

Synergizing District Night Markets and Cultural Innovation: A Study on Shenyang's Internet-Famous City Branding Strategy

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Abstract. The innovative development of nighttime economies is becoming a key driver of urban cultural consumption. As a major industrial city in Northeast China, Shenyang faces challenges in its night market development, including indistinct cultural identity, homogeneous business formats, and superficial visitor experiences, which hinder its transition into a youth-oriented, digitally-savvy city brand. This study explores pathways to establish Shenyang as an internet-famous destination by integrating district-based night markets with cultural and creative initiatives. Through case analysis and consumer behavior research, it proposes the creation of an “Industrial Elf” IP system to enhance urban cultural memory through differentiated thematic designs. The study innovatively designs a cross district consumption linkage mechanism, combined with viral marketing strategies, to form a cohesive night market cluster model. Key findings include: (1) A dual phase implementation approach balancing short term pilot projects with long term cultural authenticity preservation; (2) Gamification techniques that effectively encourage inter district visitor flow and spontaneous consumption; and (3) Leveraging user generated content for cost efficient, high impact promotion. These outcomes provide actionable solutions for Shenyang’s cultural tourism challenges while offering valuable insights for similar industrial cities undergoing brand transformation.

Keywords: Cultural creative synergy, Internet-famous city, City branding, Shenyang

1. Introduction

China’s urban development has entered a new stage focused on quality improvement. As 2025 marks both the conclusion of the 14th Five-Year Plan and preparation for the 15th Five-Year Plan, favorable macro policies have ushered in a new cycle of tourism prosperity. According to the 2024 China Nighttime Economy Development Report from the China Tourism Academy, spending on nighttime tourism in China is expected to hit 1.91 trillion yuan this year. That would be a year-on-year increase of 21.7%, showing just how much the nighttime economy has become a key driver of urban growth [1]. This trend brings both opportunities and challenges for how cities build their image. In this context, cities that have successfully become internet-famous share some new traits. They usually bring together different kinds of symbols, such as hands-on experiences like local food

and night scenery, cultural learning through historical sites, and emotional links to arts and culture. By combining these elements, they create a well-rounded and recognizable tourism image [2]. This way of communicating through symbols offers useful lessons for traditional industrial cities that are looking to transform.

As a key city in Northeast China's revitalization strategy, Shenyang possesses abundant cultural heritage and industrial relics such as the Shenyang Imperial Palace and China Industrial Museum. However, field research reveals significant gaps in experience design compared to internet-famous cities like Chongqing and Changsha: industrial heritage resources have not yet been transformed into immersive experience projects that meet Generation Z's expectations [3]. Specifically, cultural symbols remain fragmented without forming effective symbolic synergy, while insufficient innovation in business formats leads to lack of differentiated experience designs [2].

To achieve successful transformation, Shenyang needs to establish a new symbolic communication system. Based on existing research, a three-tier development strategy is proposed: at the core level, focus on stabilizing cultural knowledge symbols like industrial museums; at the intermediate level, cultivate participatory experience symbols such as industrial cultural creative marketplaces; at the peripheral level, employ MR technology to create dynamic emotional symbols, for example using AR to recreate historical industrial scenes [3]. This structured development model maintains cultural authenticity while responding to Generation Z tourists' demand for immersive experiences. Research shows that when a city's symbolic system achieves positive "stable core-active periphery" interaction, it can significantly enhance destination appeal [2].

This paper will conduct qualitative research on Shenyang's cultural tourism development status and propose effective marketing strategies for city branding, aiming to establish Shenyang as a sustainable internet-famous city.

2. Current development status of Shenyang's cultural tourism

Shenyang's night market economy has developed a regionalized pattern, with distinctive markets like Shenhe District's Xie Ma Night Market and Tiexi District's Xing Shun Night Market demonstrating differentiated characteristics. These vibrant night markets not only reflect the city's commercial vitality but also serve as important carriers of Shenyang's unique cultural memory and emotional connections [4]. As key showcases of local urban culture, these markets vividly interpret the city's distinctive cultural atmosphere and historical legacy through their rooted cultural experiences, allowing visitors to deeply appreciate Shenyang's urban charm during consumption [4].

However, in order to realize the transformation from a functional consumption place to a cultural experience space, Shenyang is still facing a triple challenge: the lack of recognition of thematic IPs leads to the blurring of the characteristics of various districts, the homogenization of the industry leads to the lack of depth of the cultural experience, and the lack of systematic operation leads to the problem of fragmentation of the communication. These bottlenecks significantly constrain the evolution of Shenyang's night market economy into a recognizable urban cultural symbol.

