IJASC 24-1-18

An Investigation of Brand Communication in Small and Medium-sized Cities in China Based on Grounded Theory

QunQing Zhang, XueHua Jin*

Lecturer, Advertisement Science, Shandong Technology and Business University, China;

Visiting Professor, Department of Global Business Administration, Gachon University, Korea*

150125256@qq.com, xuehuakim810@naver.com

Abstract

With the acceleration of China's urbanization process, the economic development and market potential of small and medium-sized cities have been constantly enhanced, with the urbanization competition having been caught in the vortex of homogenization. However, small and medium-sized cities are exposed to limited resources and funds, and therefore need to be more flexible and innovative in the strategy implementation, while urban brand communication is one of the key factors to promote the competitiveness of cities. Taking the small and medium-sized cities in China as the research objects, this study, based on the domestic and foreign theories about the brand communication of small and medium-sized cities, as well as other city-related theories, analyzes textual materials about the current situation and new changes in brand communication of small and medium-sized cities with grounded theory, reflecting on the problems in brand communication in China's small and medium-sized cities. Combining the basic elements of urban brand communication, a model for constructing brand communication strategies for small and medium-sized cities is further proposed, so as to provide the differentiated and distinctive strategies for the construction and communication of urban brands in small and medium-sized cities in China, as well as provide a new perspective and strategy on how to enhance the competitiveness and contribute to the sustainable economic development of small and medium-sized.

Keywords: Grounded Theory; Small and Medium-sized Cities in China; Urban Brand; Communication Strategy; City Competitiveness

1. Introduction

The development of digital media has not only triggered a transformation of the traditional market, but

Vialso sparked another big revolution in communication practice and theory since the modern science and technology have changed the law of communication, as well as the environment and methods of city brand communication, coming up with new ideas and methods. In recent years, the traditional media has never ceased to be criticized, the shortcomings of the traditional media are more and more prominent in the change of media technology, and it is also weak in the communication of the city brand [1]. On the one hand, with the development of the economy, the competition between cities is getting more and more intense, which is mainly embodied in various aspects such as culture, politics, economy, tourism, etc. However, brand communication is a system, and the city brand, just like the brand of products, requires a consistent positioning in the communication process. On the other hand, city brands may seek to achieve better communication results by utilizing digital media, which in turn will pose a greater challenge to traditional city brands. City brand communication is faced with new and shifting communication factors. In order to achieve the goal that meets the needs of different audiences while avoiding similarities in the brand communication process, the identification of an appropriate brand positioning is a necessity. For example, situates its brand within the broader quest of cities to enhance their uniqueness in the context of increasing competition for resources, visitors, residents, and companies. In addition, the attitudes of its residents and potential residents towards the specific city brand are crucial in defining the attractiveness of the city. City attributes that influence city brand attitudes include its international, economic, social, medical, safety, educational, environmental, tourism and cultural characteristics. Besides, the modeling of city brand also requires the involvement of relevant participants, combining the interests of several relevant groups, which may cause many difficulties in brand modeling if there is no cooperation between these city attributes. Furthermore, the competence of a successful city brand is not only achieved through the participation of residents and interested parties alone, but reflected in its acceptance by these interested parties, which is more important, so that the collaboration between them may be facilitated, just as a broad study on urban planning is more likely to encompass multiple interested parties. And just as the urban planning, city brand communication is not just an internal task of one organization, but rather an inter-operative effort of a number of organizations that need to work together to contribute to the advertising and communication of small and medium-sized city brands. Based on the elaboration of city brands and characteristics, this study mainly applies the relevant theoretical knowledge of communication science to sort out and analyze the current situation of brand communication in small and medium-sized cities in China through the method of grounded theory. Subsequently, the reasons for the current poor effect of brand communication in small and medium-sized cities are analyzed from the aspects of communication subject, communication audience, communication content, communication media, and effect evaluation. Moreover, this study, focusing on the long-term development of cities, aims to develop the strategies of brand communication suitable for small and medium-sized cities in China, so as to enhance their competitiveness and attract investment, talents and tourists. The formulation and implementation of these strategies should take into account the resource situation, market demand and target audience of small and medium-sized cities. The flexibility and innovativeness of the strategies must also be emphasized to adapt to the ever-changing market

environment, so that small and medium-sized cities can increase its appeal and attraction in the subsequent communication of the city brand advertisements and express its distinctive characteristics, enhancing the city competitiveness.

