

A Strategic Framework for Enhancing Brand Value in Intangible Cultural Heritage Tourism: The Case of Liubao Tea in Wuzhou City, China

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the factors influencing the brand value of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) tourism from the visitors' perspective, using Liubao tea tourism in Wuzhou City, Guangxi Province, China, as a case study. It further seeks to propose strategic guidelines for enhancing brand value in ICH tourism destinations. A mixed-methods research design was employed. The quantitative phase involved a structured questionnaire administered to 400 tourists to assess five core components of brand value: brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, brand association, and brand loyalty. Statistical analyses included descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA, and multiple regression. The qualitative phase comprised in-depth interviews with 20 stakeholders (tea farmers, tourism providers, government officials), analysed using thematic coding supported by NVivo and triangulation techniques to ensure content validity. The findings indicate that the overall brand value of Liubao tea tourism is rated at a high level by visitors, with brand loyalty emerging as the most influential factor. Destination-related elements—specifically cultural heritage, physical infrastructure, and service quality—significantly affect brand value, while tourist behavioral factors show no statistically significant impact. Government support, especially from central authorities via policies, tax incentives, and transportation development, also positively influences brand perception. Storytelling, environmental aesthetics, and authentic experiences contribute to enhanced brand identity and emotional resonance with visitors. Brand value in ICH tourism can be effectively built by aligning cultural authenticity with strategic branding efforts. Liubao tea tourism demonstrates a successful model for integrating heritage-based storytelling, local engagement, and sustainable tourism practices. These elements enhance visitors' perceptions and foster loyalty. Despite Liubao's cultural richness, challenges remain in strengthening brand awareness and emotional association. Fragmented marketing efforts, limited international recognition, and gaps in digital engagement present obstacles to maximizing brand potential. Addressing these complications through targeted branding and cross-sector collaboration is critical for sustaining competitiveness in the growing ICH tourism sector.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), Brand Value, Tea Tourism, Visitor Perception, Sustainable Cultural Tourism

INTRODUCTION

Tourism remains one of the world's largest and most rapidly expanding industries, playing a vital role in both economic development and cultural exchange. Within this sector, cultural tourism — defined as travel motivated

by cultural experiences such as traditional food, festivals, architecture, languages, and heritage practices — has emerged as a significant contributor to global tourism growth. In 2023, the cultural tourism market was projected to reach USD 854.8 billion, highlighting its increasing relevance to global economic activity (Statista, 2023). Notably, the cultural heritage tourism segment alone generated USD 556.96 billion in 2021, with expectations for a steady annual growth rate of 3.8% due to government support in various countries (Grandview Research, 2022). Developing nations, in particular, have benefited from this trend by leveraging cultural heritage as a strategic resource for both economic and social advancement.

Cultural heritage, as defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), encompasses both tangible and intangible elements. Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) includes oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, festive events, and knowledge or skills passed through generations (UNESCO, 2004). These elements not only represent the living traditions of communities but also play a critical role in shaping national identity, education, and intercultural understanding. The Chinese government has demonstrated a strong commitment to safeguarding ICH by implementing policies that promote cultural preservation and encourage the sustainable development of heritage assets (Lin, 2018). A compelling example of ICH in practice is found in Liubao, Guangxi Province, China — a town known for its renowned dark tea, or Hei Cha. With a history of over 1,500 years, Liubao tea is deeply rooted in local traditions and is celebrated for its medicinal properties. Recognising the economic and cultural potential of this product, local authorities have initiated “tea tourism” or agritainment — an experiential tourism model that integrates tea cultivation, tea tasting, and homestay accommodations. Since its inception, tea plantation space in Liubao has expanded from 4,733 hectares in 2017 to 5,600 hectares in 2020, producing approximately 4,000 tons annually and generating over 670 million yuan in economic value (China Daily, 2017).

