

# ***Creating a New City Brand Through Social Media Platforms? The Case of Zibo***

**Jikai Yang<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*College of Landscape Architecture, Beijing Forestry University, Haidian District, Beijing, China*  
*a. Yjk041026@qq.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** This paper examines city branding through the lens of new media, focusing on Zibo as a case study. It highlights how the rise of social media and the wanghong economy have reshaped city branding models. The discussion emphasizes the critical role social media plays in this process, illustrated through six components: value perception, value recognition, value description, value communication, value co-creation, and value addition. A conceptual framework is developed to elucidate the interconnections between social media, city branding, and value co-creation, while also contrasting traditional and contemporary branding approaches. The branding process is delineated in four stages: crafting value narratives centered on Zibo's barbecue, enhancing value through city branding effects, fostering value co-creation for a new city brand, and establishing a tourism brand centered on barbecue. Additionally, the passage addresses the challenges faced by aging industrial cities, including imbalanced industrial structures and insufficient institutional policies. It proposes that these cities can capitalize on current trends by harnessing social media to construct their city brands, thereby enabling successful transformation and revitalization.

**Keywords:** digital platform, social media, wanghong economy, city branding, Zibo

## **1. Introduction**

The evolution of the Internet from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, facilitated by decentralization, has significantly increased public access to information, including insights into city branding. This enhanced accessibility has driven notable online traffic, attracting more visitors and intensifying competition among cities. In this competitive context, city branding has emerged as a crucial governance ability, reflecting a city's comprehensive strength and public perception.[1]. Historical and cultural elements enrich a city's narrative and identity, playing vital roles in affecting city branding.[2]. This has been evident as increasingly essential for urban economic development in recent years.

The literature on city branding often highlights traditional models that are predominantly top-down, led by government, and frequently involve corporate participation. These models, exemplified by many Chinese cities like Dalian and Hangzhou in the 1990s, depend heavily on official promotions without nurturing a distinct local culture. This approach is often unsustainable as it lacks the authentic local engagement and cultural participation necessary for enduring popularity and economic impact. Without a solid cultural foundation and active local involvement, such strategies tend to yield only temporary interest.

In contrast, a new, spontaneous model of city branding is emerging, grounded in local culture and everyday practices.[3]. This method leverages local traditions, allowing visitors to experience the culture and customs through local participation. Government efforts to support this organic growth with policies that protect tourists help reinforce the brand's authenticity. Positive experiences shared online by visitors create a self-reinforcing cycle of promotion without the need for significant external investment.

The growing “wanghong” (internet celebrity) economy in China underscores the potential of small-scale local events to catalyze new city brands.[4] Zibo, always known as a heavy industry city in Shandong, has continued to be a hot location on major social platforms in China since March 2023. During the pandemic period, Zibo government took very good care of Shandong University’s students in quarantine and especially shown great hospitality to them with Zibo traditional barbecue. This thing soon was publicized on the internet and harvested a lot of web traffic after the quarantine. Zibo subsequently was famous for its traditional barbecue and people’s kindness, guileless and hospitality, creating a new city brand. This exposure, driven by the joint efforts of various stakeholders, transformed social media traffic into increased on-site visits in real places. The participatory nature of this approach allows travelers to engage deeply with the local culture, enhancing the city's brand.

How and why has Zibo managed to establish a new city brand on the Internet? What mechanisms underlie this process? To delve deeper into this issue, it is essential to understand the roles played by various stakeholders, including university students, internet celebrities, netizens, residents, government entities, and social organizations. This paper aims to construct a framework to elucidate the processes and factors contributing to Zibo's rapid brand development, from the perspective of value co-creation. This perspective highlights how local assets swiftly gain visibility on the Internet, initiating a dynamic process where diverse resources, elements, and actors converge to facilitate experiential value creation and maintenance.[5] This collaborative process ultimately supports the establishment of a new city brand.

