

Research on City Branding Communication Strategies of Taiyuan from the Perspective of Cultural and Tourism Integration



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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the country's continuous promotion of the cultural and tourism integration strategy, city image communication has become a critical lever for resource-based cities to break through inherent cognitive bottlenecks and achieve transformational development. Taiyuan, as a typical provincial capital of a resource-based province, has long faced challenges such as the stereotype of "Coal Capital", limited exposure of its historical and cultural resources, and a weak communication presence. This paper takes Taiyuan's city image communication practices in the context of cultural and tourism integration as its research subject, and employs text analysis and case study methods to systematically examine its communication strategies, implementation effectiveness, and underlying problems. The findings indicate that although Taiyuan's city image communication has yielded certain results, it still suffers from prominent issues including a disconnect between co-branded IPs and the cultivation of local IPs, a fracture in content synergy between official and civilian discourse, and a decline in daily online traffic. On this basis, this paper proposes three optimization suggestions: cultivating a local cultural IP system, deepening the integration of official and civilian discourse, and establishing mechanisms for traffic retention and conversion, with the aim of providing a reference for the image communication transformation of Taiyuan and similar resource-based cities.

Keywords: Culture and Tourism Integration; City Branding Communication; Taiyuan Stereotype

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1 Introduction

In the late 1950s, the American scholar Kevin Lynch first introduced the concept of the "city image" in his book *The Image of the City*. He described it as a mental picture formed by people's overall perception of five physical elements: paths, edges, nodes, districts, and landmarks. In recent years, the "culture plus tourism" model has continued to drive urban economic growth and has offered new approaches for shaping city images. During the integration of culture and tourism, cultural resources are turned into cultural IPs, cultural narratives within tourism settings shape a city's brand image, and the experiences of tourists enable the city image to be disseminated across different social

circles [1].

The "14th Five-Year Plan for Culture and Tourism Development" defines "culture-tourism integration" as "an industrial innovation model that enriches the substance of tourism through culture and promotes cultural communication through tourism," which enables value co-creation in the utilization of urban cultural resources and resource development. Zhou Jin and Wang Tingxin summarized the integrated development of urban cultural tourism into three models: a model of industry chain reorganization driven by supply-side reform, a model of value co-creation along the industry chain oriented by cultural demand, and a model of

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industry chain extension driven by digital technology [2]. Richards, adopting a historical evolution perspective, argued that culture and tourism are inevitably moving toward deep integration, and that future tourists will increasingly seek authenticity in everyday culture and "placeness", challenging the authority of cultural institutions as dominant producers [3]. Such studies indicate that the focus of culture-tourism integration is shifting from a stage of pure cultural display to one of cultural reproduction. This integration is inseparable from local characteristic culture and architecture, laying a realistic foundation for the transformation and communication of city images. Zhang Jie, taking Chongqing as a case, argued that the uniqueness, sharedness, and dynamics of local cultural contexts determine the attractiveness and creativity in city image communication [4]. Qiao Xiufeng analyzed the integrated communication mechanism in the image building of internet-famous cities, arguing that the deep interpenetration of media and society is the fundamental logic behind the formation of such cities [5]. City image communication has increasingly relied on the participatory structure of social media, wherein audiences are not only information receivers but also content producers and meaning co-creators.

However, existing studies have mostly focused on popular cities such as Chongqing, Xi'an, and Changsha, while research on the image communication of resource-based cities remains insufficient. Taiyuan, the capital of Shanxi Province, possesses rich historical and cultural heritage, yet its long-standing heavy industrial structure has led to a fixed external perception. A clear mismatch exists between its cultural resource endowments and market visibility. Against the backdrop of the continuous promotion of the green development concept and the "dual carbon" strategy, such cities need to further explore effective paths for image communication. Therefore, this study takes the specific practices of Taiyuan's city image communication as the analytical object, examines its current difficulties, and proposes optimization strategies, so as to provide a reference for the image communication practices of similar resource-based cities.