Despite this progress, limited academic attention has been given to the development of brand value in Liubao tea tourism. Existing studies tend to focus on supply-side concerns such as tea production, homestay operations, or environmental conservation (Wu, 2016; Yin, 2016). However, few address how visitors perceive brand value in the context of intangible cultural heritage tourism. As suggested by Cheng (2012), the absence of strategic planning and weak collaboration among stakeholders have contributed to the underperformance of tea tourism initiatives. Additionally, challenges related to overcapacity, inconsistent quality, and ineffective marketing persist (Zhiyaun, 2017). Brand value — the perceived worth and identity of a cultural product in the eyes of visitors — is a key differentiator in competitive heritage tourism markets (Dong, 2022; Adegbuyi, 2022). Therefore, understanding the factors influencing brand value from the visitors’ perspective is essential for developing sustainable and attractive heritage tourism experiences. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the determinants of brand value in Liubao tea tourism and proposing strategic guidelines for its enhancement.

Although Liubao tea has long been recognised for its cultural significance and health benefits, academic studies surrounding its integration into tourism remain limited and fragmented. Existing research predominantly focuses on the supply-side aspects of tea tourism, such as the preservation of Liubao tea plantations (Yin, 2016), branding strategies for tea products (Wu, 2016), and general agritourism operations in the region. These studies provide valuable insights into the development and promotion of tea-related products and experiences; however, they lack a comprehensive examination of visitor perceptions and their role in building sustainable brand value for Liubao tea tourism.

Moreover, while broader tourism studies suggest that brand value plays a critical role in influencing tourist behavior and destination competitiveness (Dong, 2022; Adegbuyi, 2022), there is a clear absence of research applying these concepts specifically to intangible cultural heritage (ICH) tourism—particularly in the context of tea tourism in China. The absence of demand-side analysis creates a significant void in understanding how visitors perceive, engage with, and assign value to the cultural and experiential offerings of Liubao tea. Given the increasing competition among ICH-based tourism destinations across China, and the push by the Chinese government to promote cultural heritage as a national strategy (Lin, 2018), it is crucial to identify the key factors influencing brand value from a visitor’s perspective. This will enable local authorities, tourism planners, and stakeholders to implement more effective branding, marketing, and preservation strategies tailored to tourist expectations and preferences.

This study addresses the gap by examining the demand-side perspective—specifically, the factors influencing the brand value of Liubao tea tourism as perceived by visitors. In doing so, it aims to develop guidelines to enhance brand identity and long-term sustainability of intangible cultural heritage tourism in Guangxi Province.

Research Objectives

To provide a guideline in building brand value of intangible cultural heritage tourism from the visitors’ perspective of Liubao tea in Wuzhou city, Guangxi Province, China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Value: Concepts and Theory

Brand value refers to the perceived worth of a brand in the minds of consumers and plays a crucial role in shaping visitor behaviour and destination image. It encompasses various components including brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and overall brand equity (Keller, 2003; Aaker, 1991). In the context of cultural heritage tourism, brand value allows destinations to differentiate themselves in a competitive market by conveying authenticity, heritage significance, and emotional appeal (Adegbuyi, 2022; Dong, 2022). Empirical research suggests that developing a strong brand identity helps increase tourist satisfaction, repeat visitation, and willingness to pay a premium (Papadas, 2021). For ICH tourism, brand value often stems from historical narratives, cultural significance, and meaningful visitor experiences (Huang et al., 2022).

Intangible Cultural Heritage: Concepts and Characteristics

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2004) defines ICH as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills transmitted through generations.” These include oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, traditional craftsmanship, and knowledge of nature. ICH is seen as a living heritage essential to community identity and cultural continuity (UNESCO, 2004; Lin, 2018). ICH must be actively practiced and transmitted within communities, offering experiential and educational value to tourists. Its preservation supports not only cultural integrity but also sustainable tourism development (Zhang & Jiang, 2023).