The structure of this paper includes five sections: Section 2 develops a conceptual framework from the perspective of value co-creation and city branding, within an increase of the wanghong economy and platform economies. Section 3 introduces the methodology, data, and case description. In Section 4, an empirical analysis focusing on exploring our research questions. Section 5 concludes and discusses with broader implications.

## **2. Towards a conceptual framework**

### **2.1. City branding in platform economy**

City branding primarily employs market-led, place-based, and bottom-up methods. A notable example is the promotion of Shaoxing yellow wine, driven by local communities. The high quality of this wine helped cultivate a loyal consumer base, establishing a stable marketing model. However, its limited communication and advocacy reach meant that knowledge of the wine remained largely confined to residents, highlighting significant constraints related to time and space.

In contrast, from the 1980s to the 1990s, city branding strategies shifted towards decentralized, top-down approaches characterized by inter-city competition, largely due to neoliberal policies. This model often places the government at the forefront, minimizing public participation in the branding process, which is largely dominated by official initiatives. While this government-led approach can efficiently integrate tourism resources, as seen in Dalian’s development, it suffers from a lack of community involvement. Consequently, when tourists arrive, they may not fully experience the authentic culture of the city, leading to a disconnect between their expectations and the government's promoted image. This discrepancy can diminish the overall travel experience and hinder the ongoing

development of the city brand, reflecting a vitality deficit often stemming from insufficient public engagement.

The emergence of social media and the platform economy has fundamentally transformed city branding in terms of subject, process, method, and impact. Today, a diverse array of stakeholders is involved in city branding. Residents actively engage in fostering unique cultural identities, while governments focus on regulating market dynamics, creating favorable environments, and enhancing the city's image. Tourists experience local culture, derive satisfaction, and share their impressions online, which broadens awareness of the city's brand.

This participatory model allows even small local stories to gain visibility, as exemplified by the Guizhou Village Basketball Association. Here, community involvement combined with government support in organizing competitions has cultivated a distinctive basketball culture, attracting visitors eager to connect with local life. Social media amplifies these narratives, making the city brand accessible and well-known .[6]

Comparing the three historical approaches reveals that both the first and third methods are bottom-up. However, a notable distinction exists: the first method is primarily place-based and has limited influence confined by time and space, whereas the third method overcomes these constraints. In contrast, the second method is characterized by strong governmental control and a lack of broad stakeholder engagement, highlighting the increased participation of various agents in the branding process under the third approach.

Table 1: The Comparison of Different Period of City Branding

period perspective	subject	process	method	impact
the first period (at first)	enterprise, local people	consumed and promoted by the local people	place-based market-led bottom-up	only known by local people and few of the public less efficient
the second period (at about 80s,80s)	government	well-built and well-packaged by the government	decentralization top-down inter-city competition	lack of mass and business participation lack of vitality
now	multi-agent	make the joint effort to build and advertise city branding	bottom-up tremendous amount crossing over space	using small story to promote the urban explosion

(Source: author's own)

## 2.2. Social media and value co-creation in cities

This section investigates city branding through the lens of value co-creation, emphasizing the role of social media in facilitating community engagement and enriching brand dissemination. Value co-creation posits that future competitive dynamics will depend on collaborative value generation among consumers and enterprises, moving away from the traditional view where value is exclusively produced by businesses. Social media plays a crucial role in this process through six key components:

1) Value Perception: Individuals become informed about a city's culture and brand, fostering curiosity and a desire to visit. For example, Zibo barbecue attracts visitors not only for its culinary

appeal but also for the warmth and simplicity of the local community; 2) Value Recognition: Visitors engage meaningfully with local culture, developing personal connections to the city. For instance, attending the Village Basketball Association in Guizhou allows visitors to immerse themselves in the passion and harmony of the local community; 3) Value Description: Travelers share their authentic experiences online, offering personal insights and recommendations, which can significantly influence others' perceptions of the city, regardless of its reputation; 4) Value Communication: As people share their impressions, they stimulate conversations about the city, using social media platforms to spread information and enhance visibility; 5) Value Co-Creation: Various stakeholders collaborate to bolster the city brand. Governments regulate markets and protect community interests, while individuals promote the city; social media facilitates the exchange of information, creating a collaborative effort to enhance the brand and 6) Value-Added: As the city brand evolves, stakeholders contribute new meanings and dynamic attributes, encouraging further exploration and engagement from potential visitors.

