

# Value Co-Creation in City Image Communication from a New Media Perspective: A Case Study of “Zibo Barbecue”

Shuai Ma, Yanwei Huang, Anqi Pan

School of International Business, Zhejiang Yuexiu University, Shaoxing, China  
Email: 20201005@zyufl.edu.cn

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## Abstract

This paper takes value co-creation as the theoretical perspective and “Zibo Barbecue” as the case study to explore the process and strategies of value co-creation in city image communication in the new media environment. The study first reviews relevant literature, then analyzes the stakeholders and their roles in city image communication based on the viral “Zibo Barbecue” case, and discusses the collaborative pathways of various stakeholders at different stages of city image communication. It further analyzes how various stakeholders achieve win-win value creation. Finally, from the perspective of value co-creation, the paper proposes strategic suggestions for value co-creation in city image communication. This research will help enrich the results of studies in the field of city image communication and provide practical guidance for city image communication in various regions.

## Keywords

City Image Communication, Value Co-Creation, Stakeholders, Collaborative Communication

## 1. Introduction

In today’s highly developed society, city image communication has increasingly become a focus of attention and a hot research field. Traditional city image communication studies often center on information, focusing on content strategies, expression strategies, and channel strategies based on audience research, while ignoring the multi-party collaboration and value co-creation in this process. Meanwhile, with the rapid development of information technology, new media such as short videos and social media have increasingly become important

channels for city image communication. In April 2023, the city of Zibo in Shandong Province, China, successfully gained nationwide attention by leveraging the phenomenon of “Zibo Barbecue” and the power of new media, greatly enhancing the city’s visibility. This process not only involved multiple stakeholders such as the government, businesses, media, and consumers, but their collaborative efforts also became a key factor in promoting city image communication. Therefore, studying the value co-creation process in city image communication is of great significance for understanding the dynamic mechanism of city image communication in the new media era.

Cities face mutual competition, many national and local governments are under increasing pressure, and they actively respond by formulating various policies aimed at shaping city images, creating marketable brands, and enhancing competitiveness (Jiang & Shen, 2010; Shen, 2004, 2007). Even relatively small provincial cities have participated in this image-building competition, making city image shaping and communication an important topic in urban planning and development research. Research on city image communication is mainly based on city marketing. Lynch (1964) published “The Image of the City”, first proposing the academic concept of “city image” and emphasizing that the city image is obtained through comprehensive “perception”. In the 1960s, corporate image design theory began to be widely implemented in Western businesses, and some cities also began to design city images with corporate image identification systems, and related theoretical research gradually became popular, which laid a solid foundation for later introduction of marketing concepts into city image research. Ward (1998) pointed out in his book “Selling Places” that from early land marketing, resort marketing, suburban marketing, industrial city marketing, to post-modern city marketing, Western city image marketing is essentially an inevitable product of city operation and development to a certain stage. In “Marketing Places”, Kotler (2002) proposed the concept of “place marketing”. He suggested that in order to enhance urban competitiveness, cities should be viewed as “products” for “marketing”. All aspects of this “product” should be image-packaged and designed to construct its advantages and selling points, while providing related information to potential demanders of the “product” through various channels, so they can make choices beneficial to the city. Today, many cities are using media strategies to shape favorable images for their target audiences (Avraham, 2004; Smith, 2005). Existing literature provides extensive models and theories for city image shaping (Cai, 2002; Hankinson, 2004; Hanna & Rowley, 2011; Kavaratzis, 2004; Rainisto & Kotler, 2007), and investigates how audiences perceive city images (Braun et al., 2014; Ganji et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2015; Tsai, 2015). Through literature review, it is found that previous research on the issue of city image shaping and communication involving multiple parties such as government, media, businesses, and consumers under the backdrop of new media is relatively scarce.

