From Popularity to Retention: Marketing Communication Strategies of Internet-Famous Cities-A Case Study of Zibo, Harbin, and Chongqing

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Abstract: This paper takes Zibo, Harbin, and Chongqing as typical research objects of internet-famous cities, exploring the successful experience of their marketing communication strategies and their impact on the construction of urban brands. By combining empirical research with theoretical analysis, it reveals the unique paths and effects of these cities in network communication. The introduction clearly defines the research objective, which is to analyze the effectiveness of the internet-famous city communication strategy; the concept overview focuses on the characteristics of internet-famous cities and the uniqueness of their communication paths. Theoretical analysis dissects the advantages and disadvantages of the marketing communication strategies of internet-famous cities from the perspectives of communication studies and sociology and proposes improvement suggestions. The empirical research design details the specific methods of questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, and network data analysis to evaluate the actual effectiveness of communication strategies. The experimental results and analysis demonstrate the successful cases and existing problems of the three cities in communication and verify the relevant theoretical hypotheses. The conclusion and discussion summarize the research findings, summarize the key success factors, and propose optimization measures and policy recommendations for urban brand building. This study helps understand the internal logic of the communication model of internet-famous cities and provides references for the brand promotion of other cities.

Keywords: Internet-Famous City; Marketing Communication; Urban Brand; Communication Strategy; Socio-Economic Effect

1. Introduction

The rapid development of social media has provided new pathways for the dissemination of urban images. Among them, the phenomenon of "internet-famous cities" has gradually emerged in the public eye, becoming a novel carrier that integrates cultural communication and tourism consumption[1]. Against this backdrop, this study focuses on three representative internet-famous cities-Zibo, Harbin, and Chongqing-to explore the key strategies behind their successful marketing communications and their profound influence on city branding.

An analysis of their communication approaches and outcomes reveals that their success does not rely solely on natural landscapes or historical heritage. Rather, it stems from the effective conversion of online traffic through social media platforms. For example, Zibo's barbecue culture quickly gained popularity due to its down-to-earth charm and lively street atmosphere. Related short videos went viral, significantly boosting the city's appeal and creating a ripple effect in brand communication[2]. Harbin revitalized its cultural resources through events such as the Ice and Snow Festival and winter carnivals, evoking emotional resonance among both locals and tourists while activating endogenous tourism consumption potential[3]. Similarly, Chongqing leveraged its unique mountainous landscape and food culture to become a top destination on short video platforms. These cases demonstrate that successful city marketing requires not only tapping into local cultural assets, but also applying modern communication technologies for targeted outreach.

From a theoretical perspective, the rise of internet-famous cities is closely tied to the agenda-setting theory and framing theory in communication studies. Agenda-setting

emphasizes the media's role in shaping public attention, while framing theory suggests that the presentation of information influences how audiences perceive and respond. In the cases of Zibo, Harbin, and Chongqing, social media served as a key medium. Through user-generated content (UGC), it helped construct refreshed urban images. For instance, young people such as college students spontaneously shared their Zibo barbecue experiences, generating a continuous chain of viral dissemination. Harbin combined official accounts with collaborations involving influencers to reinforce its cultural symbols, while Chongqing benefited from algorithmic recommendations on short video platforms to expand the reach of its city identity. These multidimensional strategies not only increased visibility but also enriched the cities' brand narratives.

The success of internet-famous cities does not happen overnight; it involves complex mechanisms of communication and social psychology. As the path to urban popularity shifts from visual spectacle to emotional resonance, city image-building increasingly moves toward deeper cultural identification and spiritual presence. Today, "internet-famous cities" are no longer merely physical spaces visited by tourists, but also emotional spaces where public sentiment is expressed. This transformation presents new challenges for urban mobilization and emotional governance[4]. The interactivity of social media allows ordinary users to directly participate in the construction of a city's image, fostering a bottom-up model of value co-creation. Municipal governments and related institutions must adapt to the new media environment, using policy initiatives and technical support to enhance communication outcomes. For example, the Harbin government has expanded its influence through festivals combined with online promotion; Chongqing has focused on building iconic landmarks and encouraging businesses to engage in online marketing. These practices illustrate that the making of an internet-famous city is a collaborative process. It requires the technological advantages of social media to be fully utilized while also deeply excavating a city's unique cultural appeal. Such strategies not only reshape the public's traditional perception of cities but also lay a solid foundation for the long-term development of city branding.