In short social media is instrumental in transforming city branding into a collaborative process, enabling greater consumer participation and richer value creation. Through active engagement, consumers influence branding efforts, making the city brand more vibrant and accessible.

### 2.3. Conceptual framework

In this section, we analyze the intricate relationship and logical causality among social media, value co-creation, and city branding, illustrated through the following conceptual framework.

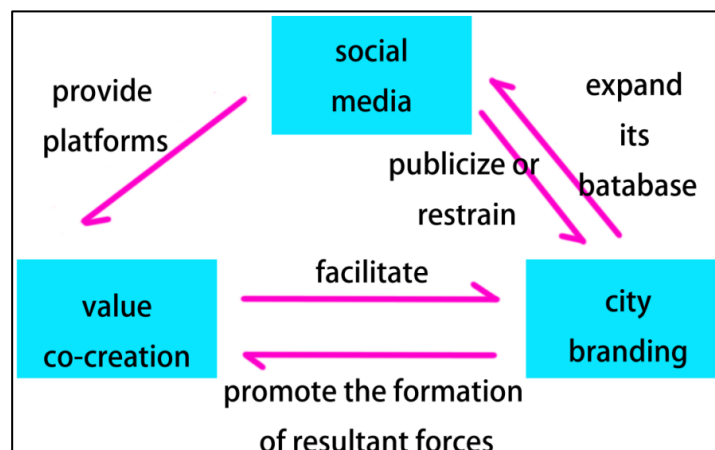


Figure 1: a conceptual framework between social media, value co-creation and city branding (Source: author's own)

The role of social media in value co-creation: the advent of social media has created a dynamic platform for value co-creation, enabling various stakeholders—including individuals, businesses, and organizations—to share information and collaborate. Social media facilitates interaction among these agents, allowing for the exchange of ideas, experiences, and feedback. This interactivity encourages greater participation in the branding process, enriching the shared narrative of the city. Social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook allow users to post experiences related to city attractions, events, and local culture. For instance, a local restaurant may share user-generated content showcasing patrons enjoying their meals, effectively engaging the community in the promotional process.

Value co-creation's contribution to city branding: Value co-creation enhances city branding by introducing new perspectives and innovations from diverse stakeholders. When citizens, businesses, and tourists contribute their insights and experiences, they add depth and authenticity to the city's

brand narrative. This collective effort fosters a sense of ownership and pride among participants, which can lead to more vigorous advocacy for the city. Community events that involve collaboration between local artists, businesses, and residents can generate buzz and interest. For example, a local festival featuring regional crafts and cuisines can attract visitors, showcasing the city's unique cultural offerings and enhancing its brand identity .[7]

The feedback loop between city branding and value co-creation: Successful city branding reinforces value co-creation by establishing a positive image that attracts participation. A well-regarded city brand acts as a "business card," promoting tourism and investment opportunities, which in turn encourages enhanced co-creation efforts. This reciprocal relationship creates a virtuous cycle, where each element strengthens the others. For instance, a city recognized for its vibrant arts scene may attract cultural festivals and events, leading to increased participation from artists and entrepreneurs. The ongoing success of these events further elevates the city's brand, making it a desirable location for future activities.

The impact of social media on city branding: Social media serves as a double-edged sword for city branding. On the one hand, it amplifies positive narratives and successful branding initiatives, while on the other, it can disseminate negative stories that undermine a city's reputation. The content that circulates on social media can significantly influence public perception and, consequently, the city brand. In terms of negative Impact, for instance, the Tangshan beating incident exemplifies how negative incidents can become defining markers for a city. When this event was widely publicized on social media, it tarnished Tangshan's image, overshadowing its positive attributes and affecting its overall branding. In contrast, the film "Hello, Li Huanying," provides the evidence of how social media generate positive impact on city branding. It highlights themes of familial love and community, brought significant attention to Xiangyang, enhancing its cultural branding overnight and underscoring the power of positive storytelling in shaping city identity.