2 The Current Dilemma of Taiyuan's City Image

2.1 Rigid External Perception Labels

Shanxi Province has been a major coal-producing region

since the Republic of China period. Taiyuan, as the provincial capital, possesses metal minerals such as iron, manganese, and copper, as well as non-metallic minerals like coal, gypsum, and vanadium, with coal being the most abundant resource. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Taiyuan, supported by its rich coal and iron resources, became a key industrial city during the First Five-Year Plan period. The coal mines owned by Shanxi's largest coal enterprises, such as Baojin Company and Northwest Industrial Company, remained the largest and most technologically advanced in the province after 1949. However, after 2012, domestic coal prices began a sustained decline, and Taiyuan, with coal as its main industry, fell into a development predicament. Subsequently, the concept of environmental protection gained widespread acceptance, the pattern of economic development shifted, and the role of coal in the energy mix gradually diminished. At the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2020, China formally proposed the "dual carbon" strategy, setting the goals of peaking carbon emissions before 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality before 2060. Against this backdrop, the marginal returns of the coal industry have continued to decline, while its environmental costs have steadily risen. The long history of heavy industrial development has made the label "Coal Capital" the most prominent external perception tag of Taiyuan.

2.2 Insufficient Exposure of Cultural Resources

Taiyuan has a history of city building spanning more than 2,500 years, and as early as the Song and Yuan dynasties, a popular saying celebrated it as "Flourishing Zhengding Prefecture, Splendid Taiyuan City." Due to its special geographical setting surrounded by mountains on three sides, Taiyuan held an important position in the political, military, and cultural landscape of ancient China. In addition, Taiyuan is a major birthplace of Jin merchant culture and is officially recognized as a National Historical and Cultural City. It is home to ancient architectural sites such as Jinci Temple, Tianlongshan Grottoes, Longshan Grottoes, Taiyuan Confucius Temple, Chunyang Palace, the Ancient Mosque, the former site of Shanxi University Hall, and the former site of the Military Governor's Office. The city's intangible cultural heritage exhibits a clustered distribution pattern, gradually declining from south to north [6]. Representative items cover multiple categories, including traditional craftsmanship, traditional fine arts,

folk customs, traditional sports, games, and acrobatics, with traditional craftsmanship and folk customs being the dominant types. However, due to Taiyuan's relatively low visibility among Chinese provincial capitals, these rich cultural resources have gained insufficient national exposure, resulting in a serious mismatch between resource endowment and market perception.

2.3 Limited Communication Volume in City Image Promotion

The construction of a city image depends on effective communication. In 2008, Taiyuan introduced the city brand "Tang Style and Jin Charm, Splendid Taiyuan", actively promoting its local historical and cultural features. As cultural tourism gained momentum, Taiyuan further launched

brands such as "City of Museums" and "City of Music Fans" in an attempt to systematically present the city's overall character. Nevertheless, these communication efforts have not effectively turned into broad public recognition. A comparison of Baidu search audience geographic profiles (Figure 1) shows that tourism-related search popularity for comparable provincial capitals like Changsha, Xi'an, and Harbin has successfully transcended regional boundaries, generating high communication volume coverage in southern core consumer regions such as Guangdong and Jiangsu. In contrast, Taiyuan's search popularity remains largely concentrated within its home province of Shanxi and the North China circle that includes Beijing and Hebei, lacking the communication momentum to spread outward.

