage environment. These natural gifts can give Sanhua Liquor unparalleled excellent quality. With its mellow and delicate taste and rich aroma, Guilin Sanhua Liquor has become a model of Chinese rice-flavored liquor. It is known as the king of rice wine and has become a treasure that the people of Guilin are proud of. Its packaging design also closely integrates Guilin's natural scenery and profound historical and cultural heritage. This

close connection with the local natural beauty and cultural heritage has not only won the favor of local people, but also made Guilin Sanhua Liquor a popular souvenir collected by tourists from all over the world, greatly expanding its market influence. (Zhou, 2021)



Figure 1. Guilin Sanhua Co., Ltd. has a wine cellar with a history of more than 100 years hidden in the cave of Elephant Trunk Hill.—— Image source: Baidu



Figure 2. Elephant Trunk Hill Wine Cellar (entrance): The annual cellar opening ceremony —— Image source: Guilin Sanhua Co., Ltd. official website



Figure 3. Cave Wine Cellar——Image source: Guilin Sanhua Co., Ltd. official website



Figure 4. Guilin Sanhua Liquor packaging incorporates local cultural elements—

Image source: Guilin Sanhua Co., Ltd. official website

Another successful case is the Guilin Lijiang Tea Factory Co., Ltd., which is not only deeply rooted in the region's long-standing tea culture, but also committed to becoming the guardian and inheritor of Guilin's unique traditional tea-making skills, and has carefully launched a series of boutique teas derived from local high-quality teas, such as the local specialty osmanthus tea. The brand emphasizes its connection with Guilin's ancient tea culture, and its packaging often features traditional Chinese calligraphy and patterns related to the history of the region. This approach has helped the Guilin Lijiang Tea Factory maintain a strong presence in the domestic and international markets, attracting consumers who value authenticity and cultural heritage. (Lin, 2020).



Figure 5. The brand highlights the unique advantages of Guilin's tea garden base.—

—Image source: the website of Guilin Lijiang Tea Factory Co., Ltd.



Figure 6. The brand emphasizes the inheritance of exquisite traditional tea making technology——Image source: the website of Guilin Lijiang Tea Factory Co., Ltd.



Figure 7. Osmanthus tea packaging that emphasizes Lijiang culture. ——Image source: the website of Guilin Lijiang Tea Factory Co., Ltd.

Among the many successful brand examples, Guilin Mi Fen stand out, and they have driven the brand's booming development by cleverly using cultural identity. Guilin is a city known for its specialty staple Mi Fen, which has a history of more than a thousand years. Guilin Mi Fen brands not only fully demonstrate the essence of traditional production techniques, but also highlight the unique flavor of Guilin dishes. In particular, well-known brands such as Huaqiao Rongji have successfully promoted Guilin Mi Fen to the international stage. In 2017, CNN selected 14 foods that most touched the Chinese people's homesickness, and Guilin Mi Fen won the fourth place for its unique charm. These brands cleverly combined the legend of Guilin with the historical heritage of food, and formed a deep emotional connection with residents and tourists who are eager to taste the authentic Guilin flavor. (Wang, 2018).



Figure 8. Guilin Mi Fen with local characteristics - Image source: Huaqiao Rongji official website



Figure 9. Pictures of the plot of "Huaqiao Rongji", a literary treasure and a heavyweight cultural IP with the theme of Guilin Mi Fen - Image source: Huaqiao Rongji official website

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

6.1 *The Impact of Cultural Identity on Branding Strategies*

These examples illustrate how deeply ingrained cultural elements can serve as powerful tools in branding. By integrating cultural identity into their strategies, these brands have established strong emotional connections with consumers rooted in pride and belonging. Consumers are drawn to brands that reflect their cultural values and heritage. The use of local imagery, traditional production methods, and historical references not only differentiates these brands in the market but also creates a narrative that resonates with both local and global consumers (Holt, 2004).

