

Destination Brand Communication in the Digital Age: The Case of Traditional Villages in Jinxing, China

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Abstract

Local governments and stakeholders are increasingly focusing on leveraging modern digital media as marketing communication channels to build distinctive place brandings. However, existing research has primarily centered on well-known tourism destination brands, with limited attention to economically backward areas, and the role of stakeholders in digital media communication remains unclear. Based on stakeholder theory, this study explores the potential of digital media communication in place branding for traditional village tourism destination, focusing on stakeholders' roles, with Jingxing traditional village in Hebei, China as the case study. In-depth interviews were conducted with 16 representatives from four key stakeholder groups: government, business operators, local residents and tourists. This study examines stakeholder roles in destination brand communication, focusing on digital media strategies for less prominent tourism destination, using Jingxing as a case study. It highlights the varying influences of stakeholders, particularly the government's dominant role, to provide insights for branding in economically disadvantaged regions. The findings offer practical implications for destination managers in implementing place branding strategies.

Keywords: stakeholders, place branding, digital media communication, Jingxing traditional village

1. Introduction

Tourism destination branding has been widely recognized as an essential topic in academic research (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011; Rather et al., 2021; Vuignier, 2017). A tourism destination is a place where people travel for leisure, business, or other purposes, supported by attractions, infrastructure, and services (Komilova et al., 2021). Destination branding refers to the strategic creation of a clear identity and image that strengthens a destination's appeal and competitiveness in the tourism market (Rather et al., 2022).

Globally, digital media has become a powerful tool in tourism destination branding. Online platforms allow destinations to reach wider audiences, enhance brand visibility, and build interactive relationships with potential visitors (Tran & Rudolf, 2022). For rural and less-developed areas, digital media can provide cost-effective opportunities to showcase cultural and natural assets, thus narrowing the gap with well-known destinations. Building a sustainable destination brand through digital communication can create tangible benefits for governments, local communities, and other stakeholders.

In China, tourism destination branding has been adopted as a key strategy for addressing challenges in the tourism industry and for promoting regional economic growth. Yet, most studies have focused on large or famous destinations, while less attention has been given to economically disadvantaged areas such as traditional villages. Jingxing, a traditional village in the Taihang Mountains of Hebei Province, provides a representative case. Despite its limited economic base, Jingxing has cultural heritage and natural resources that make it a potential rural tourism destination. However, research on how digital media supports branding in such traditional villages remains scarce.

Stakeholder theory highlights that destination branding outcomes depend on the involvement of groups directly connected to the destination (Dabphet et al., 2012). In the case of Jingxing, the main stakeholders include local government, tourism operators, residents, and tourists. Their participation in digital media communication is critical to building and sustaining the village's brand. Prior research shows that tourism growth can bring positive social and economic changes, leading to stronger community support (Ramkissoon, 2023).

This study investigates the role of stakeholders in digital media communication for destination branding in Jingxing. Specifically, it examines how different stakeholders contribute to and perceive branding efforts in this rural tourism context. By situating Jingxing within the broader global discussion of digital media and rural tourism branding, the study provides insights into strategies for economically disadvantaged regions and contributes to a more inclusive understanding of destination branding.

2. Literature Review

Stakeholders are a group of individuals in an organization who share common goals (Bowie, 1998; Freeman & Reed, 1983) and are dedicated to the success of the organization. Freeman (2010, p. 5) defines stakeholders as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives " (p. 5). From the perspective of a tourism destination, stakeholders are considered individuals, groups, or organizations with specific interests in the destination. Gray and Wood (1991) and Tsetse et al. (2022) mentioned that stakeholders of tourism destinations are those affected by the performance of the destination's tourism industry. In this context, Roxas et al. (2020) introduced four types of stakeholders in tourism destinations, namely the government, business operators, local residents and tourists.

Therefore, in line with the stakeholder theory, the multiple stakeholders of digital media communication for Jingxing Traditional Village destination branding can be residents, businesses, the government, and tourists (Cerdeira-Bertomeu & Sarabia-Sanchez, 2016) directly involved in the brand-building process, as well as outsiders not directly involved but influenced by the brand. The stakeholder theory examines the interests, needs, and interactions of these parties, emphasizing the importance of their participation in shaping the brand (Duarte Alonso & Nyanjom, 2017).