Tourism Management

Tourism management involves the planning, development, and marketing of tourism destinations to achieve sustainable economic, cultural, and social outcomes (Cooper et al., 2018). In heritage tourism, management must balance conservation with visitor engagement. Sustainable tourism principles encourage the integration of local participation, environmental sensitivity, and cultural authenticity (Lane, 2022). Successful ICH tourism management includes product diversification, community-based operations, and marketing strategies that emphasize unique cultural elements (Holloway, 2019).

Tourist Behaviour in Tourism

Tourist behaviour encompasses the psychological, social, and economic factors that influence travel decisions. It includes motivation, perception, attitudes, and post-travel evaluation (Cook, 2022). In ICH tourism, behavioural drivers such as authenticity-seeking, cultural curiosity, and emotional connection are strong predictors of tourist satisfaction and loyalty (Chumongkol, 2020). Research also shows that sustainable and eco-conscious tourists are more likely to support cultural heritage initiatives, particularly if the brand communicates values of conservation and community support (Awogbemi et al., 2022).

Liubao Tea Intangible Cultural Heritage Tourism

Liubao tea, with a history of over 1,500 years, is recognised for its cultural and medicinal value. As a form of ICH, it is promoted through agritainment models combining tea cultivation, homestays, and tea-drinking experiences (China Daily, 2017). Despite increased efforts in plantation expansion and tourism infrastructure, studies reveal that Liubao tea tourism lacks strategic brand value development and demand-side insights (Shaowen, 2012; Wu, 2016). Given the saturation of tea tourism offerings across China, Liubao must differentiate its ICH through visitor-focused branding, authentic experiences, and meaningful cultural interpretation (Dong, 2022; Yin, 2016). This literature review supports the study's aim to identify brand value-building strategies based on visitors' perspectives.

This study addresses the research gap by exploring factors influencing brand value of ICH tourism from the visitor's perspective, using Liubao tea tourism as a case study. The aim is to develop strategic recommendations for enhancing brand identity, creating emotional connection, and ensuring long-term sustainability of heritage tourism in Guangxi Province.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the factors influencing the brand value of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) tourism from the visitors' perspective and to formulate strategic guidelines for the sustainable development of Liubao tea tourism in Wuzhou City, Guangxi Province, China. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain in-depth insights into visitor perceptions, cultural meanings, and stakeholder experiences that shape the brand value of Liubao tea as an ICH tourism product. Data Collection was conducted

through in-depth interviews with 20 purposively selected key informants. The participants included tea garden owners, local tourism service providers, cultural interpreters, and government officials involved in cultural heritage management and tourism development. The selection criteria emphasized individuals with direct involvement or experiential knowledge related to Liubao tea tourism, ensuring rich, relevant, and diverse perspectives. To enhance the depth and validity of responses, the study employed the Delphi method, conducting two rounds of semi-structured interviews. This iterative process allowed for clarification, reflection, and consensus-building among participants. The interview questions were developed based on the key dimensions of brand value—namely brand awareness, brand image, perceived quality, brand association, and brand loyalty—framed within the context of ICH tourism. Data Analysis was carried out using thematic content analysis, supported by NVivo software to manage, code, and categorize qualitative data systematically. The analysis followed Creswell's (2013) framework for qualitative research, involving the steps of data organization, coding, theme development, and interpretation. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, the study applied triangulation, comparing findings across different respondent groups, and member checking, where selected participants reviewed preliminary interpretations to confirm accuracy. This qualitative methodology enabled the researcher to uncover nuanced insights into how visitors and stakeholders perceive and co-construct the brand value of Liubao tea tourism. The results serve as a foundation for developing strategic recommendations that align cultural authenticity with branding practices to support the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of Liubao as an ICH tourism destination.

RESULTS

The qualitative findings from in-depth interviews with key stakeholders—including tea farmers, local tourism providers, and government officials—reveal a rich and multifaceted understanding of how brand value is constructed and perceived in Liubao tea tourism as an expression of intangible cultural heritage (ICH).

