



Evaluations of Guangzhou's brand building through intangible cultural heritage: a brand equity model

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Abstract

Culture is an indispensable indicator for the promotion of city image that has always been regarded as an important dimension of a city brand. This study uses the brand equity model, takes Guangzhou's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as an example, analyses the overall value of ICH in city branding, and further discusses the promotion mechanism of the brand equity of Guangzhou's ICH by constructing a structural equation model. The results show that (1) Guangzhou's ICH has a good reputation among residents and tourists, reflecting high brand equity; (2) the promotion of brand equity of Guangzhou's ICH is mainly realized through three paths: brand awareness → brand loyalty, brand awareness → brand perceived quality → brand loyalty and brand awareness → brand associations → brand loyalty. The research combines cultural development and city branding to provide a certain value reference for urban cultural regulation and city branding.

Keywords City brand · Brand equity · Brand loyalty · Intangible cultural heritage · Guangzhou

Introduction

In the face of cultural convergence brought about by economic globalization, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) has become an important part of protecting cultural diversity and developing the tourism economy (Timothy 2014). In recent years, the preservation of ICH has attracted special attention (Lin and Lian 2018). Many cities brand ICH as a tourism resource to promote the sustainable development of cities (Schildenfeld and Odak Krsić 2020).

On the one hand, ICH reflects the local multi narrative and is an important element of destination branding (Ryan

2015). Local managers often understand brand building results as a product of cultural and economic integration to incorporate the branding process into the local social space and capitalize on the differential expression of local equity (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013). ICH records the unique memory and lifestyle of a region (Petronela 2016). These regional cultural symbols reconstruct the cultural boundary (Timothy 2014) and can become the object that attracts tourists to the destination for experience and consumption (George 2010).

On the other hand, branding is a mode that protects ICH and revitalizes cultural tourism (Qiu et al. 2020). Against the background of rapid urbanization and industrialization, ICH is facing difficulties such as a loss of authenticity caused by excessive commercialization, a loss of ICH inheritors by generation, and a decline in traditional communication modes (George 2010). Branding ICH is an effective strategy for protecting it (Lin and Lian 2018). ICH is not only a special craft, skill or work but also impacts the ecological environment, social organization and religious beliefs of the ICH bearers (Su 2019). This requires us to examine it. Urban branding is a strategic process that includes marketing practices and landscape strategies, infrastructure project construction, administrative structures and urban behaviour (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005). Therefore, the conservation of ICH can achieve better results in urban branding strategies. Increasing ICH consumer awareness of

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brand values helps to achieve their “buying” behaviour for the brand.

Indeed, the relationship between ICH and branding can be conceptualized as a dialogue in which local narrative and governance discourse can be transformed into brand discourse (Lucarelli and Heldt Cassel 2020). However, previous studies on ICH have focused on the protective measures of cultural heritage and the economic development of tourist destinations (Su 2019). The brand potential of ICH and the ‘personal discourse’ of its consumers are often ignored. In China, the development of ICH has been included in the key areas of national development in the future and promoted by destination managers from top to bottom (Su 2020). It helps to highlight national characteristics and reshape the image of the destination. Meanwhile, the branding of ICH is a two-way communication process. We should focus on the other end of the brand, that is, the subjective perception of heritage consumers (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005). Their loyalty to ICH determines the success of branding (Pike 2009) and plays an important role in the sustainable development of ICH.

In this context, this paper examines the local perception of ICH brands by ICH consumers through a brand equity model. In addition, by constructing a structural equation model of ICH brand equity based on ICH consumers, this paper discusses the promotion path of ICH brand equity in Guangzhou. Different from previous studies, this paper appreciates the value of ICH as existing in local communities and discusses the elements on which the value of ICH as a brand is reflected and how to improve its overall value under the Chinese background. This helps to enrich the perspective of ICH research and provides a reference for urban managers to protect ICH.

Literature review and research hypothesis

Intangible cultural heritage as a city brand

ICH is composed of all intangible manifestations of culture, including music, dance, artistic forms and cultural space (Lenzerini 2011). As the root and source of the cultural field, ICH plays an important role in city branding and urban development because local culture is regarded as the core of city brand building (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013). Once a city has a vibrant ICH, it leads to a harmonious social living environment (Kladou and Kehagias 2014).