2. Conceptual Overview

As an emerging form of urban image communication, the concept of "internet-famous cities" refers to cities that gain high visibility and influence through online platforms. These cities often stand out for their unique features-whether in natural landscapes, cultural heritage, or lifestyle-and contrast distinctly with other urban settings. For example, Zibo has gained prominence through its barbecue culture; Harbin draws attention with its Ice and Snow Festival; and Chongqing is renowned for its mountainous terrain and food culture. The rise of such cities is largely driven by social media, which conveys their charm directly to the public through short videos, live streams, and other visual formats. In this process, the physical space of a city is often "mediated" and reconstructed into symbolic, shareable imagery that enhances its appeal[5].

This mechanism of communication is not only dependent on a city's inherent resources but is also closely linked to the marketing strategies crafted by city authorities. By improving infrastructure and organizing distinctive events, governments can significantly amplify a city's attractiveness. In particular, momentum-based marketing strategies have proven effective in mobilizing communication resources and generating concentrated public attention[6].

From the perspective of marketing communication, enhancing a city's brand image and visibility requires a comprehensive and systematic approach. The first critical step is precise positioning-identifying and emphasizing a city's core strengths helps to establish a distinct brand identity. For instance, Chongqing has successfully fused its mountainous landscape with hot pot culture to create a recognizable urban brand. Multi-channel dissemination is equally important. While the real-time and interactive nature of social media makes it a dominant communication tool, traditional media and outdoor advertising still play a valuable supplementary role.

Event planning is another powerful promotional strategy. In Harbin, the Ice and Snow Festival not only draws large numbers of tourists but also amplifies the city's reach through media coverage. Events serve not only as tools to attract visitors, but also as platforms for emotional engagement and city image building[7]. Word-of-mouth marketing further complements this strategy by emphasizing quality services that earn public trust and encourage spontaneous

promotion.

Each of the three cities-Zibo, Harbin, and Chongqing-demonstrates unique characteristics in its communication path. Zibo capitalized on its barbecue culture, with netizens sharing their experiences on platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu, sparking widespread attention. Notably, short video platforms offer authenticity and immediacy to the city image, and UGC (user-generated content) from a tourist's perspective is often more compelling than official messaging[8]. The local government actively leveraged this trend by boosting promotional efforts, turning "Zibo Barbecue" into a prominent urban brand. Harbin, by relying on its internationally renowned Ice and Snow Festival and the striking visuals of its European-style architecture, successfully increased its global visibility. Chongqing took a more diversified route, combining the geographic spectacle of a mountain city with the popularity of hot pot cuisine. These elements were extensively circulated via social media, generating broad interest in the city.

In summary, all three cities effectively utilized their distinctive resources and digital communication technologies to transform online traffic into sustained public engagement.

3. Theoretical Analysis

Table 1 compares the marketing strategies and socio-economic outcomes of Harbin and Zibo. Harbin adopted a three-stage approach-KOL and IP collaborations, viral stage, and breakthrough stage-which effectively increased both tourist numbers and tourism revenue. Zibo focused on local cultural assets and emotional marketing to stimulate consumer spending. Events such as Ice and Snow World and Zibo's barbecue culture promotion significantly boosted their respective tourism and cultural industries, enhancing both visibility and brand image. This analysis highlights the pivotal role of innovative marketing strategies in city branding and tourism development.

Figure 1 illustrates the effects of internet-famous city marketing strategies in Harbin and Zibo. The red and navy lines represent trends in Harbin's tourist numbers and tourism revenue, while the cyan line tracks the growth rate of Zibo's retail sales. The data reveal that Harbin's tourist volume rose from 1.5 million in early 2023 to 3 million by year-end. From the perspectives of communication and sociology, the strategies of internet-famous cities have had a significant impact on brand construction and tourism appeal.