1. Cultural Authenticity and Heritage Significance

Respondents consistently emphasized that Liubao tea is far more than a beverage—it is a living embodiment of local tradition and cultural identity. With a documented history spanning over 1,500 years, Liubao tea has become a symbolic representation of Wuzhou's intangible cultural heritage (ICH). The narratives surrounding its origins, traditional processing methods, and medicinal properties are deeply ingrained in community life and are now central to the visitor experience. Interviewees pointed out that the traditional fermentation process, unique to Liubao tea, is a significant aspect that differentiates it from other teas in China. Unlike mass-produced varieties, Liubao tea undergoes a lengthy aging process and is crafted using indigenous knowledge passed down through generations. This sense of craftsmanship, combined with the spiritual and medicinal values associated with the tea, contributes to an image of purity, authenticity, and timelessness. Moreover, cultural rituals—such as ceremonial tea preparation and storytelling sessions—serve as a medium through which visitors gain a deeper understanding of local beliefs and historical context. These experiences transform a simple tea tasting into a meaningful cultural journey, allowing tourists to engage with heritage on both emotional and intellectual levels.

"Tourists don't come here just to drink tea—they come to understand the culture, the legacy behind each cup," said a local tea ceremony host.

Visitors often express a strong emotional connection after learning about the symbolic elements of the tea, such as its role in traditional medicine, community rituals, and seasonal festivals. This deep-rooted cultural identity enhances the perceived value of the tea and elevates the overall tourism experience. As one stakeholder noted, *"The culture gives the tea its soul."*

2. Immersive and Educational Visitor Experiences

A dominant theme across the interviews was the importance of interactive, hands-on activities in shaping visitor satisfaction and enhancing the perceived brand value of Liubao tea tourism. Stakeholders highlighted that tourists are increasingly seeking more than passive sightseeing; they crave authentic, participatory experiences that allow them to engage directly with local practices and cultural traditions. Among the most popular activities are tea leaf-picking, tea-frying demonstrations, and guided plantation tours, which offer visitors a rare opportunity to step into the shoes of tea farmers and artisans. These activities provide a tangible connection to the heritage of Liubao tea, enabling tourists to appreciate the labor, skill, and dedication involved in each step of the production process. Such experiences are not only memorable but also educational, as tourists gain first-hand knowledge of fermentation techniques, seasonal cycles, and the tools and materials used in traditional tea-making.

"They want to learn how the tea is picked and fermented. This hands-on learning is what leaves a lasting memory," shared one tea estate manager.

Several interviewees emphasized that experiential learning enhances emotional engagement, which in turn increases brand attachment and loyalty. For instance, visitors who participate in these activities often develop a

sense of pride and personal connection to the tea they helped process, leading to a more favorable perception of the brand and a higher likelihood of purchasing tea as souvenirs or recommending the experience to others. Moreover, educational elements such as museum exhibits, storytelling workshops, and cultural interpretation by local guides further reinforce the heritage value of the tourism experience. By blending learning with active participation, Liubao tea tourism successfully positions itself as a model of experience-based heritage tourism, where cultural immersion is central to brand identity and long-term destination appeal.

3. Community Involvement and Local Identity

One of the most compelling insights drawn from the interviews was the role of community involvement in shaping the brand identity of Liubao tea tourism. Stakeholders across all sectors—from tea farmers to cultural officials—expressed pride in the fact that tea tourism has become a platform for both economic empowerment and cultural preservation within the local community. Rather than positioning tourism as an external or top-down enterprise, Liubao has integrated local voices and traditions into the heart of its tourism offering. Community members participate actively in a variety of roles, including homestay hosts, tea artisans, traditional storytellers, cultural guides, and performers during tea festivals. This inclusion strengthens social cohesion and trust, not only among residents but also between hosts and visitors. The relationships built during these interactions—whether over a shared meal or a tea-picking session—often lead to repeat visits and word-of-mouth promotion, which in turn reinforce brand loyalty.

“This isn’t just about selling tea—it’s about showing who we are as people. Our traditions, our way of life,” a local elder explained.