Aware of the value of ICH in attracting tourists and enhancing national confidence, China has adopted a gradual and systematic management approach (Lin and Lian 2018). Authenticity and integrity are the main principles Chinese urban managers consider in protecting and inheriting ICH (Su 2020). Through multilevel governance, China has

established a more comprehensive legal protection system (Lin and Lian 2018). After China joined the Convention for the protection of ICH in 2004, the inheritance of ICH became a social responsibility and historical mission. ICH has not only become a resource to enhance urban attention but also a factor through which urban cultural diversity and urban governance ability are reflected (Schildenfeld and Odak Krasić 2020). A strong reputation of ICH has brought benefits to urban development and provided residents with a better quality of life, forming a brand effect in the process of communication.

City branding is a development concept local governments can utilize to cope with the intensification of competition among cities (Chan and Marafa 2017). Through the excavation of local assets, the city publicizes itself on the global stage and establishes a unique and positive image to obtain more attention and allow for choice in residence and tourism (Park and Lee 2019). The essence of this branding is a symbolic process with local identity, local culture and local image as the core (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013). Branding uses regional culture as a resource for economic activities, while ICH is a typical representative. After long-term development, ICH carries the history of the city, and its special artistic value makes it more recognizable. Therefore, building a city brand with ICH elements can better reflect the city’s cultural heritage and obtain the recognition of internal residents and external tourists.

In fact, the branding of ICH has only attracted global attention in recent years (Ryan 2015). Previous studies believe that being named ‘world cultural heritage’ (WHS) can promote a local landscape to become a carrier of branding and turn the material landscape into aesthetic cultural relics (Porter 2020). Realizing that cultural heritage includes not only tangible elements but also intangible elements, city managers try to combine the logic of branding with ICH (Ryan 2015). According to Vecco (2010), compared with material cultural heritage, the importance of ICH can be interpreted as a step towards overcoming the European-centred concept of heritage and accepting cultural diversity as a rich resource for all mankind.

ICH is constantly developing and changing, and its brand value is defined by the local community (Su 2019). This means that when urban cultural departments continue to emphasize the experience brought by ICH in their publicity work, they must consider the opinions of local residents and consumers (Konecnik and Gartner 2007). At present, many studies have discussed the protection and development of ICH. However, these studies mainly start from the perspective of planners and managers and pay less attention to the voice of local communities (Su 2019). Community discourse is the decisive factor in determining the success of ICH branding. They can accept or resist the brand meaning (Vallaster et al. 2018). At the same



time, research on branding is inconsistent, and the branding of ICH in developing countries needs more attention (Andersson 2014). Therefore, taking Guangzhou as a case and using the concept of brand equity to express the community attitude of ICH and explore its brand value promotion mechanism can provide a reference for urban managers in developing countries to make decisions.

City brand equity and research hypothesis

Keller (1993) was the first to define brand equity as the different responses of consumers to brand marketing, and Yoo and Donthu (2001) further argued that brand equity is the cognitive and behavioural response of consumers. These reactions can add value or negatively affect the brand. Some studies see brand equity as a separate element related to brand value. Due to the different perspectives of researchers, there is no consensus on the meaning and form of brand equity. However, most definitions recognize brand equity as a means of measuring consumer perception.

In recent years, scholars have extended the theory and practice of brand equity to the field of place branding research, integrating it with broader themes in urban studies (Chan 2019). Examples include cultural heritage (del Barrio-Garcia and Prados-Peña 2019) and microtransformation (Wang et al. 2021). In this context, city brand equity refers to the ability of a city brand to bring value to the city. The more city brand equity there is, the more satisfied the public is with it, and the higher the value of this city brand. City brand equity also exists in many forms, such as brand familiarity, brand value, brand association, brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand perceived quality, brand image, and other forms. Some of these concepts are also widely debated, such as brand familiarity versus brand awareness (Chan 2019) and brand value versus brand uniqueness (Chi et al. 2020). The complex structure of cities poses certain challenges for the measurement of city brand equity.

Despite the differences in the dimensions of local brand equity models, local brand equity is usually assessed in four dimensions: brand awareness, brand association, perceived brand quality, and brand loyalty. In the literature, these four dimensions possess strong applicability and operability. Some scholars have combined the model composed of these four dimensions with cultural heritage studies to measure the branding benefits of cultural heritage for cities (Dewar et al. 2012; Kashif et al. 2015). Therefore, this paper transforms the elements of brand equity into a list of brand equity assessments for ICH based on combining previous studies.