Table 1. Marketing Communication Strategies and Socio-Economic Effects in Harbin and Zibo

City	Marketing Communication Strategy	Outcomes & Data	Key Cases/Events	Socio-Economic Impact
Harbin	1. KOL + IP strategy: Collaborations with top influencers; event-based marketing for Ice and Snow World. 2. Viral stage: Shift in perspectives between locals and tourists, e.g., the viral "Little Southern Potato" meme on Douyin reaching over 2 billion views. 3. Breakthrough stage: Official responses evoked emotional resonance, such as the statement "Harbin's popularity is no accident but the result of collective effort."	1. A 254% increase in Harbin-related posts on Xiaohongshu. 2.In December 2023, Douyin saw 1.266 million new videos about Harbin; searches for "frozen pear plating" surged by 27,668 times. 3. On the third day of the New Year's holiday, Harbin received 3.05 million visitors, generating RMB 5.914 billion in tourism revenue.	1. Ice and Snow World 2. Promotional video "Special Forces Enter Harbin" in collaboration with Game for Peace	1. Visitor volume and tourism revenue hit record highs. 2. Boosted the development of related tourism and cultural industries.
Zibo	1. Local resource focus: Deep cultivation of cultural identity, particularly barbecue culture. 2. Emotional marketing: Enthusiastic local hospitality offered emotional value to tourists. 3. Cross-industry collaborations.	1.In Q1 2023, Zibo's total retail sales of consumer goods reached RMB 31.36 billion, a year-on-year increase of 8.3%.	1.Barbecue culture promotion.	1. Strong momentum in consumer market recovery. 2. Improved city image and awareness.
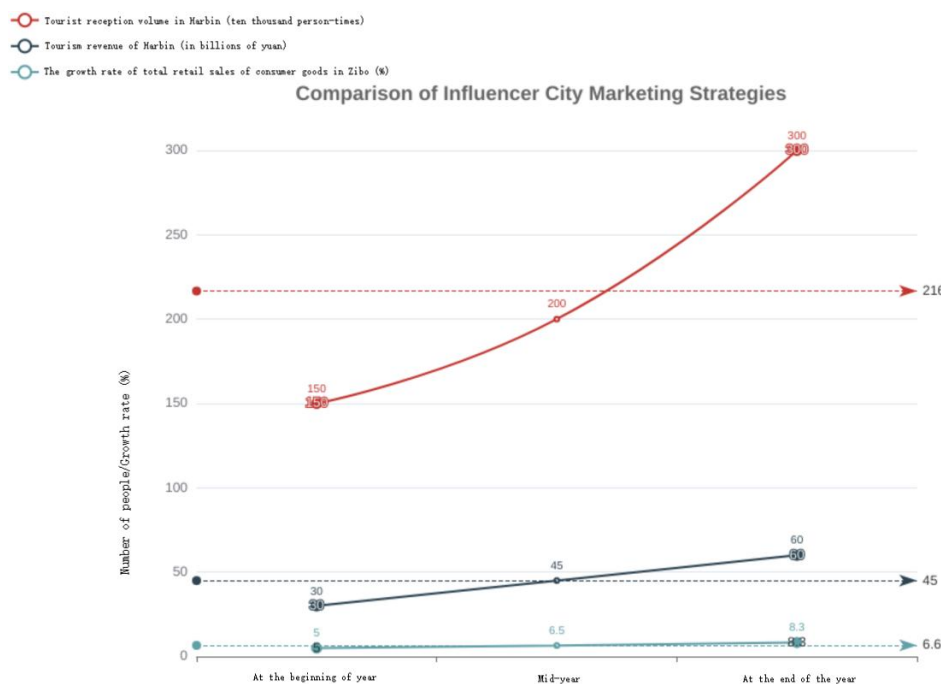
Figure 1. Comparison of Marketing Strategy Outcomes in Internet-Famous Cities

Taking Harbin as an example, its collaboration with KOLs and the creation of event-based content helped propel Ice and Snow World to national prominence. Influencer-generated content showcasing Harbin's unique winter culture, combined with popular memes such as "Little Southern Potato," achieved over 2 billion views on Douyin. This type of interactive, social-media-driven dissemination effectively closed the gap between the city and its target audience, fostering greater emotional identification with Harbin's winter identity[9]. The government's timely and sincere responses also enhanced the city's reputation, making it a top winter tourism destination.

