

REVIEW ARTICLE

INTERACTIONS AND VALUE CO-CREATION IN A VIRTUAL BRAND COMMUNITY: A STUDY OF “ZIBO” ON TIKTOK IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

To help achieve sustainable development of tourism industry of emerging tourist cities, this study employs Netnography and content analysis methods, using Zibo as an example to investigate the mechanism model of value co-creation through user interaction behavior. The study reveals that interactions within the Zibo virtual brand community can be categorized into “customer-customer”, “customer-government”, and “customer-media” interactions. “Customer-customer” interactions are the most fundamental interaction and exist at various stages of brand community development. They primarily involve tourists “seeking help” and local residents “assisting others”, thus creating practical and hedonic value in interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, “customer-government” and “customer-media” interactions mainly create customer asset value through advocacy behaviors. As time progresses, the types of interactions among community subjects amounts, and the patterns become more complicated. With the entry of media into the virtual brand community, an interactive cycle is formed, where the three types of interactions occur simultaneously, leading to the co-creation of value from multiple perspectives.

KEYWORDS

Value co-creation, Virtual brand community, TikTok, Tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

A place’s virtual landscapes and geography have been represented on the internet since the early stage of information age (Florian Urban, 2002). With further informatization, our society is inevitably involved in the process of “mediatization” (Hepp, 2013). Nowadays “mediatization” has led to the emergence of what is known as “internet-famous cities.” Hankinson (2004:110) linked city to brand by focusing on cities as tourism destination and further proposing a perspective of understanding cities as brands. The popularity of an “internet-famous city” signifies the profound integration of city and brand, while also highlighting the significant role played by social media in shaping and promoting city brand (Wu and Zhou, 2019). Among all the social media, TikTok has become a significant platform for both tourists and city branding. According to CNNIC, the user base of short video platforms in China has accounted for 94.8% of the overall internet user population.

Zibo, a normal Chinese city shifting to “internet-famous city” at an exponential rate on the internet, serves as a typical case of city-branding relying on TikTok platform. Since its rising, the local government has proposed the “Cultural and Tourism Development Plan”, reflecting the

city’s proactive approach to tourism development in the digital era, considering social media as an effective tool for promotion and publicity while combining the cultural pattern and the tourism recourses. The formation of city brand is closely related to the participation of multiple subjects within society and the “media spectacle” resulting from deep mediatization (Yan, 2019). That means, the successful city branding of Zibo have partly benefited from the joint collaboration of national “apparatuses” such as local government and official media, and partly from social media that affords users to shift from passive customers to active creators through the co-creation of content (Rafaeli and LaRose, 1993). In this case, the structure of value creation has become increasingly intricate.

Traditionally, the prevailing perspective on value emphasized a clear distinction between enterprises and customers, wherein enterprises were the sole creators of value, while customers simply serving as recipients or users (Normann and Ramírez, 1993). However, as the business landscape evolved, many scholars reach an agreement that the value of user-produced content continues to increase (Yan, 2019; Howells, 2005). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2000) proposed a shift in the role of the customer, asserting that value creation is no longer one-sided

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but rather a collaborative process involving customers. Furthermore, the scope of value creation expanded to include a broader range of participants, encompassing suppliers and business partners (Pinho et al., 2014). This shift underscores the importance of acknowledging the various roles played by different subjects and the significance of their behaviors and interactions in contributing to the process of value creation. Therefore, it's essential to pay closer attention to diverse subjects' the interactions and activities. Meanwhile, in the context of the TikTok, users, both ordinary individuals and official representatives, congregated and engaged around the topic of "Zibo", ultimately giving rise to a relatively stable virtual brand community.