To sum up, this conceptual framework shows the interplay among social media, value co-creation, and city branding is complex and multidirectional. Social media acts as a catalyst for value co-creation, enabling diverse participation that enriches city branding. Conversely, the strength of a city's brand can foster continued engagement and collaboration among stakeholders. However, the potential for both positive and negative narratives on social media makes the management of a city's brand increasingly critical in today's digital landscape. Through strategic engagement and storytelling, cities can harness these dynamics to build a resilient and appealing identity.

### **3. Zibo: becoming a wanghong tourism city with “barbecue”**

Based on our conceptual framework, we specifically analyze how Zibo with a long-standing industrial city image becomes a wanghong tourism city featured by its local food “barbecue”. This involves a four-stage process, in which multiple actors and shareholders jointly enable a series of value co-creation activities that shifts the city's branding towards a new wanghong tourism city. The process includes four stages of development, namely, the creation of value narratives on Zibo's barbecue, value creation with city branding effect, value co-creation for a new city brand and the establishment of the barbecue-featured tourism city brand.

#### **3.1. The creation of value narratives on Zibo's barbecue**

The initial phase of this phenomenon can be characterized as the emergence of value narratives. During the pandemic in 2022, 12,000 students from Shandong University were placed in quarantine in Zibo by the Shandong provincial government. While such arrangements were commonly accepted by cities across the country, Zibo demonstrated exceptional care and support with good conditions of housing, food, and entertainment for the quarantined students. The city government of Zibo provided



daily meals that varied significantly, and the abundance of fruits and local food specialties offered was more than the students could consume. Notably, upon their departure from Zibo, it treated these students to a generous “Zibo-style barbecue” feast, which profoundly impacted their experience, as barbecue not only stands for a local food with great taste, but only a sign, or an intermediary food for face-to-face and down-to-the-earth social interactions, gatherings and relaxing.

The students from Shandong University were deeply touched by the warm hospitality extended by the Zibo government. As a gesture of gratitude, they mutually agreed to return to Zibo to enjoy its barbecue once the pandemic ended. Beginning in 2023, many college students, accompanied by friends and family, returned to Zibo, expressing their appreciation and nostalgia. They shared their experiences through photographs and videos on social media platforms such as Douyin.[8]

Consequently, the topic of "college students group dining on barbecue in Zibo" gained significant traction, propelling Zibo barbecue into the spotlight on platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin. According to incomplete statistics, with "Zibo + barbecue" as the keyword, from March 1 to 28, 2023, more than 285,000 pieces of relevant information were monitored, with an average transmission speed of 10,179.07 pieces per day. Among them, there are more than 170,000 video messages, accounting for more than 60%, becoming the largest public opinion field. Words such as "enthusiasm", "humanistic care", "simple folk customs" and "gratitude" have also quickly become the key words of Zibo. In the post-epidemic era, netizens have been moved by keywords such as "enthusiasm", "tourists from all over the world are pro" and "sincere", which in turn aroused people's good feelings about Zibo. This series of events catalyzed the development of a grassroots barbecue brand in Zibo, primarily driven by spontaneous rather than top-down initiatives. The uplifting narrative surrounding the interactions between the Zibo government and Shandong University students significantly increased Zibo's visibility online. As a result, this traditional industrial city, primarily known for its chemical industry, experienced a transformation in public perception, becoming popular due to this pivotal moment.