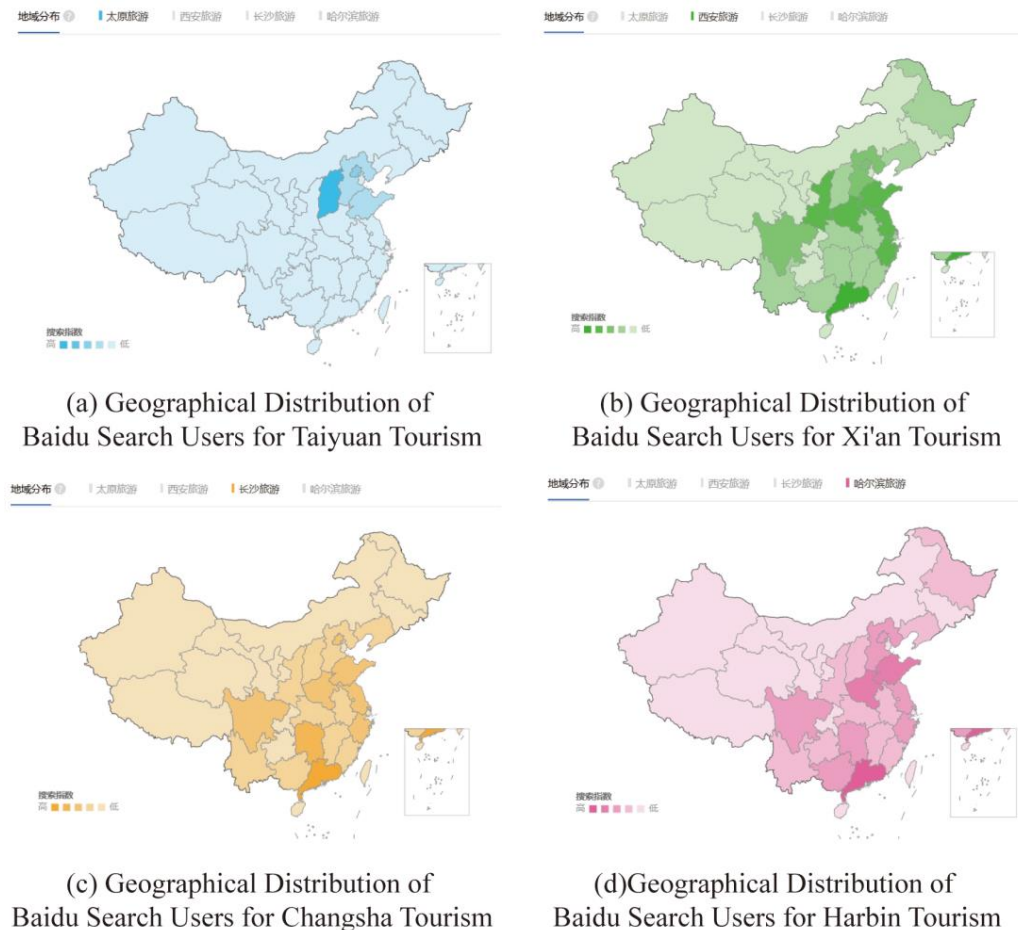


Figure 1 Geographic Distribution Map of Baidu Search Users for Urban Tourism

3 Communication Practices of Taiyuan's City Image

3.1 The Gap Between IP Co-branding and Local IP Development

IP originally stands for intellectual property. Cultural IP extends this concept to mean intellectual property carried by a particular culture, and its external expression takes the form of cultural symbols. Most cultural IPs are highly recognizable, often appearing in the form of games, literature, and animation. They are widely liked by the public, bring their own online traffic, and hold high commercial value. In August 2024, the Chinese AAA game *Black Myth: Wukong* became a global phenomenon. Its strong Eastern aesthetic style drew players' attention to traditional Chinese cultural spaces. Among the 36 real-world locations featured in the game, 27 are in Shanxi Province, including ancient architectural sites in Taiyuan such as Jinci Temple, Tianlongshan Grottoes, and Longshan Grottoes. Cai Libin and Lu Yihui found in their research that for cultural tourism IP to complete a closed loop of virtual-real symbiosis, it is first necessary to use digital media to construct local cultural symbols and virtual interactive fields, and then to reconstruct the destination's offline experience space through technological and cultural empowerment, thereby creating an interactive symbiosis between the virtual and the real [7]. Local cultural resources that were once relatively marginal have been transformed, through the mythological narrative and real-scene symbols in the game, into city cultural images with emotional appeal. To seize this opportunity, Taiyuan's cultural tourism sector built on Shanxi Province's "Travel Shanxi with Wukong" campaign and tailored several "Wukong" tour routes within the city, converting audiences from online players to offline visitors. During the first week of the game's release, venues directly under the Municipal Cultural Relics Bureau received 398,800 visitors, an increase of 170,200 compared to the same period, a growth rate of 74% [8]. Leveraging the lingering popularity of *Black Myth: Wukong*, Taiyuan's cultural tourism successfully stepped into the public spotlight.