Brand awareness

Brand awareness is the possibility that consumers recognize brands in different situations. For example, when referring to a certain type of product, consumers can recognize or remember a certain type of brand and its characteristics. In the case of Guangzhou's ICH, potential ICH consumers need to know Guangzhou, the consumption place of ICH, to gain a centralized perception of ICH. Therefore, brand awareness is both the first step in leading ICH consumers to attempt repeating consumption and the starting point to form brand value and assets.

Many empirical studies have explored the role of brand awareness in ICH and tourism destination brands. For example, Dewar et al. (2012) and others investigated the brand awareness of tourists on Macao's ICH and found that tourists could not well identify the logo of Macao's ICH, which led to the decline of overall brand equity. Similarly, Kladou and Kehagias (2014) believe that Roman cultural brand awareness composed of ICH and other elements affects tourists' perceived quality experience, brand associations and revisit intention (loyalty).

The above evidence shows that there is a positive correlation between brand awareness and brand perceived quality, brand associations and brand loyalty. Therefore, brand awareness will have a positive impact on the overall equity of ICH brands. This study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1 Brand awareness will have a direct and positive impact on perceived brand quality.

H2 Brand awareness will have a direct and positive impact on brand associations.

H3 Brand awareness will have a direct and positive impact on brand loyalty.

Perceived brand quality

Perceived brand quality is usually defined as a person's view of brand elements, including performance and characteristics. It is another key dimension of brand equity (Aaker 2009), which is applicable to ICH. In this study, brand quality is people's perception of the ability of ICH to meet their expectations and needs (Konecnik and Gartner 2007). Previous studies have shown that the audience's perceived quality of local brands affects their brand loyalty. Vinh et al. (2017) found that tourism destinations can improve the quality of products (services) through multi-party participation, which is important to brand loyalty. Meanwhile, Kim and Lee (2018) also believe that the quality characteristics (interactivity and vividness) of cultural heritage scenic spots not only affect the experience of tourists but also have a positive



impact on brand loyalty. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H4 Perceived brand quality will have a direct and positive impact on brand loyalty.

Brand associations

Brand associations refer to relevant information generated in memory when people mention a brand, including functional attribute association and non-functional attribute association (Chen 2001). Brand associations play a significant role in ICH (Kashif et al. 2015). Existing studies show that the association of historical, literary and artistic values with ICH can affect tourists' willingness to return to cultural heritage sites, which is the reason tourists buy ICH-related products (Su 2019). Positive association through the brand can significantly improve loyalty to the brand and have a positive attitude towards the brand (Kladou and Kehagias 2014). Based on the above analysis, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5 Brand associations will have a direct and positive impact on brand loyalty.

Brand loyalty

Brand loyalty is described as a commitment to a specific brand or a selective psychological and behavioural response to a brand's special preferences (Aaker 1991). Brand equity comes from consumers' higher confidence in the brand than competitors (Lassar et al. 1995), consumers' loyalty and insurance premiums they are willing to pay. Therefore, brand loyalty is the main goal of brand building (Boo et al. 2009). For Guangzhou, the importance of branding ICH lies in obtaining more loyalty from ICH consumers, which is an important embodiment of brand equity (Fig. 1).

Methodology

Case location

Guangzhou, with more than 2000 years of history and culture, was selected as the research area of this paper because it is an area in China that leads in promoting and implementing the protection of ICH. To date, Guangzhou has 2 representative projects of human ICH, 17 national projects, 68 provincial projects and 107 municipal projects (Guangzhou Civilization Online 2018). As a regional cultural symbol, these ICHs record the long history of Guangzhou and the lifestyle of local people to a great extent and have become an important resource for urban brand construction. Through top-down and bottom-up approaches, Guangzhou's ICH has been developed into one of Guangzhou's urban brands. In this case, Guangzhou is a typical case, and the survey results have potential relevance to the formulation of policies in other regions.

Measurement

This study adopts brand awareness, brand perception quality, brand associations and brand loyalty to measure Guangzhou's ICH brand equity. In the four dimensions, items are listed in the form of 7-point Likert statements, from strongly disagree (1 point) to strongly agree (7 points), as the content of the questionnaire (see Table 1).