The city-branding of Zibo has involved multiple subjects, and the virtual brand community has become a platform realizing continuous social interaction. However, how different subjects co-create the value in the media convergence ecology needs to be further explored. In this context, this paper will further study the mechanism of multiple subjects, especially the users/ customers, participating in brand value co-creation in virtual brand community. Through in-depth analysis of the users' behaviors and interactions, we can better understand how the virtual brand community of "Zibo" on the TikTok platform realizes the co-creation and provides useful insights for future tourism branding and social media marketing.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Development and Challenge of the Tourism of Zibo

Zibo is a city with scarce tourism resources, but now is rapidly accumulating cultural capital under the auspices of social media and blossoming into one of the "internet-famous cities". Zibo's rising trajectory started from February 23, 2023, when a user named "Mr_mu" released the "A New Way to Eat Zibo Barbecue" video. The video received nearly 200,000 likes and "Zibo barbecue" got initial exposure on the internet. On March 4, the topic of "college students flooding to Zibo" became a trending subject on TikTok, igniting widespread online discussions of "Zibo barbecue". Subsequently, the first batch of internet celebrities and bloggers headed to Zibo, increasing the city's visibility and attracting more users who became intrigued by "Zibo" as a potential tourism destination. At the same time, the local government immediately took actions to the viral popularity by launching a "barbecue map" and "barbecue bus premier" for visitors, which harvested millions of positive responses on TikTok. During this period, Zibo was constantly being reported by the mainstream media, and the city image of Zibo featuring "sincerity and hospitality" was widely spread and the city brand is taking shape.

However, despite the surge in brand awareness, the tourism industry of Zibo is facing the challenge of sustainable development. Data shows that the search index for the keyword "Zibo barbecue" reached a peak of 11,057,900 on April 29th. But after the May Day holiday, the index is on a downward trend, which indicates Zibo still has a long way to go as a fast-rising "internet-famous city". A considerable part of Zibo's brand formation takes place on the TikTok, and value is multiplied mainly within the interaction among the local government, the enterprises, the residents, and the visitors. Therefore, it is necessary to further explore the dynamic mechanism of value creation so as to find practical ways to realize the long-term sustainable development of Zibo.

2.2 Virtual Brand Community

A virtual brand community represents a fusion of a virtual community and a brand community. Initially proposed by Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) a brand community is defined as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" established by brands to foster social interaction, facilitate user-generated content, and thus promote value co-creation. However, the openness and accessibility of digital media, enable dispersed users who share a common preference for a brand to transcend geographical boundaries and engage in interactions with each other (Bagozzi and Dholakia, 2002). In this context, a virtual brand community can be understood as a brand community that exists in a virtual (online) environment, where member interactions are predominantly mediated through digital means (Füller et al., 2007).

Alternatively, it can be seen as a specialized virtual community formed around a specific brand with a commercial nature (Albert et al., 2008).

Regarding the realm of tourism, the emergence of virtual communities has significantly influenced the decision-making process of tourists. Members engage and share their collective travel experiences on social media platforms, consequently impacting others' travel choices (Tavakoli and Wijesinghe, 2019). However, little attention has been devoted to exploring the precise aspects of media in Web 2.0. The use of digital tools to mediate relationships within a virtual community influences the ways members participate and interact. For instance, Adebajo and Michaelides (2010) argue that Web 2.0 has facilitated users' active involvement, resulting in a community that is characterized by a "participation-based" approach. Consequently, there have been numerous studies exploring customer engagement and participation (Baldus et al., 2014; Madupu and Cooley, 2010). However, it is important to note that these studies often focus on "mature brands" that have already been well-established primarily by the company. As a result, the "engagement and participation" highlighted in these research studies mainly pertain to the "post-brand" stage. This paper, however, will focus on analyzing the value creation of a city brand from its initial stages.

2.3 Value of Co-creation

Early researchers' interpretations of value co-creation focused on "value co-production". Scholars argued that co-production involved active customer participation during the production of services, granting consumers the ability to customize their consumption experiences (Bendapudi and Leone, 2003). However, these theories primarily concentrated on the pre-consumption stage and overlooked the subsequent consumption experience stage (Lusch and Vargo, 2008). With the advancement of growing influence of participatory culture, consumers are now empowered to participate throughout the entire value-creation chain, spanning from the production stage to the consumption stage, leaving more room for value co-creation.

Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) propose two implications of value co-creation: firstly, they emphasized experiential value, and secondly, the interaction between stakeholders within the network, including consumer-enterprise and consumer-consumer interactions, serves as the means of value creation. A virtual brand community is considered a medium through which stakeholders collaboratively co-create value (McAlexander, 2002). In this context, Heinoon (2010) introduced the concept of customer-dominant logic, wherein value creation arises from customers' everyday life practices. Customers combine their needs and resources with the products and services offered by enterprises to create value, often termed "the value of life" or "contextual value". Consequently, enterprise marketing shifts its focus towards understanding and addressing customers' consumption activities, practices, experiences, and settings, which are manifested through interactions among the involved parties. This customer-centric approach aligns with the core principles of a brand community, emphasizing a network of consumer-centered relationships (McAlexander, 2002). Accordingly, this study aims to focus on the interactions of customers/users.

To analyze these interactions, it is essential to first understand customers' behaviors within a virtual brand community. Jiang and Xv (2012) argued that customers' behaviors in a virtual brand community is mainly composed of five dimensions, namely, positive public praise, community participation, maintaining order, helping others, and feedback. Yi and Gong (2013) categorized behaviors into two strands, customer participation and customer citizenship. Building upon prior research, Bu (2016) further summarized five dimensions and measurement methods of customer interaction behaviors in virtual brand communities. In this paper, we adopt Bu's framework to classify customer behaviors into five categories: help-seeking, interpersonal interaction, feedback, advocacy, and helping others. Help-seeking refers to customers frequently seeking interactive assistance to fulfill their needs; interpersonal interaction pertains to communication and exchange of interpersonal relationships with other customers; feedback involves customers conveying suggestions or opinions about products or services to enterprises and other customers; advocacy entails customers actively publicizing and recommending the community, brand, or relevant information to others; and helping refers to customers engaging in interactive behaviors to

assist other users.

The co-creation of value in virtual communities can be constituted by practical value, hedonic value, and customer assets (Tu, 2013). Practical value refers to the pursuit of intentional outcomes, often associated with informational value; hedonic value pertains to the pleasure and spiritual enjoyment derived from immediate objectives (Babine et al., 1994); customer assets denote the ability of enterprises to obtain better word-of-mouth and broader publicity through customer advocacy. The former two represent the value created by customers for themselves while customer assets manifest as the value created by customers for the enterprise during this co-creation process. This paper analyzes the flow of value from the perspectives of practical value, hedonic value, and customer assets, based on this framework.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This paper utilized Netnography to examine user comments on TikTok related to Zibo. This analysis helped identify the major interactive subjects and patterns of interactions. Netnography is a qualitative approach to exploring online communities by an ethnographic view (Kozinets,1997). And Netnography was often used as a tool for business discipline to study consumer behavior (Bartle et al., 2016). Since the virtual brand community has a commercial nature and the interaction of virtual brand community users is in constantly dynamics (Le and Zhu, 2023), this paper adopts the method of Netnography.

The preliminary research reveals that the public opinion surrounding “Zibo” can be categorized into three distinct periods: The first period spans from January to February, during which interactions among regular users predominantly prevailed. The second period, from March to April, witnessed a surge in public opinion, as influencers (“bloggers”) flocked to engage with “Zibo”, leading to the active involvement of local government and relevant authorities in the virtual community to responde to users’ concerns. The third period, from mid-April to May, saw an increased presence of mainstream media in the virtual brand community of Zibo. Accordingly, the research in this study encompasses the time span from January 1, 2023, to June 1, 2023, with each of the three phases being examined separately.