The success of these brands is a powerful example of the effectiveness of integrating cultural identity into branding strategies. For example, Guilin Sanhua Winery has

greatly enhanced its appeal in the local market and become a tourist favorite by virtue of its close connection with the iconic Li River scenery and karst caves. Similarly, Guilin Lijiang Tea Factory Co., Ltd. successfully attracted consumers who seek authenticity by focusing on traditional tea-making techniques and highlighting the unique natural environment of the tea gardens. And Guilin Mi Fen have won wide recognition by cleverly capitalizing on the growing interest in local specialties around the world by focusing on its culinary traditions and the historical stories behind them. (Schmitt, 2012).

6.2 Broader Cultural Context Of Guilin And Comparison Whish Other Regions

Guilin's cultural identity is distinct, shaped by its unique geographical features and historical significance. The city's iconic karst mountains and the Li River have not only defined its landscape but also influenced its cultural practices, such as traditional fishing methods, rice cultivation, and local festivals. Guilin's cultural identity is closely tied to nature, reflected in its local products and brands that often emphasise this connection (Zhou, 2021).

When compared to other regions in China, such as Beijing or Shanghai, Guilin's branding strategies focus more on preserving and promoting its natural and cultural heritage. Major metropolitan areas in China might emphasise modernity and innovation in their branding, while Guilin's approach celebrates tradition and the timeless beauty of its environment. This difference highlights the diversity within China's cultural landscape, where each region has its unique identity and approach to branding (De Mooij, 2019).

Globally, Guilin's focus on cultural heritage aligns with a broader trend in branding that emphasises authenticity and sustainability. As consumers worldwide become more interested in products that tell a story and are rooted in tradition, Guilin's brands are well-positioned to appeal to this market. This global trend can be seen in other regions with strong cultural identities, such as Tuscany in Italy or Kyoto in Japan, where local brands similarly leverage their cultural heritage to create a unique brand identity (Warren, 2018).

Guilin's local brands, such as Guilin Sanhua Liquor, Guilin Osmanthus Tea, and Guilin Mi Fen, illustrate the powerful impact of cultural identity on branding strategies. By integrating elements of Guilin's cultural heritage into their branding, these companies have successfully differentiated themselves in the market and established strong connections with consumers. Guilin's cultural identity, deeply rooted in its natural landscape and historical traditions, provides a rich foundation for branding that resonates both locally and globally. As the global market continues to value authenticity and cultural heritage, Guilin's approach to branding offers valuable

insights into the potential of leveraging cultural identity to create enduring brand success.

6.3 Limitations of The Study Findings and Their Possible Implications

This study not only reveals that cultural identity has a profound and significant positive impact on Guilin's local brands, but also deeply recognizes the limitations of the research results and the multi-faceted impacts they may bring, including sample limitations, changes in the market environment, and cultural differences, all of which may limit the general applicability of the research conclusions. Therefore, when applying the research results to Guilin's brand strategic planning, it is necessary to comprehensively consider the actual situation, carefully evaluate and flexibly adjust the strategy to ensure that the brand can continue to develop steadily and stand out in the global market.

In summary, cultural identity has a profound and significant positive effect on Guilin's local brand. By deeply exploring and inheriting Guilin's unique regional cultural essence, it can not only strengthen consumers' cultural identity and loyalty to the brand but also significantly enhance the international recognition and reputation of Guilin's brand through diversified communication channels and clever cross-cultural strategies. Looking to the future, in-depth analysis of the detailed research on the mechanism of the role of different cultural identity dimensions on local brands will provide a more solid theoretical foundation and rich practical cases for brand building and communication strategies and further promote the brilliant bloom of Guilin's brand on the global stage.

This study highlights the centrality of cultural identity in the planning and implementation of Guilin's local brand strategy. By providing practical insights and strategic recommendations for destination marketing experts, policymakers and academia, this study aims to promote the construction of a more effective and culturally resonant brand strategy blueprint. In the long run, this will effectively enhance Guilin's competitiveness on the global stage, promote sustainable development, and strengthen the cherishment and protection of its valuable cultural assets and traditional heritage.

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