2. Concept Deficintion and Characteristic Analysis

2.1 The Concept of Urban Brand

The so-called Urban Brand refers to city builders to analyze, refine and integrate the unique (geographic and artificial nature) elements, historical and cultural precipitation, industrial advantages and other differentiated brand elements of their cities, and provide the interested parties with continuous, trustworthy, and associated personalized commitment, so as to increase their recognition and satisfaction of the city, enhancing the aggregation effect, scale effect and radiation effect of the city [2]. As can be seen, it is extended from commodity (product) brand and business brand. With the intensification of urban competition, cities need to shape their unique identity and recognition through the specific image, values and market positioning in the market competition just like other product brands, and reflect the wealthy economic and cultural contents and spiritual connotations of a city. Nowadays, to realize the integration of network culture and traditional culture, with the arrival of the Internet era, network culture began to be valued by all walks of life [3]. It is an important factor distinguishing itself from other cities, and is also the overall impression and evaluation of various factors constituting the city in the minds of the public, which is the external manifestation of the nature, function, culture and civilization of the city.

2.2 Characteristics of Urban Brand

2.2.1 Multiple Factors Comprehensively Affecting the City's Economy, Culture, and Education, etc.

City brand has many similarities with ordinary product brand while at the same time, compared to ordinary product brand, city brand is a comprehensive concept with the characteristics of complexity, such as the diversity of target groups, the complexity of different messages, the multiple spatial scales, competing interests, and different institutional environments. Everything that is contained in a city, takes place in the city, and is done by the city, conveys messages about the image of the city. Therefore, city brand encompasses all aspects and dimensions of the city [3].

2.2.2 The Construction and Dissemination of City Brand Needs to Prioritize the Broad Participation of Many Parties

The construction and dissemination of city brand requires the participation of city residents, investors, tourists and so on. When choosing a city for investment, traveling, residence, work or study, people are more favorable to and interested in famous cities, which are in nature more capable of attracting more and more celebrities to come and settle down, giving people a sense of pleasure, trust, reliability and security. Once the status is established in people's minds, it can maintain relative stability for a long time. People are more

inclined to actively promote the brand image for cities that bring them pleasure through social media, event participation, and volunteer services, so it's important to emphasize people's participation in widespread communication[4].

2.2.3 Urban Brand Can Highly Mold City Image

City brand can be modified and promoted through deliberate modeling and communication. Cities can develop their brand image by devising promotional campaigns, building iconic buildings, and fostering specialty industries, all of which play a very important role in creating the right image, which would also affect the city's ability to attract investment and young people. Defined the instruments of city brand as consistent factors or combinations thereof that contribute to a positive image of the city to gain recognition and make the city more friendly to tourists [5]. By placing emphasis on their brand, cities can create a unique and attractive brand image, which will bring more opportunities and competitive advantages to themselves, and will be conducive to build a well-known city brand.

3. Research Design and Study Analysis

3.1 Research Method

On the basis of analyzing the concept and characteristics of urban brand communication, this study combs through the current situation of brand modeling in small and medium-sized cities in China, reflects on the problems of communicating process and proposes corresponding strategies according to the changes in the brand communication environment of small and medium-sized cities within the digital media environment.

First of all, an in-depth analysis of the current situation of China's city brand communication is conducted based on the grounded theory, including three key steps: opening coding, axal coding and selective coding. The researcher gathered domestic and international relevant materials and systematically analyzed them through three levels of coding, sorting out the main resources obtained as well as their correlations, and converging the optimization strategies that can be adopted for the communication of the city brand.

Secondly, this study reflects on the problems existing in brand communication of small and medium-sized cities in China based on the method of literature analysis, including communication subject, communication audience, communication process, etc., and analyzes them according to the city's official website, Micro Blog, Official Accounts on WeChat, Mini Programs and other new media platforms, to map them into the design of a new ecology of city brand communication.

Finally, the grounded theory are synthesized with the literature information, and the analytical method is used to propose a model for constructing brand communication strategies for small and medium-sized cities in China, providing corresponding strategic suggestions.