Notably, Shenyang welcomed over 200 million tourists and generated 200 billion yuan in tourism revenue in 2024, providing substantial support for night market transformation [5]. The city's cultural tourism authorities are enhancing service quality through innovative models under the "Listening & Pampering" branding initiative. Functional upgrades to cultural tourism service stations, expanded free shuttle networks, and the implementation of "Four Courteous Services" (convenience services, smile services, flexible law enforcement.) at tourist sites have not only improved visitor experiences but also systematically supported the upgrade of nighttime

consumption scenarios. These service optimizations are gradually creating new consumption spaces that integrate cultural experiences with urban memory [5].

3. District based planning

Among Shenyang's ten municipal districts, six including Heping District and Shenhe District possess unique advantages for developing distinctive night market clusters. Beyond homogenized food stalls and light decorations, night market clusters need to systematically build a four dimensional system of "facilities-projects-image-activities" [6]. This approach helps achieve sustainable competitive advantages. At the same time, they should deeply excavate local elements to meet tourists' triple demand for cultural rootedness. Place attachment can be built through local spatial narratives, while social interactions strengthen emotional connections. Collective identity is evoked by historical memory [4].

The key to overcoming homogenization is creating distinctive images. To create a trendy cultural and creative night market, Heping District can rely on the Taiyuan Street commercial area and the Luxun Academy of Fine Arts. This unique blend of art and marketplace can effectively increase the destination's recognizability by transforming pioneering art symbols into participatory street exhibitions and combining art exhibitions and sales with flash mobs of trendy brands. According to research on destination marketing, a unique image distinction is necessary to encourage travelers to spread the news about a place [6].

Shenhe District can use Marshal Zhang's Mansion and the Shenyang Imperial Palace to create a Mukden Heritage Night Market, featuring Qing Dynasty-themed immersive experiences and light displays. Tiexi District can leverage its industrial heritage near the China Industrial Museum for a Factory Memory Night Market with VR recreations of industrial landmarks and machine-tool art installations. Huanggu District may incorporate Liaoning University's resources into a Scholarly Night Market, complete with late-night reading areas and interactive science education zones. Dadong District is ideal for an Ethnic Culture Night Market offering Korean and Hui minority foods and entertainment. Collaborating with tech companies like Siasun, Hunnan District's Tech-Future Night Market can showcase AI interactions and drone light displays.

While each district maintains unique characteristics, the crucial factor in establishing Shenyang as an internet-famous destination lies in creating inter-district consumption linkages, ensuring visitors naturally progress from one thematic experience to another. This forms a "cultural anchor-innovative periphery" concentric model [2]. Studies verify that simultaneous improvement in brand visibility and service quality attracts premium stakeholder networks, representing the pivotal transition from fragmented development to integrated tourism for Shenyang [6].

Rooted in experiential rootedness theory, tourists develop meaningful cultural connections through three interrelated dimensions. When visitors engage with physical elements of urban spaces, whether distinctive architecture or local products, they begin forming place attachments through this place dimension. Meanwhile, authentic interactions with residents foster a sense of community identity, addressing the people dimension while countering modern life's tendency toward alienation. The history dimension emerges as visitors connect with cultural traditions and collective memories, cultivating a deeper sense of belonging. Together, these dimensions create a comprehensive rootedness mechanism that offers valuable insight into grassroots cultural tourism experiences [7].

The theory particularly emphasizes that only when tourists establish organic connections with place, community, and history simultaneously can they attain genuine cultural identification and belonging a key metric for evaluating the quality of cultural tourism experiences [7].

4. Marketing framework

4.1. IP design

A critical challenge in Shenyang's current city branding lies in the absence of a nationally influential iconic IP. While district night markets have begun developing cultural distinctions, they lack effective visual integration through a unified symbolic system. Research indicates that urban IPs, as cultural creative assets in the digital era, hold significant potential for both social value and commercial development while building audience engagement [8].

To tackle this, Shenyang could creatively develop the "Industrial Elf" as its core IP. This IP takes the form of a mechanical lifeform inspired by classic industrial machinery. It can also be adapted with different thematic elements to reflect the unique culture of each district. This approach combines a unified model with local customization. It ensures the IP remains recognizable citywide while capturing the distinct identity of each area.

Studies confirm that effective urban IPs must function as cultural memory vessels, symbolically conveying a city's unique heritage [8]. Shenyang's industrial legacy and regional diversity particularly require this IP adaptability, maintaining cohesive branding while dynamically expressing local characteristics.