Brand awareness measures visitors' and residents' perceived ability to recognize and recall Guangzhou's ICH. With reference to the relevant research results (Horng et al. 2012; Konecnik and Gartner 2007), we designed 4 items: perceived brand quality, for which 4 items are applied to measure Guangzhou's brand quality according to the actual value of Guangzhou's ICH; and brand associations, for which 6 items are designed according to the relevant literature (Buil et al. 2013; Gartner and Ruzzier 2011; Zavattaro

Fig. 1 Brand equity model of Guangzhou's ICH

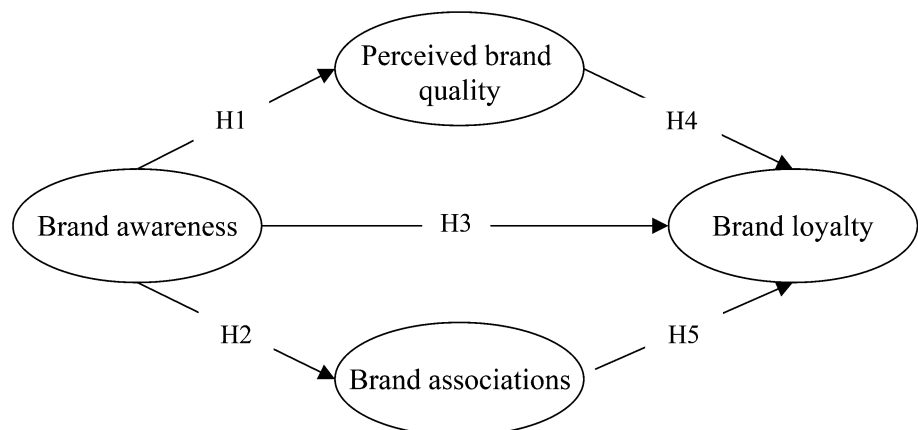


Table 1 Measurement of the brand equity of Guangzhou's ICH

Dimension	Brand equity variables of Guangzhou's ICH
Brand awareness [AW]	I know Guangzhou is a city with rich ICH When I think about ICH, Guangzhou is one of the cities that come to mind I am very familiar with the ICH of Guangzhou I can name some ICH projects in Guangzhou
Perceived brand quality [BQ]	Making use of Guangzhou's ICH can create a unique cultural place Using Guangzhou's ICH can produce high-quality goods Guangzhou's ICH has important aesthetic and artistic value ICH endows Guangzhou with profound cultural deposits
Brand associations [AS]	Guangzhou has its economic values for being branded as a city with rich ICH I think it's a better choice for tourists to build Guangzhou into a city with rich ICH I think it's a better choice for residents to build Guangzhou into a city with rich ICH Learning ICH knowledge, purchasing ICH products and visiting ICH sites will make me feel fruitful Guangzhou's ICH makes me feel distinct local characteristics Guangzhou's ICH is interesting, and it interests me
Brand loyalty [LO]	I am willing to take the initiative to learn about Guangzhou's ICH I will introduce Guangzhou's ICH to others If I want to live or travel in a city with strong cultural atmosphere, Guangzhou is my first choice

et al. 2015). Brand loyalty. We designed 3 aspects to measure this dimension in accordance with the relevant literature (Arnett et al. 2003; Back and Parks 2003; Odin et al. 2001; Yoo and Donthu 2001). Brand loyalty conjures 3 questions, such as 'I am willing to take the initiative to learn about Guangzhou's ICH', 'I will introduce Guangzhou's ICH to others', and 'If I want to live or travel in a city with a strong cultural atmosphere, Guangzhou is my first choice'.

Samples

Our survey focuses on residents and tourists in Guangzhou in early 2020 (January–February). ICH is spatial in nature, and this spatiality is often delineated by cultural rather than administrative boundaries. The visitors attracted by ICH in Guangzhou basically originate from the surrounding area, more specifically from the Pearl River Delta region. Although this region includes several cities other than Guangzhou, they share the same cultural roots. People from these places are less controversial in their understanding of ICH. In addition, in recent years, China's tourism industry has been characterized by "localization", and the development of ICH in Guangzhou has blurred the boundaries of the subject. The localization of tourism has two main meanings: first, the "residentsation" of tourists, i.e., tourists are closer to locals in terms of tourism consumption patterns and behavioural preferences (Lau and Li 2015); second, the "touristisation" of local residents, i.e., the growth of leisure demand in a narrow sense, with local residents becoming the main "tourists" of some local destinations (Merrilees et al. 2018). Finally, ICH's brand equity arises from the value

co-production by residents and tourists (Lan et al. 2021). Considering the actual situation, this study does not make a strict distinction between resident and tourist identities but rather treats them as common ICH consumers.