However, there are limitations to social-media-driven strategies. Content homogenization has become a growing concern: as many cities imitate Harbin's approach, similar ice-and-snow visuals and food content now saturate platforms, leading to audience fatigue and reduced interest. Over-commercialization has also diluted the authenticity of some cities. Certain businesses prioritize trend-based offerings over meaningful cultural expression, resulting in monotonous tourist experiences. Additionally, the overreliance on online platforms often neglects the potential of traditional media and offline events, reducing overall communication diversity and reach. This one-dimensional communication model is increasingly ineffective in sustaining public interest[10].

Different cities exhibit varying strengths and weaknesses in their communication strategies. Zibo focuses on localized resources and emotional marketing, using barbecue culture to strengthen ties between residents and visitors. Hot-selling souvenirs like the "Penguin Plush" and "Siberian Tiger Magnets" reveal the potential of a new, hybrid cultural-tourism model. In contrast, Harbin leverages its Ice and Snow World IP for event-driven marketing, while Chongqing draws food lovers with its iconic spicy hotpot. Though differing in content and tactics, all three cities rely heavily on social media and emphasize the excavation of unique local characteristics. Notably, the traffic generated by online fame not only boosts short-term tourism but may also stimulate broader economic ripple effects across industries[11].

In light of these challenges, optimizing communication strategies is essential. Content innovation is key-cities should develop differentiated tourism products based on local characteristics. Harbin could further integrate winter culture into diversified experiences, while Zibo could expand its barbecue-themed derivatives to attract younger consumers. Balancing commercial appeal with cultural authenticity is also crucial; avoiding over-commercialization ensures that tourism experiences remain meaningful and culturally rich. Furthermore, diversifying communication channels by incorporating traditional media and

offline events can extend reach and connect with wider audiences.

The impact of internet-famous city strategies extends beyond influencing tourist decisions-it deeply shapes socio-economic outcomes. Harbin's New Year figures demonstrate this clearly: over 3 million tourists and nearly RMB 6 billion in revenue within just three days. Zibo's 8.3% increase in retail sales also indicates strong consumer recovery. Behind these numbers lies not only increased visitation, but also improvements in city branding and broader economic development. With ongoing strategic refinement, internet-famous cities are poised to generate even greater socio-economic value in the future.

4. Empirical Research Design

Table 2 summarizes the marketing communication strategies, concrete cases, data effects, and socio-economic impacts of the three cities Zibo, Harbin, and Chongqing. To examine these strategies and their effects in depth, this study combines two approaches: in-depth interviews and secondary-data analysis. The interview sample comprises 12 individuals: three barbecue-restaurant owners in Zibo, two marketing directors from the Harbin Culture and Tourism Group, two planners from a Chongqing-based MCN agency, and five tourists recruited via Xiaohongshu; the interviews were conducted between December 2023 and March 2024 through offline meetings, Tencent Meeting, and online recruitment. This design yields a more nuanced and personalized perspective. A semi-structured guide steered the conversations while still allowing flexibility to capture spontaneous insights. For instance, interviews with Zibo barbecue owners revealed that the local government streamlined approval procedures and supported content creation (the specific policy is the "One-Stop Barbecue Permit" reform issued on the Zibo municipal website in March 2023, complemented by subsidized-loan details), which greatly facilitated the spread of barbecue culture. This not only strengthened residents' sense of belonging but also drew large numbers of tourists, demonstrating the viability of a regional O2O business model in lower-tier cities[12].

Table 2. Overview of Marketing Strategies and Effects in Zibo, Harbin, and Chongqing

City	Marketing Strategy	Specific Case	Data Outcome	Data sources and collection methods
Harbin	1. Entry Phase: KOL + IP collaboration, event marketing	Collaboration with top influencers on Ice and Snow World	Received 3.05 million visitors during the three-day New Year holiday, generating RMB 5.914 billion in tourism revenue	Harbin Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism, released on 2024-01-04
Harbin	2. Viral Phase: Perspective shift, content from locals and tourists	"Little Southern Potato" meme on Douyin, over 2 billion views	Related Xiaohongshu posts up by 254%; 1.266 million new Douyin videos; searches for frozen pear plating increased by 27,668 times	NewRank Douyin Data & ChanXiaohongshu; scraped from 2023-12-30 to 2024-01-02.
Harbin	3. Breakthrough Phase: Emotional resonance via official response	Authoritative media framing	—	-
Zibo	Local resource-based marketing, content creation focused on barbecue culture	Rise of Zibo barbecue popularity	In Q1 2023, retail sales of consumer goods reached RMB 31.36 billion, an 8.3% year-on-year increase	Zibo Municipal Bureau of Statistics, "Consumer Market Report for the First Quarter of 2023
Chong qing	Multi-angle social media marketing	Cross-platform promotions and event marketing	—	-