### 3.2. Value creation with city branding effect

The second stage centers on the value creation associated with the city of Zibo. During this period, an increasing number of market participants contributed to the evolution of Zibo barbecue, with prominent video bloggers playing a pivotal role. On April 8, 2023, notable Douyin video creators visited ten barbecue stalls in Zibo and confirmed that all establishments maintained high-quality standards and sufficient supplies, showcasing the authenticity and commitment of the local community. This positive exposure significantly elevated the popularity of Zibo barbecue.[9]

A well-known anti-counterfeiting blogger, with millions of followers, visited Zibo and utilized an electronic scale to ensure transparency while purchasing from various local vendors, including fruit, pastry, delicatessen, and seafood shops in the area known as the Eight Bureaus. Among the 344,000 comments generated by the blogger's video, one particularly resonated with audiences, garnering 197,000 likes: "It's obviously a matter of course, but I'm so moved." Another comment received 258,000 likes, stating, "I declare that this wave of Shandong wins Mala."

Additionally, the famous short video blogger "是个泡泡 (is a bubble)" visited Zibo during the May Day holiday in 2023 to sample the authentic Zibo barbecue. He released a video highlighting the dish's deliciousness and affordability while capturing the enthusiasm of the local populace. These video bloggers utilized short videos to emphasize the appeal of Zibo barbecue, inspiring a growing number of ordinary consumers to explore this unique barbecue culture.

Throughout this stage, not only did local residents and university students participate in promoting Zibo barbecue, but video bloggers and social media also played crucial roles in this marketing effort. The engagement of social media provided an ideal platform for collaborative promotion. Notably, despite minimal participation from local government, the kindness, simplicity, and hospitality of

Zibo's residents ensured that barbecue prices remained stable, quality food was consistently available, and customers were not misled. Local service providers refrained from exploiting the situation for profit, maintaining their original pricing while striving to offer excellent service to tourists, thereby fostering positive consumer experiences.

As a result, Zibo's businesses received favorable reviews and built a strong reputation, contributing significantly to the city's urban image. This collaborative and community-oriented approach laid a foundation for the dynamic development of Zibo's city brand.

### **3.3. The primary phase of value co-creation and the establishment of a new city brand**

During this period, an increasing number of market entities emerged as part of the city's branding efforts. Local governments began to play a more intentional role, actively engaging the public in the process.

As the popularity of "Zibo barbecue" continued to rise, Zibo officials took steps to foster a favorable consumption environment. They issued reminders and regulations to operators, emphasizing the need for fair pricing practices. Barbecue vendors and other businesses were required to establish reasonable pricing standards in accordance with legal guidelines. This included clearly posting prices, fulfilling price commitments, refraining from arbitrary price increases, and prohibiting the imposition of unspecified fees aimed at defrauding consumers.

In support of local vendors, the Zibo government facilitated operations by providing free water and electricity and promptly penalizing unscrupulous sellers. To ensure a positive experience for tourists, the authorities deployed police cars to guide traffic, ensured that ticketing regulations were enforced judiciously, and communicated that various government offices were open to the public with free parking available. During the May Day holiday, local officials, including the secretary of the municipal party committee, actively participated in community service, even personally inspecting vendors while riding bicycles. The engagement of the community was instrumental in constructing the Zibo barbecue brand. In addition to the contributions of video bloggers, a growing number of ordinary consumers shared their experiences through extensive reviews on social media platforms. Many documented their barbecue tourism experiences through videos and check-ins, creating a rich repository of testimonials that showcased the hospitality, integrity, and simplicity of the Zibo people, alongside the dedication of the local government to serving its citizens.

Social media played a critical role in facilitating value co-creation in Zibo. Various merchants, supported by consumer advocacy, shared customers and resources, enhancing market visibility. The collaboration between the government, businesses, and security agencies streamlined communication, simplified operational processes, and improved overall efficiency. Together, these efforts contributed to enhancing the consumer experience and establishing Zibo barbecue as a hallmark of the city. This collaborative approach not only strengthened the Zibo barbecue brand but also reinforced the positive image of the city itself as a vibrant and welcoming destination.