To ensure randomization, this survey was conducted through a large cross-section of network platforms to ensure that the survey covered a large area and many groups. The concept and content of ICH is explained in the questionnaire guide, and we ask them if they understand the items prior to filling it out. If they do not understand something during the process they can ask us questions at any time. A total of 840 electronic questionnaires were collected, 799 of which were valid, and the effective rate was 95.1%.

The sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents are as follows (Table 2). From the perspective of our respondents' identity, 24.3% of them lived or travelled in Guangzhou for less than 1 year, categorizing them as tourists, while 47.2% lived in Guangzhou 1–5 years and were mainly college students and new workers living in Guangzhou; 3.6% had lived in Guangzhou for 5–10 years, and 24.9% of them lived in Guangzhou for more than 10 years. All respondents had enough knowledge and experience to answer the questionnaire.

Data analysis

Reliability and validity analysis

Before the analysis results, SPSS 24.0 statistical software was used to input and analyse the data, and reliability



Table 2 Characteristics of respondents ($n = 799$)

		<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	268	33.5
	Female	531	66.5
Age	20 below	168	21.0
	20–30	447	56.0
	31–40	71	8.9
	41–50	80	10.0
	50 above	33	4.1
Education level	Primary school and below	3	0.4
	Junior middle school	9	1.1
	High school and technical secondary school	67	8.4
	College, undergraduate or above	720	90.1
Duration of travel/residence/ study in Guangzhou	Less than 1 years	194	24.3
	1–5 years	377	47.2
	5–10 years	29	3.6
	More than 10 years	199	24.9
Total		799	100

Table 3 Model fit of CFA

Fitting index	Acceptable range	Measured value
CMIN		209.252
DF		113
CMIN/DF	< 3	1.852
GFI	> 0.9	0.969
AGFI	> 0.9	0.959
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.033
NFI	> 0.9	0.967
IFI	> 0.9	0.985
TLI(NNFI)	> 0.9	0.982
CFI	> 0.9	0.985

analysis was used to estimate the reliability of the questionnaire. The Cronbach's alphas of brand awareness, perceived brand quality, brand associations and brand loyalty are 0.886, 0.868, 0.878 and 0.817, respectively, which are higher than the 0.7 standard, showing that the variables have high reliability (Kline 2000). CITC is higher than 0.5, which indicates that the measurement items meet the research requirements. From the perspective of Cronbach's alpha after deleting the item, deleting any question will not cause the Cronbach's alpha value to increase, which also shows that all scales have high reliability.

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used to test the convergent validity of the internal items of each variable. The main purpose was to test the fitness of the actual measurement data and the theoretical framework (Reis and Judd 2000). From Table 3, CMIN/DF is 1.852, which is less than 3. GFI, AGFI, NFI, TLI, IFI and CFI all reach the standards above 0.9. RMSEA is 0.045, less than 0.08. Most of the

fitting indices are in line with the general SEM research standards, so it can be concluded that the model has a good fit.

Table 4 shows that the standardized factor loadings of each question are more than 0.5, and the residuals are positive and significant, showing that there is no violation of the estimate. The component reliability of brand awareness, perceived brand quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty were 0.841, 0.860, 0.867, and 0.808, respectively, which were all greater than 0.7. The average variance extracted (AVE) of variation was 0.570, 0.607, 0.521, and 0.585, respectively, which were all greater than 0.5, reaching the standard of convergent validity. The fitness was acceptable, so all questions were reserved for subsequent analysis.

Brand equity evaluation of Guangzhou's ICH

Table 5 lists the average score and standard deviation of residents and tourists on the brand equity index of Guangzhou's ICH from the four dimensions. The average score of all questions is above 5.0. In this regard, we can conclude that Guangzhou's ICH makes the public have a high degree of brand awareness, perceived brand quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty; that is, the public has a high evaluation of ICH's city brand equity in Guangzhou. The detailed evaluations of respondents' four dimensions will be illustrated in the following two aspects.