According to the interview with a Chongqing travel-agency director, the success of the multi-angle social-media strategy lies in precisely targeting audiences and showcasing the city's charm through short videos (the director's MCN produced 156 short videos for Hongya Cave during the 2023 May-Day holiday, accumulating 120 million views; data come from the agency's backend screenshots), turning Chongqing into a top destination. Secondary

data-an indispensable tool for estimating communication effects-were scraped from social-media platforms and included post counts, comment-interaction rates, reposts, and keyword-search trends. For example, the Douyin hashtag "Harbin + Southern Little Potatoes" reached 2 billion views, and Xiaohongshu notes grew by 254 % (data from NewRank and ChanXiaohongshu). Analysis of the Harbin Ice-Snow World campaign shows that after partnering with top KOLs, Douyin views exceeded 2 billion (Baidu Index report for 1–5 January 2024), while searches for "frozen-pear plating" skyrocketed more than 27,668 % month-on-month (Baidu Index, 1–5 January 2024), highlighting the power of the KOL + IP model. This pattern illustrates Ying Ting's (2021) argument that "traditional consumption scenes can be transformed through the internet"[13].

In Zibo, timely official responses and authoritative interpretations stabilized public opinion and amplified positive impacts, further cementing the city's "Barbecue Capital" image. Chongqing's culinary promotion also achieved viral spread on short-video platforms; during the 2023 May-Day holiday, Hongya Cave recorded 927,000 check-ins (data from the Chongqing Culture and Tourism Commission's May-Day 2023 briefing). By leveraging diverse narratives-food, nightscapes, dialects-the city has crafted an urban image that is both modern and rooted in local culture, forming a "visual + emotional" communication model. These data not only reflect the real outcomes of each city's marketing efforts but also provide a scientific basis for future optimization.

5. Results and Analysis

Table 3 summarizes the marketing strategies, successful cases, supporting data, and socio-economic effects of Harbin, Zibo, and Chongqing. Harbin employed comprehensive marketing and emotional storytelling, significantly boosting both city recognition and tourism revenue. Zibo focused on local cultural resources and content creation, successfully revitalizing its consumer market and enhancing its attractiveness. Chongqing emphasized immersive experiences and deep cultural exploration, improving its urban image and appeal to tourists. These strategies not only elevated urban branding and tourism potential but also contributed to broader industrial growth, offering new momentum for economic development.

Table 3. Overview of City Marketing Strategies and Socio-Economic Impacts

| City	Marketing Strategy	Success Case(s)	Data Outcome	Impact
Harbin	Integrated marketing, emotional storytelling, cross-industry collaboration, scarcity marketing, new cultural-tourism business models	Ice and Snow World, collaboration with Game for Peace, Taoxue Penguin merchandise	3.05 million visitors during the three-day New Year holiday; tourism revenue of RMB 5.914 billion	Enhanced city visibility and increased tourism revenue
Zibo	Local resource-based content development	Barbecue culture	Q1 2023 retail sales of consumer goods: RMB 31.36 billion, up 8.3% YoY	Stimulated consumption recovery; strengthened city appeal
Chongqing	Immersive tourism experience, deep exploration of urban culture	Hotpot, nightscapes, cultural heritage	No specific data provided	Improved city image and tourist attraction

Figure 2 illustrates the quarterly marketing performance of Harbin, Zibo, and Chongqing. Harbin's tourism revenue rose from RMB 50 billion in Q4 2022 to RMB 65 billion in Q4 2023, reflecting the success of its strategic campaigns. Zibo's retail sales increased steadily from RMB 28 billion to RMB 35.5 billion over the same period, indicating the effectiveness of its barbecue-themed cultural promotion. While Chongqing's tourist satisfaction rose modestly from 60% to 75%, it suggests growing recognition of its immersive tourism model.