However, from a long-term perspective, Taiyuan's current utilization of IPs largely relies on borrowing the momentum of external popular IPs, a model that can only generate limited attention in the short term. The popularity of external IPs

is clearly cyclical and contingent in nature; once that popularity fades, the city's exposure and attractiveness are likely to decline as a result. In contrast, the systematic development of IPs rooted in Taiyuan's own local cultural resources still lags behind. The ancestral temple culture and garden aesthetics embodied in Jinci Temple, the commercial ethics and national narratives found in Jin merchant culture, and the spiritual worlds of historical figures such as Fu Shan these distinctive place-based cultural resources have yet to be integrated and transformed into an endogenous cultural IP system with independent appeal and lasting vitality.

3.2 The Disconnect Between Communication Matrix and Content Synergy

He Guoping argues that city image communication involves the proactive dissemination of a city's functional positioning based on its dynamic intentions, as well as the integrated communication of city image elements [9]. The communication of a city image requires a multi-layered promotional strategy, where content emphasis is adjusted according to different platform characteristics, yet all efforts should ultimately converge into the same city brand.

Although Taiyuan's communication spans multiple channels, including mainstream media, government social media, and short video platforms, these channels lack a unified guiding objective. For instance, local mainstream media such as *Taiyuan Daily Press* and *Taiyuan Radio and Television Station* have produced a series of works like *Echoing the Fame of Splendid Taiyuan* and *Twelve Hours of Taiyuan*, which focus on depicting Taiyuan's cultural depth and developmental changes. Official accounts such as "Taiyuan Fabu" and "Taiyuan Culture and Tourism" concentrate on city highlights, cultural tourism events, and similar content. Taiyuan's official Weibo account leans more toward promoting the city's brands as a "City of Museums" and a "City of Music Fans", along with images of its core tourism resources, the birthplace of Jin culture, and the capital of noodle-based cuisine. The official promotional video unfolds along two main supporting threads: the cultural lineage and tourism resources of *Splendid Taiyuan*, striving to present visitors with the city image of "Tang Style and Jin Charm, Splendid Taiyuan" [10].

Objectively speaking, although Taiyuan's communication matrix has made initial progress in terms of channel

coverage, a clear disconnect in content synergy across platforms remains. The in-depth narratives of mainstream media, the service-oriented information on government social media, and the fragmented content on short-video platforms have not yet formed an organic interplay or a progressive relationship with one another. Furthermore, a gap still exists between Taiyuan's official discourse system and the city images spontaneously constructed by the public. Official communication carries a relatively strong traditional propaganda tone and, compared with the discourse spread by internet users on their own, lacks affinity. In this regard, Taiyuan's official communication actors need to explore a more integrated pathway through which official and grassroots communication can blend.

Henry Jenkins' participatory culture theory suggests that in the digital media era, audiences are no longer passive receivers of information but active content producers and disseminators. Weibo is the platform where fan communities are most active. We retrieved Weibo posts containing the keyword "City of Music Fans, Taiyuan Spoils You" posted between April 2024 and April 2026, and selected a total of 3,619 valid samples. The sentiment analysis of these samples (Figure 2) shows that, regarding Taiyuan's "City of Music Fans" services, positive sentiment from fans accounted for 69.2%, neutral sentiment for 16%, and negative sentiment for only 14.8%. Among the positive sentiments, highly positive sentiment made up 28.9% of the total, moderately positive sentiment 14.4%, and mildly positive sentiment 25.9%. These data indicate that the "City of Music Fans" brand has received predominantly favorable

feedback on social media, and Taiyuan's city image has been actively reshaped through the spontaneous communication of fan groups.