3.2 Collection of Samples and Data

This paper selects the relevant data of city communication, adopts the based sampling method, and conducts a questionnaire survey in the form of semi-structured interviews. The data for the study came from the official website of the city, CTR's advertisement publication, China's Small and Medium-sized Cities Brand Communication Development Index Report and other textual information, with a total of 90 textual

information collected. The sample sizes were determined randomly and multiple rounds of sampling were conducted according to the principle of theoretical saturation. Ten samples were taken for coding in the first round and ten samples in the second round until the saturation was reached.

3.3 Research Analysis

3.3.1 Open Coding

In the open coding of this study, the literature related to brand communication of small and medium-sized cities both at home and abroad was selected to analyze. Firstly, the initial conceptualization was completed by refining, summarizing, simplifying the basic original information, accompanied with the naming and attribution of the classification code. The second is to develop initial concepts, constantly comparing, analyzing and summarizing the formative nodes of initial concepts, merging and organizing to derive 59 initial concepts. In the third place, the scope is refined, such as the components of corporate brand communication and the corporate image are taken in account in designing the components of brand communication, obtaining finally 28 initial categories.

Table 1. Initial scope forming in brand communication strategies of small and medium-sized cities in China

Scope	Concept	Original statement
Lack of integrity in brand communication 1	Lack of integrity in city brand communication	No basic positioning and planning in the communication of the city brand and inconsistent image in each promotion
	Lack of continuity in city brand communication	Insufficient patience and haste in city brand communication, without continuity and long-term thinking
Creative Strategies for Personalized Content and Urban IP 2	Better brand storytelling	Use brand storytelling to choose appropriate ways to spread the city brand
	Excavating city culture	Continuously excavate city cultural connotations and stories of humanities and history, enhance the consciousness of city history and culture among the public
	Brand positioning should consider a combination of factors	In the city brand positioning, close combination of the social environment of city development and its future trends is needed, so as to make a scientific positioning
The prominent role of the audience in communication 3	The importance of audience	In activity planning and festival marketing, it is necessary to focus on the psychological "pain points" and "itch points" of the audience from the audience's needs.

	Active participation of the audience	The audience has gradually turned from passive receivers in the communication chain to active participants.
	Communication content determines participation motivation	It is an indisputable fact that when the government-led brand communication of city image has little to do with the immediate interests of the citizens.
	Audiences are active participants	The audience is an active participant in communication activities and an important component in the implementation of the communication chain.
Audiences serve as transmitters and receivers 5	Audience as the information receiver	The audience acts as both the receiver and the disseminator of information, forming a closed loop of network communication.
	Audience as the communicator	The audiences share the city information with other netizens through social media such as short videos
Highlighted role of new media platforms 6	Utilizing new media platforms	Government agencies are supposed to reinforce awareness of using new media platforms and plan campaigns to promote city branding
	The pile-up mode affects the effectiveness of communication	The pile-up media communication strategy obviously makes no contribution to the city popularity and reputation.
More diversified content of communication 7	interesting communication content	The audiences are free to upload fun and interesting content, which tends to be more diverse, nuanced, and fragmented.
	Humanistic flavors in communication	In the communication of city brand, we should pay attention to the intangible elements such as humanistic flavor
Short videos are the main medium of communication 8	Short video dissemination	With the social attribute of short video media and its own interpersonal circle, a wide dissemination of information about the city has been accomplished.
	Adaptation of short videos to new changes in communication	To better promote the city brand based on the changes in media technology, communication subject, communication content and socialization mode.
	Businesses boost city brand communication	Communication activities sponsored by corporates not only realize the brand value, but

Businesses contribution to brand communication 9		also enhance the competitiveness of the city brand.
	Significant role of corporate communications	Cities should emphasize the active combination of city brand and the enterprise brand.
Emphasis on conveying the soft power of the city 10	Soft power of cultural brands	The cultural brand soft power should also been significantly enhanced though the short-video media.
Lack of integration of multi-channel communication media 11	Urban soft power content	Citizen quality, government services and other dimensions of the city's soft power are supposed to be exhibited in short videos.
	No planning for media development	No scientific and systematic top-level design by the government for the construction of mobile digital media in city brand communication
	Failure to develop communication linkages	Internet technology has not been fully utilized to achieve effective integration of media resource.
Limitations of the communicating agent and the problem of synergy 12	Lack of official communication initiatives	The initiative of official participation in city brand communication could be enhanced.
	Less official involvement in dissemination	With regard to governmental units, it is also limited to the Tourism Bureau, the Public Security Bureau, the Fire Department, museums, etc.
	Lack of PR communication	Low audience engagement in the official city government website and fewer opinions solicited by the government.
Diversification of Communication Subjects 13	The role of government as a communication agent	The government owns first-hand resources and information about the city, which gives it an advantage when conducting city brand communication.
	Citizens as the main body of communication	Citizen's communication with authenticity and pro-people characteristics harvests resonance from internal audiences and wins recognition.
Broader Communication agents 14	Activities organized by cities are equivalent to the medium	City festivals or expo events in themselves amount to an important medium for communicating a city's branding
	College students as the communication agents	Colleges and universities are the main communication window of the city's image and serve as internal and external communicators of the city's brand.