3.1 Data Collection

The research subject is divided into users, media and government. Given that we-media users entered the Zibo virtual brand community at an early stage and their interaction with normal users is way flattening in a daily setting compared to that of the mainstream media, this paper defines we-media users as normal users. Also, the time of the above three subjects entering the community time does not follow a strict time order. It’s just that the degree of activity of different subjects interacting differ at each stage. To investigate these interactions, the

study specifically focuses on active users in the community, collecting textual data from the comments section. Certain accounts representing each category at various stages of community engagement were selected for analysis. To ensure data validity, only the top 100 comments with the highest number of likes for each video were considered as the research dataset, resulting in the collection of 700 comments, encompassing a total of 20,020 words. Details are shown as Table 1.

3.2 Data Analysis

Then, quantitative data from user comments were gathered and analyzed with the assistant of MaxQDA through a top-down deductive logic following the framework of 5 customer behaviors to explore the mechanism of value co-creation in the virtual brand community. After categorizing behaviors, this study went back to the three stages of Zibo brand community development and analyzes how these interactions contribute to co-creating brand value respectively. Additionally, to investigate whether interactions among similar subjects change across developmental stages, a comparative analysis of we-media users is conducted.

4. FINDINGS

This research outlines the trajectory of the rising of the Zibo tourism brand and finds out three kinds of interactions generated by the identified main subjects within the virtual brand community, thus in some way clarifying the value co-creation mechanism. The three interactions are customer-customer, customer-local government and customer-media. And the interaction become increasingly sophisticated with more subjects engaging in different interactions at the same time.

In the brand burgeoning stage, burgeoning tourism brand like Zibo attracted a group of primary “customers” on TikTok, whose cultural empowerment facilitates the initial accumulation of cultural capital. As the brand gains traction, these pioneering individuals evolve into an emotionally connected tribe around the brand, thus laying the groundwork for the emergence of a virtual brand community. During this stage, user interaction primarily involves seeking help, advocating for the brand, and assisting others within the community. Through such interactions, the collective emotions and identities of users become standardized and stabilized, gradually transforming into their productive engagement and purchasing power. As the brand continues to develop, an increasing number of users actively create value for the brand through ongoing interactions through help-seeking, interpersonal interaction, and helping others. Guided by a “customer-centric logic”, both the government and local tourism enterprises recognize the potential of tourist resources and proactively engage with users by offering authentic tourism experiences. This proactive engagement serves to strengthen the brand’s position and fosters a co-creative process of value generation. In the subsequent brand diffusing stage,

Table 1: The List of Selected Accounts

Subjects	Content	Accounts
Users	Non-professional media users such as tourists, local residents, and tourism practitioners	Mr_mu
		ZiBoZiWeiXiaoLu
	Internet-famous users	TeBieWuLaLa (19,163,000 followers)
		B'Tai (21,342,000 followers)
Media	Mainstream media with journalistic professionalism and authority	CCTV News
		Xinhua Agency
Local Government	Government of Zibo and relevant government departments	ZiBoWenLv



Figure 1: The Mechanism of Value Co-Creation

mainstream media plays an integral role, eventually becoming the third interactive actor. As the brand gains endorsement and recognition from official media sources, it attracts a larger user base, elevating its popularity and authority. Users, the local government, and the media form an interactive cycle, with users positioned at the center of this dynamic relationship. The specific mechanism is shown in Figure 1.

4.1 Customer-customer Interaction

Under the influence of early opinion leaders, a group of individuals who became interested in “Zibo” gathered on the TikTok platform, forming a sizable virtual community. During this stage, the primary actors engaged in communal interactions were normal users, who could be approximately categorized into two groups: out-of-town tourists and local residents. Meanwhile, the research findings indicate that users’ interactions vary across different opinion leaders. Two main types of opinion leaders emerged in the construction of subspace communities: “instantaneous opinion leaders”, who are ordinary users but become temporary opinion leaders by an occasional video on TikTok, such as “Mr_Mu”; and “internet celebrity opinion leaders”, who were originally ordinary users but gained fame and a large body of followers steadily, like “TeBieWuLaLa”. This study considers the aggregation of users and their interactions initiated by an opinion leader’s single TikTok short video as a “virtual brand community subspace”, where normal users’ interactive behaviors happened collectively.