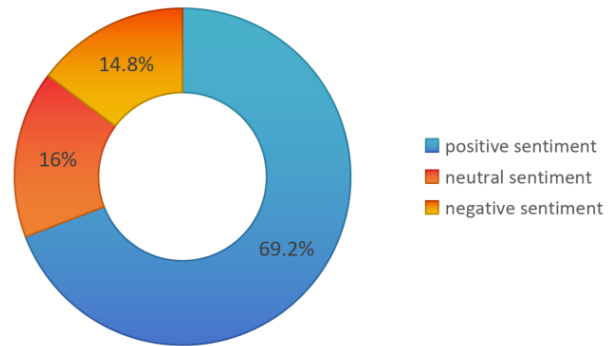


Figure 2 Sentiment Analysis Results of Weibo Posts for "City of Music Fans, Taiyuan Spoils You"

Furthermore, the high-frequency words in the Weibo posts further reflect the discussion hotspots among fans during the concerts (Table 1). Words such as "free", "subway", "shuttle bus", and "souvenir" reflect the effective communication of Taiyuan's "fan-spoiling" services. Words like "check-in", "drone", and "Jinci Temple" demonstrate the cultural experiences and interactive scenes that fans encountered in Taiyuan. Meanwhile, words such as "anticipation", "enthusiasm", and "happiness" directly present fans' positive evaluations of Taiyuan. Overall, these high-frequency words, spanning the dimensions of service, experience, and emotion, confirm the favorable reception of the "City of Music Fans" brand among fan communities.

Table 1 High-frequency Words in Weibo Posts on "City of Music Fans, Taiyuan Spoils You"

No.	Word	Frequency
1	free	765
2	check-in	488
3	anticipation	424
4	drone	404
5	subway	402
6	shuttle bus	289
7	Jinci Temple	268
8	souvenir	220
9	enthusiasm	215
10	happiness	194

More specifically, the hosting of concerts follows a clear cyclical pattern. During concert periods, Taiyuan enjoys high city exposure, and its online popularity rises markedly. However, during non-concert periods, related popularity for Taiyuan declines noticeably. Currently, Taiyuan's "City of Music Fans" model relies heavily on

the drawing power of individual stars. The singers' concerts serve as the direct reason for fans to visit Taiyuan, and their emotional connection to the city is largely a temporary sense of novelty. Therefore, Taiyuan needs to consider transforming fans' concert experiences into a lasting interest in the city's urban culture, establish a normalized

content output mechanism, re-disseminate the service experiences and positive emotional cases accumulated during concert periods, and gradually internalize the brand memory of the "City of Music Fans" into sustained attention toward Taiyuan's urban culture.

4 Suggestions for Optimizing the Communication of Taiyuan's City Image

4.1 Cultivating a Local Cultural IP System

Herbert Blumer's symbolic interaction theory holds that human social behavior is guided by values and meanings that are mediated through symbolic interaction [11]. By leveraging the IP popularity of Black Myth: Wukong, Taiyuan activated tourists' enthusiasm for interacting with its ancient architecture and achieved a short-term surge in visitor numbers. However, the popularity of external IPs is highly dependent in nature, so Taiyuan needs to pay more attention to the systematic integration and IP-based development of its own local cultural resources. Taiyuan is rich in intangible cultural heritage (ICH) resources. As a living form of cultural resource, ICH functions as an index symbol with the capacity for transformation; when collaboratively developed by multiple actors, it can be reconstructed into an experiential entity of cultural consumption [12]. Therefore, Taiyuan should further explore its distinctive place-based cultural resources such as the Jinci cultural lineage, Jin merchant culture, and traditional noodle-making techniques and carry out full-chain IP incubation covering visual design, story packaging, and industry chain extension, so as to cultivate an endogenous cultural IP matrix with independent appeal. The city's humanistic architectural symbols should be its most recognizable cultural symbols [13]. In practical terms, this can be achieved by presenting cultural resources in scene-based settings, linking ancient buildings and historical districts with cultural IPs, and transforming cultural resources into urban experiences that are both participatory and communicable. By reducing excessive reliance on external IPs, Taiyuan can make the leap from borrowing momentum to creating momentum of its own.