This paper seeks to explore how various stakeholders can collaboratively par-

ticipate and synergistically propagate the city's image within the context of new media. To accomplish this goal, we apply the lens of value co-creation, basing our analysis on the "Zibo Barbecue" case study to probe into the paths and strategies for co-creating the value of City Image Communication in the era of new media. This study broadens the perspective on City Image Communication research, enriches related scholarly outputs, and offers reference for the communication strategies of other city images in a new media context, thereby bearing significant theoretical and practical implications.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Part 2 encompasses our research design, which includes theoretical foundations, methods and data, case introduction, and case analysis. Part 3 details the specific case analysis process, primarily delving into three aspects of the case: the agents of value co-creation, the process of value co-creation, and the benefits of value co-creation. Part 4, based on the case summaries, puts forth insights from our research and suggests specific strategies for co-creating the value of City Image Communication. Part 5 concludes the study, discussing its findings and limitations.

## 2. Research Design

### 2.1. Theoretical Foundation

This paper employs the theory of value co-creation to analyze the "Zibo Barbecue" case. The concept of Value Co-Creation, initially proposed by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), refers to the shared creation of value in products and services by both producers and consumers. Currently, scholars primarily divide value co-creation into two research perspectives: customer-dominant logic and service-dominant logic. In the context of new media, the communication of city images has evolved beyond the era of one-way transmission by traditional media. Government departments, the public, businesses, and other social organizations all contribute to the production and shaping of the city's image content. In comparison to the separate production and dissemination stages of past media reports and city promotional videos, in the context of new media, the divide between city image "production" and "communication" is disrupted, and the boundary between communicators and audiences becomes blurred. The trend is towards the mutual creation of value in City Image Communication by diverse subjects.

### 2.2. Method and Data

Case studies have become increasingly popular in theoretical construction, forming the basis of a substantial amount of research (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Case studies are often considered useful tools for exploratory research projects, as they can describe the essence of phenomena and explore their overall evolution. They are suitable for new or relatively weak research areas or for in-depth investigations of specific complex cases in the real world (Rowley, 2002; Yin, 2013). In this paper, we examine the issue of value co-creation in City Im-

age Communication in the context of new media. Given the complexity of relationships among participating entities in City Image Communication, the case study method is an appropriate choice. In the specific research process, we utilize a descriptive single-case study approach, detailing the practice of value co-creation in City Image Communication during the viral “Zibo Barbecue” phenomenon, distilling inductive theoretical regularities, and suggesting strategies for other cities’ image communication.

The materials used to build our case study mainly include on-site interviews and research, academic papers, media reports, and information posted on the city government’s official website. Following the “triangulation” model, we compare information from different sources to verify the logic between data and information, thereby maximizing the credibility of our research.

### 2.3. Case Introduction

Zibo is located in Shandong Province, China. It is one of the core cities in the Shandong Peninsula urban agglomeration, boasting a long history and developed economy. Before the popularity of the “Zibo Barbecue”, Zibo was mainly known as a national old industrial base, but it had relatively low domestic recognition. The “Zibo Barbecue” topic began fermenting in the media in March 2023 and once topped the hot lists of media platforms such as Weibo and TikTok. The significant promotional effect of the “Zibo Barbecue” on City Image Communication is evident. According to data from Ctrip, a Chinese online travel website, driven by the phenomenal traffic of “Zibo Barbecue”, Zibo set new records in passenger traffic during the May Day holiday period in 2023. A total of 240,252 passengers were sent, an increase of 85,000 or 55% compared to the same period in 2019. The number of hotel bookings in Zibo increased more than tenfold compared to the same period in 2019, entering the top five popular cities for hotel bookings in Shandong Province. With the help of the “Zibo Barbecue”, Zibo swiftly transitioned from an unknown city to one widely recognized by the public, effectively communicating its city image.

### 3. Case Analysis: Value Co-Creation in Zibo City Image Communication

Based on the theory of value co-creation, this article analyzes the subjects involved in value co-creation, the process of value co-creation, and the benefits of value co-creation in the “Zibo Barbecue” case, with the aim of deeply analyzing the process of value co-creation in city image communication through case study. In the “Zibo Barbecue” case, stakeholders such as the government, businesses, media, and consumers serve as the agents of value co-creation. They jointly participate in the value co-creation of City Image Communication, realizing the synergistic effect in co-creating the city image’s connotations, content, and dissemination. This promotes the propagation of the city’s image. The effective communication of the city’s image brings corresponding benefits to all

stakeholders. This, in turn, positively propels the value co-creation behaviors of these stakeholders, forming a positive feedback loop. The specific operational mechanism is as follows (Figure 1).