### **3.4. The establishment of the barbecue-featured tourism city brand**

The fourth stage marks the establishment of a new city brand for Zibo. Building on previous efforts, Zibo effectively harnessed social media to achieve value co-creation, resulting in the emergence of "Zibo Barbecue" as a nationally recognized city brand. During this period of rapid social media growth, Zibo capitalized on the opportunity to garner attention and quickly gained popularity, making the entire country aware of this hospitable, sincere, and charming city in Shandong Province.[10]

This transformation signifies a significant shift for Zibo, which has evolved from a primarily industrial and chemical city to a vibrant tourist destination. Zibo has transformed from an old industrial city to a tourist city due to the business card of barbecue, the proportion of the tertiary

industry in the economic structure has gradually risen, and many cultural and tourism infrastructure has been established, such as the opening of tourist bus loops, and in the Internet celebrity barbecue restaurant, they have set up dynamic police forces to improve the efficiency and level of emergency handling. Upgrade the service mode of street police stations and the level of armed patrols of "standby in motion", and carry out persuasion and disposal as soon as hidden dangers are discovered. The traffic police department increased the police force to increase traffic relief efforts, and found that vehicles were parked indiscriminately, and first called to remind them not to post tickets, which effectively guaranteed the traffic order. The personnel of the urban fire brigade and brigade will implement fire safety inspections door to door, conduct fire prevention tips and training, and guide fire drills to ensure fire safety; Reduced the fire safety approval of newly opened food and beverage outlets from the usual 13 days to 2 days, improving service efficiency. The sustained popularity of Zibo and its barbecue culture is expected to encourage long-term visitation, allowing more people to experience the unique cultural offerings of the city. According to the "2023 Statistical Communiqué on the National Economic and Social Development of Zibo City" released by the Zibo Municipal Bureau of Statistics, according to the results of the unified accounting of the city's gross domestic product, the added value of the tertiary industry was 214.66 billion yuan at constant prices, an increase of 4.7%. This influx of visitors will, in turn, invigorate Zibo's economic development and provide a boost to local businesses, ensuring a dynamic future for the city.

#### 4. Conclusions

In contemporary society, the transformation of old industrial cities encounters numerous challenges. Many such cities face issues including an unbalanced industrial structure, a weak tertiary sector, and inadequate institutional policies. These problems reflect the entrenched urban identities and brands associated with "old industrial cities," ultimately leading to a lack of motivation and vitality in their development. The fixed imagery and branding of these cities constrain their potential for renewal.

In the current context of the internet and new media, the economy driven by internet celebrities and online traffic tends to favor "fresh, dynamic, appealing, and marketable" brands. Consequently, traditional and conservative elements often experience marginalization in new media, making it difficult for old industrial cities to gain exposure and leaving them in a disadvantaged position in the spatial economy.

However, under specific circumstances and targeted initiatives, there exists an opportunity for these cities to revamp their images and establish new city brands. This, in turn, could generate significant attention and enable these cities to occupy a prominent space in both online discourse and economic revitalization. The aim of this paper is to propose a strategic framework for the transformation and upgrading of old industrial cities through the lens of new media, with an emphasis on building a compelling brand image.

Using Zibo as a case study, this paper illustrates how old industrial cities can effectively utilize internet and new media platforms to develop their own city brands, attract substantial online traffic, and enhance their visibility despite the challenges of structural transformation. This analysis posits a framework that incorporates several critical elements, primarily focusing on the interconnections between social media, value co-creation, and city branding.

The findings indicate that social media serves as a platform that facilitates value co-creation, which in turn accelerates the process of city branding. Moreover, the act of branding generates synergy that further enhances value co-creation. Social media also plays a crucial role in disseminating information regarding city branding, thereby providing valuable data for subsequent social media initiatives.

The platform economy and the internet celebrity economy present novel opportunities and avenues for the transformation and upgrading of old industrial cities. By adeptly leveraging new media



platforms, these cities can potentially reshape the stereotypical perceptions associated with them and cultivate unique city brands. The overall process of city branding unfolds through four stages: narrative value creation, the establishment of city-related values, the actual branding process, and the finalization of the new city brand.

Future research should further explore why certain cities successfully capitalize on new media to facilitate their transformation and upgrading, while others struggle to renew their urban brands. It is also essential to consider whether successful experiences in branding can be replicated and to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of urban development strategies within the framework of the internet celebrity economy.

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