In the digitalized era, digital media platforms serve as a vital tool for facilitating stakeholder engagement and collaboration. Government use digital platforms to disseminate information about tourism policies, events, and initiatives (Yavetz & Aharony, 2021). Businesses operators leverage digital marketing strategies to promote their services and collaborate with influencers to reach a wider audience (Drummond et al., 2020). Residents can utilize social media to share their stories and cultural heritage, fostering a sense of authenticity and community (Ginzarly & Teller, 2021). Tourists share experiences through reviews, photos, and videos, creating user-generated content that enhances the destination's online presence (Skinner, 2022).

As highlighted by McGahan (2023), stakeholders differ in their roles and responses to issues, such that their contributions vary in diverse ways due to their unique characteristics. For example, while residents may prioritize cultural preservation, businesses may focus on profitability, and tourists may seek memorable experiences. Effective place branding requires balancing these diverse interests and fostering collaboration among stakeholders.

3. Method

The research focuses on addressing a notable gap in the literature regarding the roles of stakeholders in digital media communication for rural tourism destination branding, particularly in economically disadvantaged traditional villages like Jingxing. While previous studies have examined stakeholder involvement in well-known tourism destinations, limited research has explored how different stakeholder groups, such as government, local residents, business operators and tourists, interact and contribute to branding efforts through digital media in less prominent rural contexts. To address this gap, this study adopts a qualitative approach and selects 16 participants from the four core stakeholder groups, ensuring a comprehensive representation of the main actors and their interactions in the process of Jingxing traditional village destination branding.

The researcher conducted a total of 16 face-to-face interviews with representatives from four key stakeholder groups: government, business operators, local residents, and tourists. This sample size was determined in accordance with the principles and objectives of qualitative research. As the study aims to delve deeply into subjective experiences and attitudes rather than pursue statistical generalization, depth and richness of information were prioritized over sample size. The purposive sampling of representatives from these four groups ensured coverage of core perspectives. During data analysis, data saturation was observed, whereby subsequent interviews ceased to yield new themes, confirming that 16 participants provided sufficient and profound information to address the research questions.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was audio-recorded to ensure accurate documentation. Following the interviews, the researchers transcribed the verbal content and proceeded to conduct thematic analysis (Christou, 2022). This analytical approach enables the interpretation of rich, in-depth data, affording the study detailed insights into the stakeholders' experiences, beliefs, and attitudes towards the tourism branding of Jingxing Traditional Village. Thematic analysis facilitates understanding of textual content by examining meanings, semantics, and contextual information. Ultimately, this method transforms individual stakeholder experiences into broader insights relevant to wider audiences and other stakeholders in the fields of digital media and tourism branding.

Table 1 summarizes the basic information of the 16 participants. Females represented a larger proportion and exhibited a high level of involvement in the village's tourism management and operations. Over 75% of the participants had been living in Jingxing for five years or more, of which 62% had been residents for more than 10 years, they can be found among all four types of stakeholders, especially among the groups of government officials and local residents, indicating relatively long-term experiences. In terms of age, 75% were over 35 years old, with 68% falling between the ages of 30 and 50. To distinguish between the different types of stakeholders, the researchers labeled the participants as government (G), business operators (BO), local residents (LR), and tourists (T).

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

Informant	Gender	Age	Education	Years of Residence
G-1	Male	52	Bachelor	52
G-2	Female	50	Bachelor	50
G-3	Male	50	Master	4
G-4	Male	54	Diploma	54
BO-1	Male	39	Diploma	7
BO-2	Female	38	High school	6
BO-3	Female	32	Bachelor	32
BO-4	Female	36	Bachelor	36
LR-1	Male	42	High school	42
LR-2	Female	46	Junior high school	46
LR-3	Male	40	Diploma	40
LR-4	Male	61	Primary school	61
T-1	Male	30	Master	3
T-2	Female	28	Diploma	4
T-3	Female	26	Diploma	3
T-4	Male	39	Diploma	12
Total			16	

4. Findings

Through NVivo analysis of the interview content, the research findings address the research question, revealing that different stakeholders play distinct roles in the digital media communication of the tourism destination place branding for Jingxing traditional village.

4.1 Distinct Roles of Different Stakeholders

In developing the destination branding of Jingxing Traditional Village, particularly through digital media communication, the active stakeholders are the government, business operators, local residents, and tourists. The thematic analysis of 16 in-depth interviews with these stakeholder groups provided concrete evidence of their distinct yet interrelated roles, capabilities, and objectives (Ali et al., 2017; Christou, 2022; Murphy & Murphy, 2004). The government is responsible for planning, guidance, and infrastructure development (Liu & Lu, 2021); business operators shape and disseminate the brand; local residents maintain the environment and demonstrate local culture (Aktürk & Lerski, 2021); and tourists provide experiences and feedback that inform ongoing brand development (Nangpiire et al., 2022).