### 3.1. Value Co-Creation Subjects in City Image Communication

In the case of the Zibo Barbecue sensation, the main value co-creation subjects include government, media, businesses, and consumers. These subjects, also stakeholders in city image communication, participate and achieve value co-creation together, thereby promoting city image communication (Figure 2).

The government creates a favorable environment for city image communication by formulating policies, providing support, and promoting city brand strategies. Its support and promotion of the Zibo barbecue industry has led to the industry’s booming development and increased Zibo’s nationwide popularity. Furthermore, the government actively promotes exchanges and cooperation with other cities, as well as organizes various activities, further enhancing the influence of Zibo barbecue.

The media played a key role in the Zibo Barbecue case, promoting the appeal of Zibo barbecue to a broader audience through articles, videos, and other content. The dissemination of these media contents enabled more people to learn about Zibo barbecue, thereby significantly enhancing Zibo’s national reputation and image.

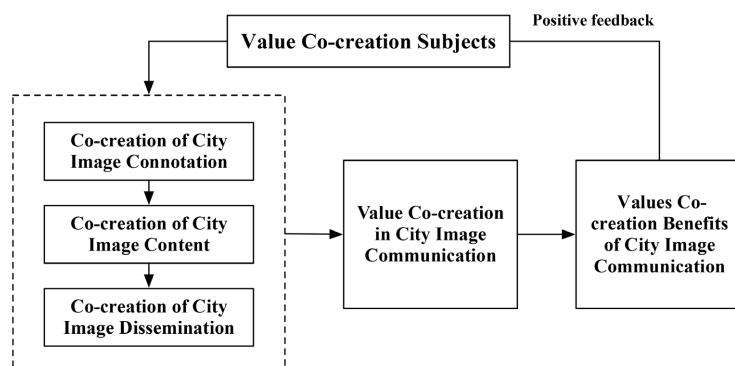


Figure 1. Framework for value co-creation in city image communication.

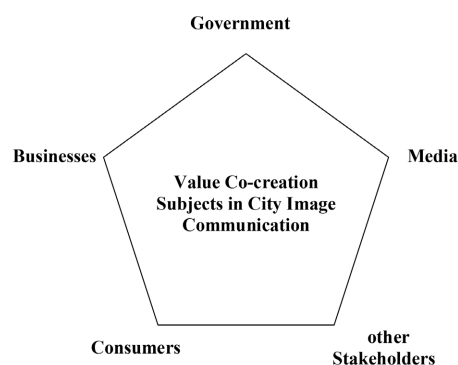


Figure 2. Value co-creation subjects in city image communication.

As the main implementers of city image communication, businesses played a vital role in the Zibo Barbecue case. By innovating barbecue products, improving service quality, and carrying out marketing activities, they enhanced Zibo barbecue's nationwide reputation and image. In addition, businesses cooperated with the government, media, and other stakeholders to jointly promote the development of city image communication.

Consumers are the end recipients of the value co-creation in city image communication. Their word-of-mouth and evaluations are crucial to city image communication. By trying Zibo barbecue and sharing their reviews on its deliciousness and uniqueness, they attract more consumer attention. Consumers' positive feedback provides continuous momentum for the popularity of Zibo barbecue.

In the "Zibo Barbecue" case, other stakeholders include other city government departments and industry organizations. For example, relevant departments from other cities in Shandong Province also participated in the "Zibo Barbecue" sensation.

### **3.2. Co-Creation Stages in City Image Communication**

In the Zibo Barbecue case, all stakeholders achieved value co-creation at different stages of city image communication, effectively promoting city image communication.