First, it is obvious that Guangzhou's ICH has been recognized in terms of perceived brand quality and brand associations. Among the five variables with the highest average score, two are from the perceived brand quality dimension and two are from brand associations. This shows that the public subscribes to the description of indicators



Table 4 Results of CFA

Dimension	Items	Non-standardized factor loadings	SE	t value	p	Standardized factor loadings	CR	AVE
Brand awareness [AW]	AW1	1				0.74	0.841	0.57
	AW2	1.196	0.058	20.707	***	0.8		
	AW3	1.116	0.058	19.208	***	0.734		
	AW4	1.238	0.064	19.405	***	0.742		
Perceived brand quality [BQ]	BQ1	1				0.797	0.86	0.607
	BQ2	0.985	0.042	23.285	***	0.787		
	BQ3	0.974	0.048	20.429	***	0.704		
	BQ4	1.179	0.048	24.471	***	0.823		
Brand associations [AS]	AS1	1				0.705	0.867	0.521
	AS2	0.891	0.047	19.042	***	0.738		
	AS3	1.014	0.054	18.867	***	0.73		
	AS4	1.036	0.053	19.408	***	0.753		
	AS5	0.994	0.053	18.654	***	0.722		
	AS6	1.045	0.059	17.659	***	0.681		
Brand loyalty [LO]	LO1	1				0.77	0.808	0.585
	LO2	1.066	0.052	20.4	***	0.809		
	LO3	0.926	0.05	18.638	***	0.712		

****p* < 0.001

Table 5 Descriptive statistical results of each item in the sample (*n* = 799)

Items	Mean	SD
AW1 I know Guangzhou is a city with rich ICH	5.42	1.296
<i>AW2</i> When I think about ICH, Guangzhou is one of the cities that come to mind	<i>5.33</i>	1.331
<i>AW3</i> I am very familiar with the ICH of Guangzhou	<i>5.22</i>	1.295
AW4 I can name some ICH projects in Guangzhou	5.42	1.422
BQ1 Making use of Guangzhou's ICH can create a unique cultural place	5.35	1.101
<i>BQ2</i> Using Guangzhou's ICH can produce high-quality goods	<i>5.26</i>	1.086
BQ3 Guangzhou's ICH has important aesthetic and artistic value	5.61	1.195
BQ4 ICH endows Guangzhou with profound cultural deposits	5.49	1.245
<i>AS1</i> Guangzhou has its economic values for being branded as a city with rich ICH	<i>5.27</i>	1.210
<i>AS2</i> I think it's a better choice for tourists to build Guangzhou into a city with rich ICH	<i>5.37</i>	1.030
<i>AS3</i> I think it's a better choice for residents to build Guangzhou into a city with rich ICH	<i>5.19</i>	1.179
<i>AS4</i> Learning ICH knowledge, purchasing ICH products and visiting ICH sites will make me feel fruitful	<i>5.28</i>	1.166
<i>AS5</i> Guangzhou's ICH makes me feel distinct local characteristics	<i>5.33</i>	1.184
<i>AS6</i> Guangzhou's ICH is interesting, and it interests me	<i>5.09</i>	1.309
LO1 I am willing to take the initiative to learn about Guangzhou's ICH	5.39	1.289
<i>LO2</i> I will introduce Guangzhou's ICH to others	<i>5.33</i>	1.303
LO3 If I want to live or travel in a city with strong cultural atmosphere, Guangzhou is my first choice	5.31	1.285

The five highest averages are in bold and the five lowest averages are in italics

related to perceived brand quality and brand associations of Guangzhou's ICH. The high brand awareness reflects that the public has a certain understanding and familiarity with Guangzhou's ICH, which can connect Guangzhou with the ICH. At the same time, the public has a high evaluation of the quality of the brand, believing that the ICH can create cultural places with unique styles, produce high-quality

commodities, and endow Guangzhou with profound cultural deposits, especially with important aesthetic value. Such positive cognition has a direct impact on the brand value of Guangzhou's ICH, promotes the formation of a process that is different from that of competitive brands, and reflects a certain brand identity.