	Celebrities make for phenomenal communication	Many stars with millions of fans, are more likely to create a phenomenal spread of the city's brand.
Dissemination content is more fun-oriented 15	Tell a good story with the help of scene	The model of "Narrative + content" is more prone to tell the city's story with the advantage of the scene.
	Popular content for residents' lives	When promoting the city's image, the communication content should emphasize the life of the citizens, the port, and the gastronomy.
Media integration and matching strategy 16	The boom of short videos	The boom in short-video social media has also created possibilities for more obscure and peripheral cities to emerge in the limelight, increasing the exposure and presence of small cities.
	Different media have different communication effects	Communication media are the channels and tools for city brand communication, with each medium having its own communication characteristics.
	Develop a package media plan	Develop a media mix plan that addresses communication objectives, media characteristics, message strategies and communication budgets.
	Creating a joint communication mechanism	Vigorously consolidating media resources to create a media matrix for the dissemination of the city image
More integrated communication content 17	Classification of transmitted content	The transmitted content of city brand should be generated based on the key information of the city.
	Communication content focuses on the cultural dimension	The refined operation centered on the spirit of the city may become the new focus of city IP shaping.
Target audience segmentation strategy 18	Differences in audiences	Different audiences and cities have different relevant interests, showing interaction and diversification.
	Audience segmentation	Categorize audiences into internal and external audiences based on differences in the geographic location of the audience.
		Systematic survey and analysis of audiences and mobilization of audience interaction with communicators.
	Clarify the target audience	Defining the target audience can help maximize the impact of a communication campaign.

Focus on public opinion and audience experience 19	Emphasize word-of-mouth communication	Audience spreads through multiple levels by word-of-mouth, increasing the city's visibility and reputation
	Emphasize the audience experience	It gives attention to the public's experiential needs, with creative online and offline activities that attract the public to enthusiastically participate in the communication process.
Media as one of the main communication agents 20	Media and celebrities together	The main body of communication is not only government-based, but also mobilizes the participation of the entire population to expand its reach.
	Promotion of advertising by the media	The media should vigorously publicize the communication concept of urban advertising and promote the role of urban advertising in publicity.
Establishing an evaluation strategy of communication effectiveness 21	Establishment of specialized teams	Professional communication teams should be recruited and trained to strengthen the professionalism of media workers.
	Make a good advertising plan	Detailed and appropriate advertising planning should be done, and a system for measuring the effectiveness of advertising should be established and continuously improved.
Precise communication to meet the challenges of brand communication 22	The Internet facilitates brand communication	Advances in network technology and the expansion of Internet users provide conditions for better dissemination of city brands.
	Big data enables precise communication	Big data technology can be used to locate the target audience and realize the precise dissemination of city brand information.
Digital media becomes more influential 23	Impact of digital technology	Revolutionary changes in media communication activities are triggered by changes of digital technologies in communication means, functional structures and morphological patterns
	Important of medium tools	The development of online and digital technologies has enabled the media to play an increasingly important role in communication.
The role of creativity in city brand communication 24	Creative industries develop with the city	It has become a consensus among academics and city administrators that cultural and creative industries and urban competitiveness develop together.
	Talents are the foundation of the creative city	Talent in terms of "skill, talent and tolerance" forms the basis of human resources.