The community-centered approach also fosters a strong sense of place attachment among both locals and tourists. Visitors report feeling welcomed into an authentic cultural environment, which enhances their emotional connection to the destination. From the community’s perspective, tourism is not seen as exploitation of heritage, but rather as a celebration and revitalization of their identity. This model supports not just economic sustainability, but also intergenerational knowledge transfer, as younger locals are encouraged to learn about and take pride in their heritage through involvement in tourism activities. Ultimately, Liubao’s brand value is intimately tied to its people and cultural integrity, making community participation a cornerstone of its success as an ICH tourism destination.

4. Perceived Quality and Brand Image

Interview findings revealed that the perceived quality of Liubao tea is central to its brand image, and is shaped by more than just the product itself. While taste, aroma, and texture remain important indicators of quality, stakeholders emphasized that narratives of tradition, health, and sustainability significantly enhance consumer perceptions. The tea is widely regarded as a natural and artisanal product, cultivated through environmentally friendly methods that reflect the values of care, longevity, and cultural pride.

“The way we grow tea—naturally, without chemicals—and how we talk about our history, that builds trust in our product,” said a marketing officer for a local tea brand.

Many respondents noted that Liubao tea’s distinctiveness is rooted in its historical production techniques, including its unique fermentation and aging processes. These traditional methods are not only preserved but actively highlighted in branding and storytelling efforts, reinforcing the authenticity and exclusivity of the product. The tea is also commonly associated with health benefits, particularly in terms of aiding digestion, reducing inflammation, and promoting overall wellness—an association that strengthens its appeal to health-conscious tourists. Packaging and presentation were also seen as important elements of brand communication. Stakeholders reported that successful packaging strategies include visual cues of heritage, such as calligraphy, traditional motifs, and stories printed on labels. These design elements serve as cultural signifiers that differentiate Liubao tea from mass-produced alternatives and support the perception of premium, heritage-based quality. In summary, the brand image of Liubao tea is not confined to sensory experience alone; it is a multidimensional construct that blends product excellence with cultural storytelling, ethical production, and emotional trust. This integration helps build a loyal customer base and strengthens the competitive positioning of Liubao tea in the ICH tourism market.

5. Government Support and Infrastructure Development

Stakeholders consistently acknowledged the critical role of government support—at both central and local levels—in facilitating the growth and recognition of Liubao tea as a flagship product of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) tourism. Participants pointed out that government initiatives have enhanced the physical and policy infrastructure, making the destination more accessible and appealing to domestic and international visitors alike. At the central level, policy frameworks and strategic planning have provided important foundations for tea tourism development. Investments in road systems, signage, and public transport connectivity have significantly improved accessibility to Liubao’s tea-growing areas. Additionally, the government has supported the organization of cultural

festivals, tourism expos, and media campaigns, which have raised the national profile of Liubao tea and positioned it as a cultural emblem of Wuzhou and Guangxi Province. Local governments have also played an important role, particularly in standardizing service quality through licensing systems for tourism providers, setting up information centers, and establishing complaint mechanisms. These efforts have contributed to building visitor confidence and ensuring a baseline level of service across tourism touchpoints. However, several interviewees raised concerns about gaps in policy implementation and coordination. While the intentions of government programs are widely praised, their execution at the grassroots level is often seen as uneven or delayed.

“We have policies, yes. But sometimes the support doesn’t reach us quickly. There’s a gap between what’s promised and what’s done,” remarked a tourism officer.

This disconnect, they argued, sometimes hampers local innovation and limits the responsiveness of tourism operations. Some stakeholders suggested that greater consultation with local communities, as well as decentralized funding mechanisms, could help address these shortcomings. In conclusion, while government support is essential and largely beneficial, its full potential can only be realized through inclusive, transparent, and timely coordination with community actors and tourism practitioners on the ground.