Second, the public's evaluation of brand awareness and brand loyalty is relatively weak compared to perceived brand quality and brand association. Among the five items with the lowest average score, 3 are from the dimension of brand association, but the total score is still greater than 5.0, reflecting a high evaluation. The results illustrate that residents and tourists have a certain understanding of Guangzhou's ICH and can connect Guangzhou's ICH with local characteristics, personal choice and personal harvest. In the dimension of brand loyalty, the public shows a relatively positive willingness to learn and spread ICH, and most of the respondents will consider Guangzhou as their first choice of residence with a strong cultural atmosphere. Such enthusiasm of consumers for brand communication is conducive to achieving the goal of brand realization.

In general, as consumers of city brands, residents and tourists hold a positive attitude towards the brand value of Guangzhou's ICH, and it has strong brand equity. The public's recognition of the locality of Guangzhou's ICH presents the characteristics of Guangzhou, which is a positive response to the uniqueness and identification of the city brand. However, there is still room for improvement in arousing brand association and loyalty, and better consultation among the government, non-hereditary inheritors and the public is needed to achieve more effective brand promotion and marketing to promote the formation of more obvious competitive advantages.

The promotion mechanism of Guangzhou's ICH brand equity

Table 6 shows that the correlation coefficients of brand awareness, perceived brand quality and brand associations are 0.405 and 0.296, respectively, and the p values all reach the significance level of 0.01, indicating that there is a significant positive correlation between brand awareness, perceived brand quality and brand associations. The correlation coefficients of brand awareness, perceived brand quality, brand associations and brand loyalty were 0.405, 0.507 and 0.434, respectively, and the p values reached the significance level of 0.01, indicating that there was a significant positive correlation between brand awareness, perceived brand quality, brand associations and brand loyalty. It is generally

Table 6 Correlation analysis and discriminant validity

	AW	BQ	AS	LO
AW	0.754			
BQ	0.405**	0.779		
AS	0.296**	0.453**	0.721	
LO	0.405**	0.507**	0.434**	0.764

** $p < 0.01$

believed that the square root of AVE of each variable (diagonal bold number) is greater than the correlation coefficient between any two variables, which indicates that the discriminant validity of each latent variable is high (Fornell and Larcker 1981), indicating that the discriminant validity of this study meets the analysis requirements. Table 7 shows that most of the fitting indices are in line with the standard of general SEM research, thus it can be considered that this model has a good fit.

The hypothesis model is tested, and the test results show that the path coefficient has a significant correlation. Table 8 shows that brand awareness has a significant positive correlation with perceived brand quality ($\beta = 0.476$, $t = 11.827$, $p < 0.001$). Brand awareness had a significant positive correlation with brand associations ($\beta = 0.366$, $t = 8.954$, $p < 0.001$). There was a significant positive correlation between brand awareness and brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.214$, $t = 4.847$, $p < 0.001$). Perceived brand quality had a significant positive correlation with brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.392$, $t = 8.987$, $p < 0.001$). Brand associations had a significant positive correlation with brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.261$, $t = 6.595$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, it is assumed that H1-H5 are all valid.

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the value of Guangzhou's urban culture (in particular its ICH) as well as its potential for brand building. We evaluate the brand equity of Guangzhou's ICH from the four dimensions of brand awareness, perceived brand quality, brand association and brand loyalty and build a structural equation model to analyse the promotion mechanism of brand equity. Through the evaluation of brand equity by questionnaire surveys, our findings show that Guangzhou's ICH has a good reputation among residents and tourists. In this sense, the ICH has a reliable foundation and potential for city brand building, which is of great significance for Guangzhou's city branding. In the

Table 7 Model fit of SEM

Fitting index	Acceptable range	Measured value
CMIN		325.168
DF		114
CMIN/DF	< 3	2.852
GFI	> 0.9	0.955
AGFI	> 0.9	0.939
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.048
NFI	> 0.9	0.954
IFI	> 0.9	0.970
TLI (NNFI)	> 0.9	0.964
CFI	> 0.9	0.970



Table 8 Path coefficient of SEM

Path	Hypotheses	β	Nonstandardize Coefficient	SE	<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i>	Support
AW → BQ	H1	0.476	0.402	0.034	11.827	***	Strongly supported
AW → AS	H2	0.366	0.308	0.034	8.954	***	Strongly supported
AW → LO	H3	0.214	0.201	0.041	4.847	***	Strongly supported
BQ → LO	H4	0.392	0.434	0.048	8.987	***	Strongly supported
AS → LO	H5	0.261	0.29	0.044	6.595	***	Strongly supported