An in-depth analysis of their strategies reveals that the success of these cities is not coincidental but the result of a combination of well-executed factors. Harbin's achievement stems from its layered communication strategies, integrating multi-channel promotion, emotional resonance, cross-sector collaboration, and innovative tourism experiences. For instance, the Ice and Snow World partnership with Game for Peace attracted younger demographics, while the

Taoxue Penguin merchandise helped amplify the brand. The city welcomed over 3 million visitors during the New Year holiday and generated nearly RMB 6 billion in tourism revenue. This approach aligns with Wanying Ying's (2020) assertion that "social media transforms users into self-directed brand communicators," and demonstrates how emotional resonance and visual imagination work synergistically in a new media context[14].
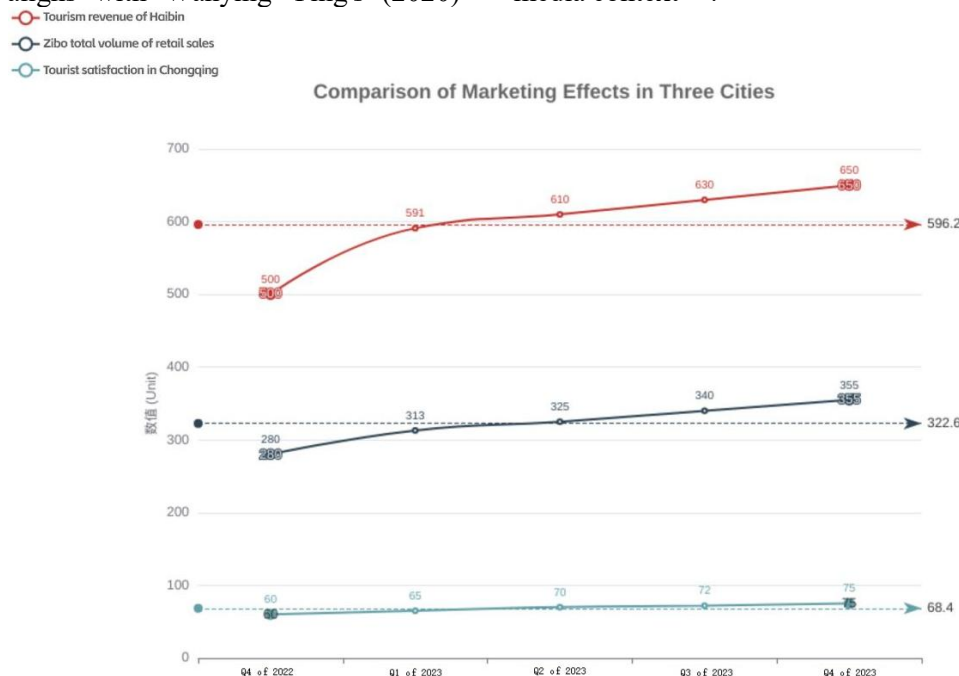
Figure 2. Quarterly Comparison of Marketing Effectiveness in Zibo, Harbin, and Chongqing

Zibo, by contrast, built its strategy around deeply rooted local culture, particularly barbecue, crafting a highly recognizable urban identity. In Q1 2023, its consumer retail sales reached RMB 31.36 billion, an 8.3% increase year-on-year, reflecting the success of refined local branding. This supports Ying Ting's (2021) view that "the shift from traditional markets to online marketing requires authentic content and localized resources." Zibo's narrative strategy emphasized "small but refined" storytelling, using short-form videos of authentic scenes to spark emotional resonance and attract visitors. The synergy between grassroots content creators and government initiatives created a dual-channel dissemination mechanism, combining top-down promotion with bottom-up engagement.

Chongqing focused on immersive experiences and cultural depth. Iconic elements such as hotpot, nightscapes, and historical landmarks became central to its marketing efforts. The city is evolving from a tourist destination into an experiential lifestyle, closely aligning with Wu Wei and Zhou Mengjie's (2019) concept of "digital sense of place" [15]. Content such as "Mountain City Trails" and "Hongya Cave at Night" presented on short video platforms allowed audiences to experience the city virtually, influencing travel decisions. However, Chongqing must also address the challenge of balancing traffic growth with service quality to ensure visitor satisfaction.