Homogeneous content and impersonalized communication 25	Similarity of communication themes	The similarity of communication themes in city brand advertisements is also a prominent issue in the content of city communications.
	Ambiguous brand identity	Too many titles, on the contrary, make the tourism brand vague and ambiguous, leading to insufficient recognition of the city brand.
	Missing cultural content in the city personality	Insufficient expression of the city's individuality and cultural characteristics, coupled with no connotation, make the city brand lack of charisma.
Systematization of urban communication content 26	Emphasize the word-of-mouth communication effect	An excellent creative expression of city brand advertising can be passed on to the public to form a word-of-mouth effect.
	Urban communication needs multidisciplinary support	To establish a theoretical framework for the evaluation standards of urban image communication based on a multidisciplinary theoretical foundation.
Lack of professionalism in evaluating communication effectiveness 27	Negligence in tracking the effectiveness of dissemination	Neglecting to track the effects of urban advertising directly leads to the inability to understand the response of the audience.
	The two-sided nature of the communication effect	In terms of dissemination effects, the positive dissemination effects are complemented by the negative side.
The importance of city image in brand communication 28	City image and brand	City image and city branding are closely linked.
	City image recognition	City image recognition centers on the spirit of the city, which mainly includes the connotation of city theme culture, city slogan and city values.

3.2.1 Axial coding

The task of axial coding is to uncover the underlying logical relationships between categories and thus develop the main categories. This study explores brand communication strategies for small and medium-sized cities in China and summarizes the different categories according to their logical interconnections at the conceptual level, resulting in seven main categories (see Table 2).

Table 2. Main categories formed by axial coding

Main categories	Corresponding category	Connotation of the category

Current situation of city brand advertising communication	Lack of integration and continuity in brand communication 1	City brand communication requires holistic planning and timely follow-up on subsequent communication effect testing
	Precise communication to meet the challenges of brand communication 22	With the development of big data technology, the audience segmentation is becoming more and more accurate, providing better assistance to the city brand advertising communication
	Digital media becomes more influential 23	Digital technology has facilitated a shift in the media ecosystem that will have a huge impact on the future of city brand communication
	The role of creativity in city brand communication 24	The development of digital media has made creativity more and more important in the communication of city brands
	The importance of city image in brand communication 28	Urban image construction mainly contributes to brand communication from the perspective of the spiritual level
Changes in the communications content of city brand	More diversified content of communication 7	In the communicating process of city brand, humanistic factors are added to make the communication content more diversified
	Corporate contributions to brand communication 9	City managers should be aware of the fundamental significance of the city's corporate visibility to the city's branding and communication
	Emphasis on communicating the soft power of cities 10	Product branding and city branding in an organization are complementary to each other
	More entertaining communication content 15	Communication content is supposed to focus more on daily life, delicious food, entertainment and other information interested by the audience
	More integrated communication content 17	Communication content is more culturally and spiritually oriented, requiring the grading of complex content
	Systematizing urban communication content 26	Communication content is complex but more systematic, which requires multidisciplinary assistance
Changes in the communicating agent	Broader communication subjects 14	The subject of communication includes students, media, celebrities, etc. Everyone can be the subject of communication
	The media is one of the subjects of communication 20	Brand communication can not be separated from the media, which require the joint effort of both internal and external media

Changes in communication audiences	The role of the audience in communication is highlighted. 3	With the development of digital media today, audiences are no longer just receivers, whose word-of-mouth communication directly plays a role in driving consumption.
	Audiences as transmitters and receivers 5	The audience takes on the dual role of audience and communicator, interacting with the communicator through digital media
	Emphasize the audience's word-of-mouth communication and experience 19	Nowadays, word-of-mouth communication is more emphasized to enhance the awareness and reputation of the city brand
Changes in communication media	New media platforms come to the fore 6	To emphasize the role of new media platforms, but also avoid pile-on media communication
	Short videos are the main medium of communication 8	Short videos make it easier for the audience to experience the city's comprehensive information to achieve a good communication effect
Problems in city brand communication	Similarity and non-personalization of the communicating content 25	Communication of the city brand should be based on the understanding of the culture and positioning of the city and its image
	Ambiguous target audience and positioning bias 4	Audiences should be segmented and their preferred content and media should be selected for distribution
	Limitations of the communicating agent and the problem of synergy 12	Failure to reflect professionalism in the main body of communication, and failure to harmonize the communication of city branding services
	Lack of integration of multi-channel communication media 11	Inadequate media construction and operation mechanism, unable to form a communication linkage mechanism
	Lack of professionalism in evaluating communication effectiveness 27	Ignoring the tracking of the communication effect may have a bad influence on the city brand
Communicating strategy for city brand	Creative Strategies for Personalized Content and Urban IP 2	In terms of content, the city should be well positioned on the basis of mining the city's culture
	Target audience segmentation strategy 18	The target audience should be clearly identified and segmented so that the communication effect will be maximized
	Diversification of communication subjects 13	Dissemination utilizes interactions and cooperation among government departments, government and business, etc