*** $p < 0.001$

model of brand equity of Guangzhou's ICH, brand awareness is an important influencing factor of perceived brand quality, brand association and brand loyalty and is the first step to build and enhance brand equity. Perceived brand quality and brand association are the key influencing factors of brand loyalty. They are the two key dimensions of brand equity that jointly affect perceived value and realize the public's brand loyalty. As the core of brand equity and the main goal of brand building, brand loyalty is the intuitive embodiment of brand equity.

Through this mechanism, we find that the brand equity of Guangzhou's ICH can be improved through related strategies. Brand awareness, as a starting point for the enhancement of Guangzhou's ICH brand equity, should be of particular focus for those who build and promote the city's brand. Most of the public must be familiar with Guangzhou's ICH before further understanding and promoting it, which reflects the importance of a certain degree of brand awareness to enhance perceived brand quality, brand associations and brand loyalty, so branding needs to expand cognitive influence based on the original mass base. Among them, in the brand awareness dimension, the ability to name some ICH projects in Guangzhou reflects the public's specific knowledge of Guangzhou's ICH and indicates that the knowledge of individual specific projects of ICH is more conducive to achieving further public perception, association and promotion of the brand, rather than ICH as a whole. Therefore, in addition to promoting ICH, city managers should also focus on the preservation and heritage of individual projects to achieve better brand diffusion.

Second, perceived brand quality and brand associations also have an important impact on brand loyalty to ICH. The perceived quality of the brand plays a greater role in influencing one's own acceptance and choice of ICH, as it is linked to one's actual consumer experience. This is partly reflected in the role of enhancing and ensuring the quality and value of the brand in consolidating the original consumer base. At the same time, participation in ICH-related activities is the most direct source of public cultural perception, whether it is knowledge absorption, consumption experience or spatial perception level gain, which has a significant impact on the brand loyalty of residents and visitors.

This result implies the importance of events and place-making in the brand building process, which is reflected in the branding of ICH in Guangzhou as ICH courses are conducted, cultural and creative products are created, and ICH exhibitions are held. Additionally, making Guangzhou a city with a distinct ICH identity as a better choice for living is key to enhancing brand loyalty. The enhancement of the city's cultural atmosphere and heritage is likely to give residents a greater sense of pride and visitors a greater sense of immersion. The acceptance of Guangzhou as a residential choice will lead to a greater understanding of the city's culture and promote the process of active and recommended learning about ICH culture, which may lead to a greater understanding of ICH and have a positive impact on brand loyalty.

In addition, the local character of ICH is one of the sources of brand uniqueness, linked to the lineage of local development, and the natural geographical and historical conditions of the place become the functional value guarantee of the ICH brand, and this unique value positively influences the process of active learning and introduction of ICH to others by residents and visitors. This variable indicates the importance of preserving the local characteristics of ICH. The possibility of the city becoming a better choice for tourists due to its strong culture of ICH reflects the spill over of the brand and becomes one of the prerequisites for the public to introduce and make this city a first choice for residence to others. Thus, ICH promotions and activities for tourists are valued, for example, in special attractions and tourist shopping areas, focusing on ICH characterization and atmosphere creation.

From the perspective of urban development, we applied the ICH as the entry point and discussed the role of brands in enhancing a city's 'soft power'. Guangzhou is an important international metropolis and 'opportunity city' in China. The ICH, as the soul of the city's brand card, would be a conducive foothold for Guangzhou to be a city with cultural diversity. Empirically, this study focuses on the evaluation of the ICH in city brand building, which could be expected to provide a decision-making reference for urban cultural regulation. The article also has some limitations. Based on the fact that the later evaluation of residents and tourists as



brand consumers plays an important role in the process of brand value promotion, it is exceedingly important to further study the different views of other stakeholders to explore the differences in ICH brand equity across social strata, including decision-making bodies, developers and investors, non-governmental organizations, immigrants and talent. In addition, this paper did not strictly limit the number of people with different attributes when the questionnaire was released, which may have led to an unbalanced number of sample attributes and skewed the results of the questionnaire. It is hoped that future research can be considered from these aspects.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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