In the virtual subspace established by instantaneous opinion leaders, there is relatively less direct interaction between users and bloggers, while users in the comment section actively engage with one another, manifesting a robust pattern of peer-to-peer interactions. These interactions encompass various forms such as seeking assistance, advocacy, and help others. For example, a user named “moon and sixpence” inquired, “I’m going to Zibo next week. Any recommendations for barbecue restaurants?” In parallel, local residents actively respond to inquiries from out-of-town tourists. Some fervently promoted Zibo’s image as a “warm and hospitable” city, exemplified by a comment from a user named “XiLiXiLi”, which emphasized, “Amidst the ancient imperial exams, come to Zibo and embrace the trendy barbecue. The birthplace of cuju in the Qi state welcomes you warmly.” Another contingent of local residents actively aided tourists by offering practical solutions and recommending noteworthy travel destinations. These acts of advocacy and helping others create practice value for the tourists and hedonic value for users. Moreover, such proactive engagement creates bolsters the branding effort, augmenting its popularity and capturing the attention of a wider audience of potential tourists. Consequently, these dynamics stimulate tourism motivation and facilitate the realization of tourism intentions into tangible behavioral actions.

In the virtual subspace created by “internet celebrity opinion leaders”, the users in the comments section predominantly engage in “conversations” with the blogger and provide evaluations of the short video content. On one hand, these evaluations pertain to the blogger’s travel experiences, such as remarks like “I heard you visited six shops before finally getting something to eat.” On the other hand, there are affirmations from locals, like “I must admit, people from Zibo are indeed like what the blogger described; they heat up the small pancakes on the stove and then wrap

them to eat.” The former type of comments represents the user behavior of interpersonal interaction, objectively strengthening the emotional connection between the blogger and their followers, thereby reflecting the enhancement of the influencer’s value to the brand. The latter type of comments is considered “endorsements”, as they indirectly reinforce the brand’s reputation through the approval of the video content, thereby reflecting the influencer’s value creation. This reflects the hedonic value and also along with practical value. Compared to instantaneous opinion leaders, internet influencers have a significant impact on expanding brand awareness and motivating tourists at the level of travel intentions.

4.2 Customer-Government Interaction

Some scholars have mentioned that promoting value co-creation is one of the primary tasks for enterprises by arguing that the main process of co-creating value lies in the diverse forms of interactions between customers and enterprises (Vargo et al., 2015). As city brands are predominantly constructed by the government, this study considers the Zibo government and relevant departments as the “enterprise”. Specifically, the interaction between the Zibo government and users strengthened community cohesion and increased customers’ willingness to contribute their knowledge resources, generating customer assets for Zibo. In turn, the local government provides a more standardized and harmonious subspace for tourists to interact with other members. Noticeably, the customer behavior involves more “feedback” from the tourists instead of only local residents, creating new practical value and hedonic value.

After Zibo became a new “Internet-famous city”, the Zibo government, through its official TikTok account, released “a letter addressed to a vast number of tourist friends”, mainly advocating interactive behaviors of virtual brand subspaces’ users. Once the brand community took shape, users spontaneously identified themselves as the brand’s “community citizens” as evident from comments such as “I would call it the coolest city of 2023” and “This copy is well-written, encompassing the cultural context, natural wonders, warmth, and literary flair.” During this process, the local government improved the quality of their relationships with users, thereby enhancing the governance of the community. Meanwhile, local tourism practitioners in Zibo also proactively engaged with users in the brand community, primarily through seeking help, assisting others, and providing feedback. In the comments section of “ZiBoZiWeiXiaoLu” (a local restaurant), the virtual brand subspaces resembled that of the “instantaneous opinion leaders”, where most user behaviors involved non-local tourists seeking help and local residents assisting them. However, as time progressed, there was a rise in users’ feedback behavior during this stage, further generating practical value.