Media integration and matching strategy 16	Establishment of media integration strategy and planning, utilizing the strengths of each medium to create a communication linkage mechanism
Building the evaluation strategy for communication effectiveness 21	Components of a specialized communication monitoring team and the establishment of a long-term mechanism for evaluating the effectiveness of communication

3.3.3 Selective Coding to Complete the Definition of Core Categories

Under the background of digital media development, facing the status quo of brand communication in small and medium-sized cities, changes in communication content, subjects, audiences, media (channels) and so on constitute a model of brand communication strategy in small and medium-sized cities. In the face of these changes in urban brand communication, advertising creators and city managers should conduct a reflection on the problems in advertising communication and formulate communication strategies suitable for small and medium-sized cities.

3.3.4 Theory Saturation Test

In order to ensure the scientific nature of the research process and the accuracy of the research results of the grounded theory, this study first conceptualized the concepts and categories based on the relationships implied by the concepts and categories formed by the open coding and axial coding. Then it was compared with previous related literature and concepts. Through repeated comparisons, it was found that no further new conceptual dimensions emerged, which thus indicated that saturation had been reached in terms of the theory and concepts. Then, through the coding and analysis research methods, one-third of the interview transcripts are left to be tested for theoretical saturation by coding and analyzing the 10 interview transcripts according to the previous process, and it was found that the results of these interview materials after being fully analyzed again were all in line with the previous relational attributes and conceptual dimensions. In other words, no new main categories are derived from the coding and analysis of the 10 interview transcripts, and all interview data taken together are encompassed by the seven main categories that were previously refined.

4. Brand Communication Strategies for Small and Medium-sized Cities in China

4.1 Problems in Brand Communication in Chinese Small and Medium-sized Cities

As city brand communication is exposed to new changes in the communication environment, traditional communication of city brand, whether in the communication subject, audience, media, and content, is faced with new problems, and need to be continuously adapted to the new changing communication environment by the city brand managers and creators, which have put forward new requirements for the technology or management. Specific problems in the city brand communication are as follows.

4.1.1 Similarity and Non-personalization Communication Content

More and more cities impress their audiences with similar and homogeneous images, especially in small and medium-sized cities, where there is the phenomenon of similarity in communication content. First of all, outdoor advertising is dominated by commercial advertisements, and the communication of city brands cannot reflect its unique characteristics and cultural connotations; secondly, in the context of digital media, the laws and regulations about media are still incomplete, and cities can't carry out creative advertising communication according to the policy changes of their own cities, which makes the brand communication of small and medium-sized cities not able to determine their own image positioning, affecting the speed as well as the effect of their communication, further undermining the competitiveness of small and medium-sized cities in China.

4.1.2 Ambiguity of the Target Audience and the Problem of Synergy

The audience has changed, but an advertising template in city brand communication for all audiences may result in the aesthetic fatigue of target audiences [6]. In the flood of advertising information, the city brand communication failed to convey the value they need, which may lead to poor audience participation and interactivity, the lack of enthusiasm and collaboration between the various target audiences in the secondary dissemination, and eventually be incapable of maintaining the consistency and uniqueness of city brand communication.

4.1.3 Limitations of Communication Subjects and Positioning Deviation

City brand communication is a systematic project, whose main body of communication not only includes the government and residents, but also includes foreign tourists, foreign enterprises and some advertising producers. However, the brand communication of most Chinese small and medium-sized cities relies mainly on the official communication of government, whereas for foreign tourists, foreign enterprises and some advertisement producers, due to their lack of understanding of the city's history and culture, there is a bias in city positioning understanding, and a lack of unity in communicating the city's brand image.

4.1.4 Lack of Integration and Strategy Matching of Communication Media

Under the digital media environment, the communication media of small and medium-sized cities are more diversified, with different characteristics presented by various media. Nevertheless, there is duplication in the communication content, which greatly causes the waste of the city brand advertising costs and the inability to play the advantages of their respective media [7]. More importantly, it fails to cover a wider audience, and the lack of cross-border cooperation between media outlets fails to lay a solid foundation for building a digital smart city brand communication.