6. Challenges in Brand Awareness and Global Reach

Although Liubao tea possesses a rich cultural heritage and high-quality production, stakeholders expressed concern that it still lacks international visibility. Multiple interviewees acknowledged that, unlike globally recognized Chinese teas such as Longjing or Pu’er, Liubao tea remains relatively unknown to foreign markets. This limited brand awareness poses a significant barrier to the broader development of Liubao as a competitive destination for intangible cultural heritage (ICH) tourism. A recurring theme was the absence of strategic international marketing and branding initiatives. Participants noted that while domestic tourism promotion is robust—through cultural festivals, state media, and regional campaigns—there has been little investment in cross-border marketing efforts, partnerships with overseas distributors, or engagement with international tourism platforms. As a result, foreign tourists are often unfamiliar with Liubao tea prior to visiting China, and opportunities for global brand expansion remain underutilized.

“We have a great product, but people in Europe or America barely know it exists. We need global partnerships,” suggested one local entrepreneur.

Furthermore, many stakeholders pointed out the underuse of digital marketing channels, such as multilingual websites, social media campaigns, influencer collaborations, and e-commerce platforms targeted at international consumers. These tools are increasingly vital for promoting cultural tourism products in the digital age. The lack of digital engagement has not only limited visibility but also constrained the potential for Liubao tea to build emotional brand connections with international audiences. There is also a need for brand positioning strategies that communicate Liubao’s unique qualities—such as its traditional fermentation techniques, health benefits, and cultural significance—in ways that resonate with global values of wellness, sustainability, and authenticity. Without these efforts, stakeholders fear that Liubao tea may continue to be overshadowed in a highly competitive global heritage tea market.

Summary of Key Themes

Table 1 Summary of Findings

Theme	Description
Cultural Authenticity	Deep historical roots, traditions, and symbolic rituals enrich brand value.
Experiential Tourism	Hands-on engagement through tea-making and farm visits boosts satisfaction.
Community Participation	Locals’ involvement fosters trust and emotional branding.
Quality and Storytelling	Health, flavor, and narrative identity strengthen brand image.
Government Facilitation	Support in infrastructure and marketing enhances visibility and trust.
Barriers to Global Recognition	Limited international exposure and digital promotion hinder brand expansion.

These findings provide rich, contextualised insights into the dynamics shaping the brand value of Liubao tea tourism from the visitor’s perspective. They underscore the importance of cultural storytelling, community involvement, and policy alignment in enhancing the appeal and sustainability of ICH tourism.

DISCUSSION

1. Cultural Authenticity and Heritage Significance

The finding that visitors deeply value the authenticity and heritage of Liubao tea aligns with previous research emphasizing the role of cultural authenticity in enhancing brand value in heritage tourism. According to Chhabra et al. (2003), perceived authenticity significantly shapes tourists’ emotional engagement and satisfaction in cultural

destinations. Similarly, McKercher and du Cros (2002) assert that cultural heritage sites with strong traditional narratives foster a deeper sense of identity and place, which enhances brand loyalty. In the case of Liubao, the centuries-old fermentation process and medicinal reputation serve not only as historical anchors but also as cultural markers that reinforce its ICH status and contribute to its symbolic capital (UNESCO, 2004; Lin, 2018).

2. Immersive and Educational Visitor Experiences

The emphasis on hands-on learning, such as tea leaf-picking and tea-making, supports findings by Pine and Gilmore (1999), who argue that experiential engagement creates memorable tourism experiences and emotional value. In ICH tourism, these participatory elements serve as "co-creation" opportunities that strengthen the connection between tourists and cultural products (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009). Previous studies also show that educational value enhances destination branding by reinforcing perceived authenticity and cultural depth (Prentice, 2001). The findings support Huang, Liu, and Wang (2022), who observed that experiential tourism in heritage contexts leads to higher tourist satisfaction and positive brand evaluation.