#### **3.2.1. Co-Creation of City Image Connotation**

Co-creation of the city image connotation refers to the process where all stakeholders participate in shaping the connotations of the city image together. In the Zibo Barbecue case, various stakeholders such as the government, enterprises, media, and consumers collectively contributed to the formation of a unique connotation of the city image. The government, by formulating policies and promoting city brand strategies, provided strong support for shaping the connotations of the city image. For instance, the establishment of a dedicated high-speed railway line for barbecue, meeting tourists' needs by setting up a barbecue city near the railway station, the publication of barbecue maps, and the introduction of 21 "Zibo Barbecue Bus Lines" all contributed to making the barbecue industry a significant feature and symbol of Zibo city. Additionally, the government organized various activities like barbecue festivals to further reinforce the position of Zibo barbecue in the city's image. Enterprises, as implementers of the city image's connotations, contributed to shaping the connotations of the city image by innovating barbecue products and enhancing service levels. For example, Zibo barbecue enterprises, based on traditional barbecue, continuously innovated products, forming a variety of barbecue types characteristic of Zibo. Media and consumers, as producers and disseminators of information, participated in shaping the connotations of the city image through sharing and commenting. They showcased the charm of Zibo barbecue from different perspec-

tives, such as its unique production process, rich flavors, and traditional culture, enabling more people to learn about Zibo barbecue, thereby providing strong support for shaping the connotations of the city image.

### **3.2.2. Co-Creation of City Image Content**

Co-creation of city image content refers to the participation of all stakeholders in creating and disseminating content related to the city's image. In the Zibo barbecue case, the government, businesses, media, and consumers all participated in the creation and dissemination of the city's image content, forming a diverse content ecosystem. The government, as the director of the city image content, provides a foundation for the creation of city image content by organizing various activities and releasing official information. For example, by organizing barbecue festivals and other activities, the government provides the media with rich material, stimulating the creation of content about Zibo barbecue. Businesses, as implementers of city image content, support the creation of city image content by conducting marketing activities and offering unique barbecue products. For instance, Zibo barbecue businesses, in collaboration with the media, carry out both online and offline marketing activities to promote Zibo barbecue culture, providing rich material for the creation of city image content. The media, as producers of information, contribute to the creation of city image content by producing and publishing articles and videos about Zibo barbecue. They showcase the appeal of Zibo barbecue in unique ways, such as creating videos of the barbecue preparation process and writing articles about the history of Zibo barbecue. Consumers, as direct participants, enrich the city image content by creating their own "Zibo barbecue gestures" and various creative check-ins.

### **3.2.3. Co-Creation of City Image Dissemination**

Co-creation of city image dissemination refers to the joint participation of all stakeholders in promoting the dissemination of the city's image. In the Zibo barbecue case, the government, businesses, media, and consumers jointly promoted the dissemination of the city's image. For example, the government disseminates information through official announcements and letters to tourists; Zibo barbecue businesses collaborate with the media for marketing and dissemination; media, as producers and disseminators of information, greatly promote city image dissemination by producing and publishing content about Zibo barbecue. Their articles, videos, and other content are rapidly disseminated on social media platforms, triggering widespread attention and discussion among netizens. This has turned Zibo barbecue into a nationwide phenomenon, further enhancing the city's reputation. Consumers, as disseminators of information, participate in the dissemination of the city's image by sharing and commenting. They post food pictures and comments on social media platforms, sharing their unique insights and experiences of Zibo barbecue with more people, thereby promoting the dissemination of the city's image.

### 3.3. Value Co-Creation Benefits of City Image Communication

In the Zibo barbecue case, all stakeholders have benefited to varying degrees from the co-creation process.

The government has reaped significant benefits in the value co-creation of city image communication value. Firstly, by supporting and promoting Zibo barbecue culture, it has elevated the city's image and fame, thereby enhancing the city brand value. Secondly, the government, through collaboration with the media, businesses, and other parties, has created a thriving ecosystem for city image communication, enhancing the city's cultural soft power. Lastly, the popularity of Zibo barbecue has sparked a certain degree of economic development, increasing local tourism appeal and boosting fiscal revenue.