In conclusion, the three cities employed diverse yet effective strategies, with commonalities in their reliance on the interactivity and immediacy of social media. Their success was rooted in a deep understanding of local identity and the creative expression of cultural features that resonate with audiences. That said, some cities, while pursuing short-term traffic, may overlook the importance of long-term brand building. Therefore, sustainability in marketing strategy is critical. Future approaches should incorporate ongoing research on changing tourist behavior and make timely adjustments to achieve a balance between urban branding and economic benefit.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

High visibility on social media plays a decisive role in the marketing communication of "internet-famous" cities. Take Zibo as an example: its barbecue culture went viral on short-video platforms almost overnight, and the resulting high-frequency exposure drew massive

attention within days. At the same time, distinctive cultural symbols and creative industries constitute the core competitiveness of such cities. Harbin's ice-and-snow culture and Chongqing's mountain-city identity, for instance, are not only strongly local but can also be creatively packaged into marketable products for visitors. Emotional resonance and localized experience are equally crucial. The success of these cities lies in their ability to deliver emotional value and deepen visitor engagement through everyday life settings. Multiple communication actors-government, citizens, and professionals-form a fragmented yet highly efficient network that amplifies reach. This multi-dimensional strategy renders the city image more three-dimensional and attracts potential tourists. As Cheng Xihui (2018) notes, cross-platform synergy, user participation, and omnimedia communication are central trends in today's media convergence and offer effective pathways for city marketing[16].

The marketing of internet-famous cities has a profound impact on city-brand building. It significantly raises a city's profile and reputation, turning it into a must-visit destination for domestic and international travelers. The model directly boosts tourism, catering, and related industries, injecting vitality into the local economy. In Chongqing, for example, the unique mountain topography and culinary culture draw huge crowds and stimulate service-sector growth. Successful campaigns also forge a distinctive urban image that becomes a symbolic representation of a specific culture.

Yet the policy environment functions as both an "amplifier" and a "stabilizer." First, the policy window determines whether short-term traffic can be converted into long-term retention. In March 2023 Zibo issued the One-Stop Barbecue Permit Reform, cutting provisional sidewalk-occupation approval from seven working days to on-the-spot processing and complementing it with subsidized "barbecue loans," providing institutional guarantees for rapid business expansion. Harbin leveraged the provincial-level Ice-and-Snow Economy Development Plan (2022–2030) and its special fund to smart-upgrade the Ice-and-Snow World, increasing peak-period capacity by 40 percent. Second, policy coordination directly affects the efficiency of diverse communicators. Chongqing's Culture & Tourism Commission, Transport Bureau, and Commerce Commission established a joint command for the May-Day holiday, coordinating traffic flows and commercial extensions at hotspots such as Hongya Cave and Liziba, thereby averting negative sentiment caused by overcrowding. Third, policy risk management decides the sustainability of the city brand. When the "Southern Little Potatoes" meme triggered regional-label controversy, Harbin's Propaganda Department mobilized mainstream media to release An Open Letter to Visitors within 24 hours, promptly neutralizing negative associations and demonstrating the positive correlation between policy responsiveness and opinion guidance. As Yu Tao and Zhang Jingxiang (2007) observe, city marketing has become a key strategic tool for enhancing comprehensive competitiveness in the era of globalization[17].

Other challenges remain. Limitations in data collection and processing may affect accuracy, and the short time span hampers full assessment of long-term effects. The study focuses primarily on marketing strategies and does not fully consider external factors such as policy environments, thus constraining its comprehensiveness.

Future research should deepen theoretical foundations and explore the mechanisms and developmental patterns of internet-famous city marketing. Expanding the scope to more cities and domains will reveal variations in strategies across regions; longitudinal tracking and empirical analysis are needed to evaluate overall impact. In concrete terms, Zibo can enrich barbecue culture and upgrade supporting infrastructure; Harbin can leverage the 2025 Asian Winter Games to extend ice-and-snow policy dividends from a one-season boom to year-round operations; Chongqing should continue to strengthen multi-department policy frameworks to prevent over-commercialization from diluting the city brand. At the policy level, governments should increase support-through funding or tax incentives-while safeguarding local culture and avoiding the negative effects of excessive commercialization. These measures will lay a solid foundation for the sustainable development of internet-famous cities.

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