Simultaneously, during this stage, the virtual subspaces ecosystem established by “internet celebrity opinion leaders” also undergoes a transformation. As public opinion reaches its peak, the ecosystem of virtual community subspaces of “internet celebrity opinion leaders” shifts towards instantaneous opinion leader-constructed subspaces, where interactions between users and bloggers decrease, while interactions between users substantially increase. During this shift, the proportion of seeking help and assisting behaviors decreases, and users demonstrate more feedback and advocacy. Meanwhile, the “Zibo” city brand evolves beyond the confines of merely being associated

with “barbecue” and begins to embody the essence of the city’s culture. For instance, in the evaluation video by blogger “B太”, which reviews the prices and authenticity of Zibo barbecue, user comments such as “Perhaps only Zibo has such fair measurements in the whole country”, providing users with practical and hedonic value. This further shape the authentic and sincere city image of Zibo, going beyond its association with barbecue, and accumulates customer assets, thereby enhancing the brand value.

4.3 Customer-Media Interaction

Hu (2004) has previously posited two major functions of modern media: ideological function and industrial function. The media, acting as one of the main subjects in value co-creation in the virtual brand community, also exhibits a dual attribute. Firstly, functioning as users, they leverage their ideological function through interactions with the Zibo government, thereby aiding Zibo in elevating the value of its brand assets. Under the endorsement of “CCTV News”, for instance, the video’s comments section witnessed comments such as “hoping that Zibo’s vibrant cultural atmosphere of collective benevolence can swiftly spread throughout the region of Shandong and even nationwide” and “a harmonious political environment, this is what the people truly need”, signifying the influence of CCTV News’ endorsement, which endowed the urban brand of Zibo with a more profound cultural connotation and consequently augmented customer asset value. Secondly, functioning as enterprises, they engage in interactions with users to provide utilitarian and hedonic value, thereby bolstering their own brand development. When “CCTV News” disseminated short videos related to Zibo, it not only offered practical value by furnishing information on Zibo’s tourism but also evoked comments like “it all revolves around being moved by a certain sentiment, one that emanates from the heart, spreading widely due to its humanistic care”, thereby providing emotional support to users. Simultaneously, during these interactions, the virtual brand community of Zibo coincided with that of CCTV, enabling CCTV to amass its own customer assets and achieve value co-creation.

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The formation of the Zibo virtual brand community can be divided into three stages: the brand burgeoning stage, the brand developing stage, and the brand diffusing stage. In different stages, interactions take place among different subjects, and the co-creation of value becomes increasingly complex over time.

In the brand burgeoning period, the primary interaction pattern is “customer-customer” interaction. Users’ interactive behaviors include seeking help, advocating, and assisting others. The co-created involves practical value such as tourism information sharing and hedonic value such the sense of gratification from helping others and community identity. In the brand developing period, the involvement of the government and local tourism enterprises complicate the interacting subjects. Besides “customer-customer” interaction, “customer-government” interaction is involved. Users demonstrate advocacy behaviors in their interactions with the government, further enhancing Zibo’s visibility. The government, in turn, exhibits assisting behaviors, creating practical value as well as accumulating customer assets. In the brand diffusing period, mainstream media enters the brand community, forming an interactive cycle centered around customers. Media engages with the government and users through advocacy and assisting behaviors. Finally, three types of interactions occur simultaneously in the community, collectively creating practical value, enjoyment value, and customer assets.

This study also has several limitations. Firstly, the sample size of the collected data is relatively small, as only one sample was selected from each category of subjects. This may lead to a lack of representativeness in the observed characteristics of the subjects. Secondly, the deductive approach used in the data analysis might result in overlooking new user behaviors during the categorization process. However, the impact of new media on the tourism industry is undeniably significant, and from the perspective of short video platform, how the interaction patterns and styles among subjects within virtual communities influence tourists, tourism practitioners, and destinations, and how they create new value, deserve further exploration.

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