Businesses have also achieved significant benefits in the value co-creation of city image communication. Zibo barbecue businesses have garnered widespread recognition nationwide, thus enhancing regional brand value, which benefits all the businesses involved in Zibo barbecue. Furthermore, the surge in popularity of the barbecue has brought a substantial influx of orders, boosting business revenues. Simultaneously, businesses, by participating in the value co-creation of city image communication, have heightened their sense of social responsibility and brand image.

The media have also gained substantial benefits from the value co-creation of city image communication. Firstly, by producing and disseminating content about Zibo barbecue, they have attracted a significant amount of attention and traffic, boosting their own reputation and influence. Secondly, some media have reached cooperative agreements with barbecue businesses, thereby gaining certain commercial benefits.

Consumers have also benefited from the value co-creation of city image communication. Firstly, by participating in city image communication, consumers have come to understand the unique features and appeal of Zibo barbecue, thus enriching their own life experiences. Secondly, consumers, in the process of participating in city image communication, have had the opportunity to interact with businesses, media, and other parties, improving their social skills and relationships. Lastly, consumers, by participating in the value co-creation of city image communication, have contributed to the enhancement and cultural preservation of the city's image, thereby increasing their own social value.

## 4. Co-Creation Strategies for City Image Communication Value

Based on the analysis of the Zibo barbecue case, this paper proposes the following strategic suggestions for the value co-creation of city image communication.

### 4.1. Establishing a Comprehensive City Image Communication Synergy Mechanism

To achieve value co-creation in city image communication, it is first necessary to



establish a comprehensive synergy mechanism to ensure all stakeholders can effectively participate and collaborate. The government should play a leading and guiding role, formulating reasonable policies and regulations to provide strong support for city image communication. At the same time, the government should actively communicate with businesses, media, consumers, and other parties to establish a healthy communication ecosystem. On this basis, all parties can jointly discuss and formulate strategic objectives and action plans for city image communication, forming a strategic alliance for collaborative dissemination.

#### **4.2. Leveraging the Unique Advantages of City Stakeholders**

In the co-creation process of city image communication value, each stakeholder has its unique advantages. The government possesses authority and credibility, providing macro guidance and policy support for city image communication. Businesses have industrial foundations and market resources, providing practical support and financial input for city image communication. Media possess communication channels and creative capabilities, providing rich content and widespread dissemination for city image communication. Consumers have actual needs and purchasing power, providing real feedback and market verification for city image communication. Therefore, all parties should fully leverage their advantages to jointly promote the co-creation of city image communication value.

#### **4.3. Innovating City Image Communication Content and Forms**

In the new media environment, city image communication faces severe challenges and competition. To attract more attention and dissemination, city image communication needs to constantly innovate its content and forms. On the one hand, government, businesses, and media creators should deeply explore the unique cultural, historical, and humanistic elements of the city to create content that has local characteristics and appeal. On the other hand, all parties should pay attention to the development trends and audience needs of new media, and use multimedia, interactive, and immersive forms to provide audiences with a rich audio-visual experience and a sense of participation.

#### **4.4. Using New Media Technologies to Promote City Image Communication**

The development of new media technologies provides new opportunities for city image communication. The government, businesses, and media should actively use new media technologies to expand the channels and means of city image communication. For example, use social media, short videos, live streaming, and other platforms for content dissemination to improve dissemination effects; apply big data and artificial intelligence technologies for deep mining and precise

delivery of city image communication to enhance dissemination efficiency. At the same time, all parties should pay attention to the development trends and impacts of new media technologies and continuously optimize and improve city image communication strategies.

#### **4.5. Paying Attention to Consumer Participation and Feedback**

Consumers play a crucial role in the co-creation of city image communication value. Therefore, the government, businesses, and media should pay attention to consumer participation and feedback, actively stimulate consumers' enthusiasm and creativity. Specific measures include: encouraging consumers to share their city stories and experiences, providing real materials for city image communication; organizing both online and offline interactive activities to increase consumer participation and satisfaction; collecting consumer opinions and suggestions in a timely manner to continuously improve and optimize city image communication.