4.1.5 Lack of Professionalism in Communication Effect Evaluation

The city brand advertising is not specialized, focused and unified enough, and the city managers attach little importance to the brand advertising and communication. Lack of risk awareness and public relations awareness in the communication process, and even some unfavorable messages to the city brand image are disseminate in short videos new media, have caused irreversible impacts on the brand communication of small and medium-sized cities. There is a lack of professional public relations team to monitor the communication effect in the subsequent period, which also can't provide experience and reference for the subsequent brand communication.

4.2 Brand Communication Strategy for Small and Medium-sized Cities in China

4.2.1 Strategy Model of Brand Communication for Chinese Small and Medium-sized Cities

This study establishes a model diagram of brand communication for small and medium-sized cities in China based on the analysis of their current communication situation through the application of grounded theory, which (as shown below) can clearly show the important components of the brand communication strategy for small and medium-sized cities in China and the relationship between them, providing corresponding suggestions for the existing problems in the communication, so as to enhance the popularity and reputation of the small and medium-sized cities.
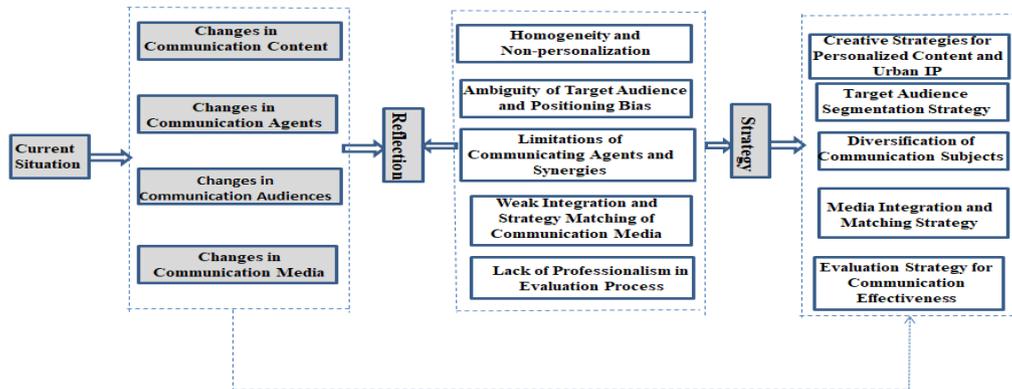

Figure 1. Brand communication strategy model for small and medium-sized cities in china

4.2.2 Creative Strategy of Personalized Content and City IP

Each city has different characteristics of city culture, city residents, geographic features, and economic development, and the city brand communication is required to reflect the city IP that reflects the unique city image and its CIS strategy system. At the same time, diversified communication contents are available to be exhibited. Focusing on festivals advertising and communication, as festivals play an important role in the development of various regions around the world, and even have a very important influence on the city's brand image. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify the positioning of the city and create its own city IP, which can

notify the public of the city characteristics through festivals, and demonstrate its humanistic characteristics by organizing music festivals, food festivals and other activities in the city.

4.2.3 Communication Strategy of Target Audience Segmentation

The communication creativity of the city brand should be targeted. On the one hand, according to the big data classification system, different target audiences can receive different city brand advertisements, both to enhance the happiness index of city residents and to meet the aesthetics and needs of tourists; on the other hand, the importance of word-of-mouth and viral communication should not be ignored. It is advisable to highlight the concerns of different audiences, and realize multi-level secondary communication by using the digital media which has the timely and convenient features.

4.2.4 Diversification of Communication Subjects

In the city brand communication, we should not only pay attention to the power of the government, but also attach more importance to the communication power of the city residents, who are the loyal "speakers" of the city and play an important role in the process of city image communication. In addition, tourists and foreign investors should be encouraged to actively participate in the communication of the city brand, as well as to make collaborative efforts in the government's efforts to coordinate with subjects of different professions and interests, forming a communication synergy through exhibitions and city events, and further expanding the city's word-of-mouth communication.