3. Community Involvement and Local Identity

Community engagement emerged as a critical component in Liubao's tourism success. This finding reflects the principles of community-based tourism (CBT), where local participation strengthens both social cohesion and the authenticity of the visitor experience (Tolkach & King, 2015). According to Richards and Wilson (2006), integrating local voices into tourism development enhances destination uniqueness and trust. The study further supports findings by Choi and Sirakaya (2005), who identified that resident involvement enhances sustainable tourism outcomes and contributes to long-term brand equity in heritage-rich communities.

4. Perceived Quality and Brand Image

Respondents' association of Liubao tea with health, natural production, and craftsmanship is consistent with Aaker's (1991) brand equity theory, which posits that perceived quality is a key dimension of brand value. Moreover, the integration of storytelling and tradition into product presentation aligns with research by Huang et al. (2022), who highlight that brand storytelling enhances tourist trust and emotional engagement. The connection between perceived quality and environmental sustainability also echoes findings from Papadas et al. (2021), who argue that ethical branding enhances brand image and differentiation in cultural tourism markets.

5. Government Support and Infrastructure Development

The role of government policy and infrastructure support in developing ICH tourism is widely recognized in the literature. Dredge and Jenkins (2007) note that tourism governance frameworks must not only offer top-down support but also involve collaborative local planning. While this study confirms the positive impacts of infrastructure and policy promotion, it also reveals implementation gaps—reflecting similar observations by Bramwell and Lane (2011), who warn that policy execution often lags behind design, especially at the local level. This mismatch can limit destination competitiveness despite good intentions at the policy level.

6. Challenges in Brand Awareness and Global Reach

Despite Liubao's strong domestic reputation, limited global recognition remains a challenge. This echoes findings by Konecnik and Gartner (2007), who emphasize the importance of international brand positioning and integrated marketing communication for cultural destinations. The underutilization of digital marketing and global partnerships reflects broader limitations in the internationalization strategies of niche heritage products (Pike, 2009). As suggested by Cai (2002), for a destination or product like Liubao to stand out globally, it must develop a coherent and differentiated brand identity that resonates with international values—such as wellness, authenticity, and sustainability.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

This study offers several important implications for theory, practice, and policy concerning brand value development in intangible cultural heritage (ICH) tourism.

1. Theoretical Implications

The findings contribute to the academic discourse on cultural tourism by reinforcing the importance of cultural authenticity, immersive experiences, and emotional engagement as central constructs in brand value formation. While previous research has focused heavily on brand equity in commercial tourism, this study emphasizes the unique dynamics of ICH tourism, where brand identity is co-constructed by both hosts and visitors. The study also extends the application of Aaker's brand equity model (1991) and experiential tourism frameworks (Pine &

Gilmore, 1999) to a community-based and heritage-driven context, supporting their relevance in non-commercial, cultural tourism settings.

2. Practical Implications for Tourism Development

The study highlights the importance of experiential design and community participation in enhancing perceived brand value. Destination managers and local entrepreneurs should invest in hands-on activities, such as tea-making workshops, heritage storytelling, and cultural performances, to strengthen visitor engagement. Furthermore, the integration of local residents as homestay hosts, guides, and artisans contributes not only to authenticity but also to sustainable income generation and cultural revitalization.

3. Implications for Branding and Marketing

To improve global recognition, stakeholders must prioritize international brand positioning through digital engagement, multilingual content, and collaboration with overseas cultural institutions. Marketing efforts should articulate Liubao's unique identity—rooted in health, sustainability, and tradition—to appeal to global consumers interested in wellness and cultural experiences. The incorporation of brand storytelling, visual heritage cues, and ethical sourcing narratives can significantly enhance emotional brand connection.

4. Policy Implications

The study reveals a need for more coherent and inclusive policy implementation at the local level. Although national and regional governments have provided strong support through infrastructure and strategic campaigns, gaps remain in grassroots coordination and timely delivery. Policymakers should involve local stakeholders in decision-making and develop decentralized funding mechanisms to support grassroots innovation. Capacity-building programs for small tourism operators could also strengthen service quality and international competitiveness.

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