#### **4.6. Creating a Positive Atmosphere for City Image Communication**

The co-creation of value in city image communication requires a favorable social atmosphere and cultural environment. Governments, enterprises, and media should work together to create a positive, inclusive, and supportive atmosphere for city image communication. Specific measures include: promoting positive energy and disseminating a positive city image; strengthening cultural confidence and disseminating city images with local characteristics and cultural heritage; encouraging diversified dissemination, fully respecting and including different groups and opinions, and collectively shaping a diverse and harmonious city image. In addition, we should strengthen the moral and legal construction of city image communication, standardize dissemination behaviors, and create a well-ordered and healthy dissemination environment.

#### **4.7. Enhancing the Monitoring and Evaluation of City Image Communication**

To ensure the effectiveness of value co-creation in city image communication, it is necessary to strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of the dissemination process and results. Governments, enterprises, and media should establish a scientific and effective city image communication evaluation system, monitor the process and effects of dissemination in real time, and provide a basis for adjusting and optimizing dissemination strategies. Specific methods include: using big data technology to monitor indicators such as the attention, range, and speed of city image communication in real time; comparing and analyzing the effects of different dissemination strategies to find the best dissemination paths and means; collecting feedback and suggestions from all parties in a timely manner to continuously improve and perfect city image communication strategies.

#### 4.8. Establishing a Long-Term Mechanism for City Image Communication

The co-creation of value in city image communication requires a long-term and continuous process. Therefore, all stakeholders should work together to establish a long-term mechanism for city image communication. Specific measures include: formulating long-term city image communication planning and objectives to ensure the continuity and stability of dissemination; strengthening the organization and coordination of city image communication to form an effective cooperation network; continuously investing resources and efforts to provide continuous support and guarantees for city image communication; paying attention to changes in the dissemination environment and technology, timely adjusting and optimizing dissemination strategies to ensure the timeliness and effectiveness of city image communication.

In conclusion, through the analysis of the Zibo Barbecue case, this paper proposes a series of strategic suggestions on the co-creation of value in city image communication, aiming to provide references for governments, enterprises, media, and other stakeholders to achieve a win-win goal in the process of city image communication. Practice has proven that only by joint efforts can we maximize the effect of value co-creation in city image communication and promote the enhancement and development of city brand value.

#### 5. Conclusions and Limitations

This paper takes the value co-creation as the theoretical perspective, and through the Zibo Barbecue case, discusses how to realize value co-creation in city image communication under the background of new media. In the highly developed modern society, traditional city image communication research no longer meets the needs of reality. Therefore, through the analysis of the Zibo Barbecue case, this paper reveals the importance of stakeholders (government, enterprises, media, consumers, etc.) participating together and jointly disseminating in the process of city image communication, as well as the cooperative paths in different links of city image communication (city image connotation co-creation, content co-creation, dissemination co-creation, etc.).

This study finds that the value co-creation in city image communication mainly reflects in the following aspects: the stakeholders who participate together and jointly disseminate form a complementary, cooperative relationship, which helps to improve the effect of city image communication; the value co-creation in the process of city image communication helps stakeholders to maximize their benefits, further promoting the enhancement and development of city brand value; the process of value co-creation in city image communication is conducive to improving the city's popularity, reputation, and influence, providing strong support for urban development.

From the perspective of value co-creation, this paper proposes a series of strategic suggestions on city image communication, including clarifying the objec-

tives of city image communication, strengthening the organization and coordination of city image communication, exerting the initiative of stakeholders, promoting innovation and development in city image communication, enhancing the monitoring and evaluation of city image communication, and establishing a long-term mechanism for city image communication, providing references for governments, enterprises, media, and other stakeholders to achieve a win-win goal in the process of city image communication.

It should be pointed out that this study is limited to the Zibo Barbecue case, and in the future, more city image communication cases need to be deeply studied to verify and enrich the theories and strategies proposed in this paper. It is hoped that this research can provide useful insights for the study and practice of city image communication and contribute to the enhancement and development of city brand value.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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