4.2.5 Multi-media Integrated Marketing Communication Strategy

The communication of city brand should broaden its channels, taking into account the traditional media and new media, and focusing on the combination of online and offline ways. Nowadays, the definition of media will be profoundly rewritten. McLuhan, a famous communication scholar, once defined the media as "an extension of the human body", and 5G's Internet of Everything further elevates the interconnection of people and the world to physiological and psychological interconnections, which will lead to a revolutionary reconstruction of communication disciplines through the further expansion of its boundaries, enrichment of its elements, and ecologization of its structure. The further expansion of its boundaries, the further enrichment of its elements, and the further ecologization of its structure will lead to a revolutionary reconstruction of the communication discipline [8]. In the media strategy, however, it should be noted that the city brand information that needs to be conveyed should be integrated, and the USP strategy can be adopted to select a combination of communication means that are more attractive to consumers, more personalized, and supplementary and auxiliary around the core information of the city brand communication, avoiding the opposite effect between the communication means. Attentions should be paid in particular to the dissemination of short videos, with the use of pictures, sound, text, special effects and other methods that are attractive to the audiences. The multi-channel and cross-border dissemination of popular digital media prevailed abroad should also be used due to

their respective media strengths.

4.2.6 Construct Evaluation Strategy for Communication Effect

City brand communication is a comprehensive system. Evaluation of communication effect should be carried out through professional organizations to find out the deficiencies in communication so as to be more targeted in the process of creativity and communication, and to develop sustainable urban advertising and brand communication. In addition, the advantages of digital media platforms should be utilized for the public relations communication in dealing with unfavorable information.

5. Conclusion

Digital communication has become the mainstream trend of city brand advertising. With increasing needs of personalized city brand communication, the improvement of people's living standards and the audience's demand for personalization and customization, city brand communication is not only the embodiment of city cultural connotation and image, but also the key to enhance the competitiveness of the city. This study selects small and medium-sized cities in China, which are relatively deficient in resources, as the object of research, and adopts the method of grounded theory to analyze the current situation of brand communication in these cities in depth. The problems faced by small and medium-sized cities in brand communication has been recognized, such as the similarity and non-personalization of communication content, the ambiguity of the target audience, the limitations of the communication subject, the deficiency of communication media integration, and the unprofessional evaluation of the communication effect, etc., all of which constrain the brand development and their effectiveness of small and medium-sized cities. Nevertheless, this study also proposes a series of feasible solutions to the existing problems, and constructs a model diagram of brand communication strategy for small and medium-sized cities in China. For example, the communication content should be personalized and city IP-based in terms of creativity; the target audience should be segmented; the main communication agents should be diversified; the media integration should be focused; and a good evaluation system of the communication effect should be emphasized. In this way, small and medium-sized cities can give full play to their own advantages through scientific and effective brand communication strategies to create a unique city brand image, which makes the city brand more precise, efficient and intelligent in its communication. However, this study did not analyze the CIS strategy system of small and medium-sized cities in depth. As an important part of city brand communication content, a city's CIS strategy also plays a vital role in city brand communication, which can help to establish the unique image of the city. This aspect may be further explored and improved in the subsequent studies to further enrich and refine the brand communication strategies in small and medium-sized cities, and to provide more comprehensive support for their brand building and development.

References

[1] X. Du, "New Communication under the New Pattern - The New Combination of Traditional Media and City Brand," *The Journal of Research Guide*, No.2, pp. 26-27, June 2016.

[2] Y. Zhang, R. Zhang, "Research on Chongqing city branding strategy and implementation strategy," *The Journal of Science and Technology Management Research,* No. 8, pp. 102-104, August 2008.

[3] J. Q. Wu, and J. Y. Chen, "An Overview of Social Media Development," *The Journal of Social Sciences of Harbin Normal University*, No.6, pp. 140-142, November 2017.

[4] I.y.Kim, G.H.Ryu, "Changes in the marketing direction and form of exhibitions using social media," *The Journal of International Journal of Internet, Broadcasting and Communication*, Vol.15 No.2, pp270, April 2023.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7236/IJIBC.2023.15.2.268

[5] L. B. Wei, Research on Integrated Marketing Communication of Jinan City Brand Image, Ph.D. Thesis. Shandong University, Jinan, Shandong, China, 2018.

[6] X. L. Wu, Research on Chongqing City Brand Communication under the Perspective of Brand Relationship, Ph.D. Thesis. Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, Jiangxi, China, 2015.

[7] G. M. Yu, "Communication Development in the 5G Era: Inflection Point, Challenge, Opportunity and Mission,*" The Journal of Media Watch*, No. 7, pp. 5-7, July 2019.
DOI:http:// doi. 10.19480/j.cnki.cmgc.2019.07.001

[8] L. Peng, New Media User Research: Node, Mediatized, Cyborg People, Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, pp. 23-26, 2020.