4.2. Consumption guidance system

To achieve effective coordination among Shenyang's district night markets, it is necessary to establish a comprehensive consumption guidance system that integrates spatial connectivity, experiential design, and digital empowerment to create a complete visit-experience-collect-share consumption cycle. Research has demonstrated that AR technology can significantly enhance visitor experiences by improving engagement and memory retention, thereby promoting sustainable development of destinations, which provides important references for the digital construction of Shenyang's night markets [9]. The specific implementation involves creating themed route guidance by designing physical "Shenyang Night Passport" booklets and mini-programs that feature three thematic routes: the Industrial Heritage Route (Tiexi-Dadong), the Cultural Journey Route (Shenhe-Huanggu), and the Trend Exploration Route (Heping-Hunnan). Each route includes four to six mandatory check in points where visitors can collect district specific stamps, and completing all check-ins on a route activates AR enhanced urban storylines. This AR integrated gamification design not only significantly increases inter-district visitor flow but also reduces reliance on physical guide facilities through virtual augmented reality technology.

Shenyang's six thematic night market zones could establish distinctive cultural creative stores, each offering exclusive merchandise alongside limited edition regional blind box badge collections. This design capitalizes on two fundamental aspects of blind box economics: firstly, the "controlled unpredictability" that stimulates consumers' sense of discovery and collecting enthusiasm; secondly, the cultural transmission capacity of physical blind boxes that transforms each district's unique characteristics into tangible collectible badges. The scarcity value and social currency attributes of these badges effectively promote cross-zone consumption linkages [10].

To enhance brand loyalty, these stores could implement a point's redemption system where accumulated purchase points can be exchanged for local snacks or cultural keepsakes. This integrated incentive structure addresses both external consumer preferences (product design and quality) and internal psychological drivers (the thrill of chance and need for belonging), thereby strengthening consumption retention. Crucially, the act of collecting and trading these physical blind

box items naturally fosters Shenyang-themed interest communities among consumers, with such peer interactions significantly amplifying the night market brand's visibility and appeal [10].

4.3. Communication channels

Creative tourism theory suggests that experiences generating unique memories and emotional resonance can create significant value for destinations [6]. Consequently, the key to developing an internet-famous city lies in whether the disseminated content can evoke profound empathy and interaction. In the digital economy era, the relevance between tourist destinations and their online image has become increasingly important [11]. Social media marketing significantly enhances brand loyalty through customized, interactive, and trending content [12].

Building on this, Shenyang could encourage tourists to create #ShenyangNightTour posts on social media, participating in challenges like #NightMarketStampRally or #LocalFoodExploration, with rewards based on engagement metrics. This approach avoids the commercial feel of celebrity endorsements while fostering authentic emotional connections through real experiences. It transforms the city's industrial identity into shareable internet subculture symbols, ultimately achieving cost effective, high conversion word of mouth promotion.

5. Limitations and future research directions

Research indicates that sustainable development of internet-famous cities' cultural tourism industries requires moving beyond reliance on short term popularity metrics, instead focusing on industrial chain upgrades and service innovation to transform cultural heritage into lasting emotional value and consumption experiences [13]. Continuous innovation and periodic updates to marketing mechanisms are therefore essential.

Simultaneously, cities also need to be careful not to focus too much on surface-level image building. When the emphasis is solely on external appearance at the cost of cultural depth and human-centered environments, a gap can form between the marketed image and the reality on the ground. This disconnect can ultimately harm a city's reputation and reduce its long-term appeal [13]. Authentic human connections and a tangible sense of historical nostalgia remain vital for making tourists feel culturally rooted. This makes it necessary to preserve and pass on a city's genuine local culture to ensure the sustainable development of cultural tourism [4].

Shenyang faces challenges with visitors spreading out to peripheral attractions and not returning often. To address this, it may help to offer combined tickets for main and nearby sites, making it easier for visitors to explore more. Organizing seasonal events in different areas can also attract people at different times and encourage them to come back. These approaches can set Shenyang apart from similar destinations and help build lasting interest through unique experiences.

6. Conclusion

This study suggests a staged implementation strategy based on the previously mentioned findings. Long-term strategies call for the establishment of mechanisms for preserving cultural authenticity, while short-term efforts should prioritize pilot zone validation to verify feasibility. To guarantee the sustainable growth of cities that are well-known online, these could include dynamic urban development monitoring and adding cultural authenticity measures into tourist review systems. Through unique IP development, regional coordination, and naturally occurring visitor generated

material, the study creatively offers an integrated Industrial Elf IP, District Linkage, and UGC Dissemination strategy, establishing a multifaceted promotion system.

Shenyang has demonstrated potential to become an internet-famous destination, yet must overcome challenges of homogeneity and superficial experiences. Specifically, it should focus on developing differentiated IPs and immersive projects while maintaining cultural authenticity during commercial development. Moving forward, Shenyang needs to build innovative experience models that both showcase its industrial heritage and meet contemporary consumption demands. This research provides actionable pathways for urban cultural tourism transformation, with particular emphasis on balancing cultural preservation with innovation.

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