4.2 Deepening the Integration of Official and Civilian Discourse

In the era of user-generated content communication, the government and mainstream media should actively shift their perspectives and proactively incorporate the city images constructed by the public. Through a multi-point composite strategy, by bridging the official and grassroots discourse systems, and by actively engaging to guide hot topics in online discussions, a synergistic resonance between official and grassroots communication can be achieved [14]. On the basis of its existing communication matrix, Taiyuan can focus on breaking down the barriers between the official discourse system and the grassroots discourse system. On the one hand, official communication needs to shift its narrative perspective and actively absorb the warm and humane emotional expressions found in the city images shaped by the public, so as to make official narratives more compelling. On the other hand, the government should proactively intervene and provide positive guidance on the existing hot online topics concerning the city image, thereby enriching the city image's connotations. At the same time, a timely and effective feedback mechanism can be established to provide positive interaction with audiences' questions, suggestions, and creative content on social media platforms, forming a healthy two-way communication that leads official and grassroots communication toward synergistic resonance.

4.3 Building a Mechanism for Retaining and Converting Traffic

Taiyuan needs to establish an effective mechanism that can turn the short-term traffic generated by concerts into a long-term asset for the city brand. During concert periods, Taiyuan's culture and tourism sector can develop more short-distance cultural tourism routes that integrate with the performances, and design co-branded creative products, guiding fans to visit Taiyuan's local ancient architecture in depth and experience the local culture. During concert periods, the Taiyuan government can plan ongoing urban cultural events or themed activities to maintain the city brand's everyday popularity. Advances in media technology have changed the elite-driven, top-down vertical communication model, and participatory communication based on dialogue and democratic principles has seen considerable development [15]. Therefore, in the digital media era, Taiyuan can

establish lasting connections with fans through channels such as social media accounts, encouraging fans to share their travel experiences in Taiyuan, generating secondary communication, and continuously expanding the reach of the city image.

5 Conclusions

This study takes Taiyuan as its subject and provides a systematic analysis of the city's practical efforts in reshaping and communicating its urban image from the perspective of cultural tourism integration. The analysis reveals that Taiyuan has long struggled with issues such as fixed external perceptions, insufficient visibility of its cultural resources, and a lack of communicative reach. In response to the challenge of breaking away from its one-dimensional image as a "Coal Capital", Taiyuan has adopted several strategies, including collaborating with popular intellectual property (IP) brands, building a multi-platform media communication matrix, and introducing special benefit measures for concert fans under the "Fan City" initiative, which have helped gain audience favor. However, the city's practice also reveals certain challenges, including an imbalance between borrowed external IP and local IP, a disconnect between the communication matrix and content coordination, as well as a decline in daily audience traffic.

Based on these findings, this study offers suggestions for improvement from three angles: building a local cultural IP system, deepening the integration of official and public discourse, and setting up a mechanism to receive and convert audience traffic. These suggestions aim to provide both theoretical guidance and practical pathways for Taiyuan and other resource-based cities seeking to reshape their image. Future research could further track the long-term outcomes of Taiyuan's strategies and explore differentiated paths for image transformation in various types of resource-based cities through comparative case studies, so as to offer more reference for similar cities in their efforts to rebuild their public image in the context of cultural tourism integration.

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