Data from the interviews indicate that participants perceive these roles as complementary and interactive. For instance, tourists' feedback directly influenced how the government and business operators adjusted marketing strategies, while local residents' engagement in cultural practices reinforced the authenticity of the brand. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the 16 participants, showing a predominance of females, high levels of involvement in tourism activities, and long-term residency, which together support their insights into the branding process.

However, the study's conclusions should be interpreted with caution due to the limited sample size and the focus on a single traditional village. While the 16 participants provided rich, in-depth data across four stakeholder groups, the findings may not fully generalize to other rural or economically disadvantaged villages. Future research could expand the sample size, include additional villages, or adopt longitudinal methods to examine changes in stakeholder engagement and brand development over time. Furthermore, comparative studies across different socio-economic contexts could enhance understanding of how digital media strategies vary in rural tourism destination branding.

4.1.1 Government

The government was represented mainly by an official of Jingxing County, and the deputy head of tourism development at Jingxing County, who has worked there for four years, was interviewed face-to-face by the researchers. He believes that the government's role in Jingxing cultural tourism destination brand digital media communication is the most important.

G-3 said, "The government can provide support through policies, and this is self-evident. While the primary affairs of the tourism industry are controlled by the tourism department, they require support from other government departments. The tourism department alone would be limited in its ability to fully work, given its budgetary and authoritative constraints. As a government leader, I am personally very supportive of the digital media communication of local brands. I would proactively propose some development suggestions, and then the tourism department would carry out their work based on this foundation to support the digital media communication of local brands".

Informant G-1 expressed agreement with this viewpoint.

G-1 stated, "Although we are the governing department for cultural tourism projects, we largely need to carry out our work in accordance with the policies set by government officials. Of course, the government remains the most important stakeholder among the interest groups. For the development of the local economy, government decision-makers nurture local tourism specialty products. Simultaneously, the government is also a direct beneficiary of the digital media communication of local brands".

Both interviewees mentioned "policies" during their respective interviews, directly reflecting the government's prominent role as the formulator and enforcer of policies, laws, and industry regulations. The government implements policies for "benefits," as heard in the conversation with informant G-1. This aligns with Jørgensen and Munar (2009) assertion that there is a close relationship between destination branding and the government's ability to acquire valuable resources.

The informant G-4, who is also a government official, mentioned the government's policy development and guidance role many times in the interview.

G-4 reflected, "Since its establishment, with the support and guidance of the government, we have helped more than 20 villages to apply for national-level traditional villages. For example, the well-known Yujiashitou Village is encouraged by the government to help villagers successfully apply, and now it has gained considerable fame. The government does this not only because it has a policy, but also to fulfill the social functions of government".

G-4 added, "The government can also guide other groups through various aspects such as policy and taxation. For example, to encourage the development of tourist destinations, tax relief policies are implemented for enterprises to provide industry support and policy guidance for enterprise development".

In stakeholder theory, the government is considered a coercive external force that uses regulations to protect the interests of the public, the environment, and other stakeholders (Greenwood & Van Buren III, 2010). Simultaneously, stakeholder theory emphasizes an organization's responsibility to society (Freeman & Dmytriiev, 2017). In this regard, the government plays a role in encouraging businesses to fulfill their social responsibilities through incentive measures, reward systems, or regulations. Therefore, the government's main role is evident in its authority to formulate, implement, and supervise effective policies. By formulating policies and regulating activities, the government ensures that organizations, while pursuing economic profits, also respect and satisfy other social interests.

Therefore, in the context of tourism destination branding, the government can establish guidelines for sustainable tourism practices, ensuring that businesses and local communities prioritize environmental conservation and cultural preservation. Additionally, the government can act as a mediator, balancing the competing interests of various stakeholders, such as residents, tourists, and businesses, to create a harmonious and inclusive development strategy. The government's proactive involvement not only strengthens the destination's brand but also promotes long-term sustainability and equitable growth for all stakeholders involved.

4.1.2 Business Operators

Another crucial stakeholder group in the implementation of digital media communication for the Jingxing Traditional Village's branding is private business operators. This group actively promotes the digital media communication of the destination brand within their industry.

The first informant is the owner of a Jingxing souvenir shop. He was influenced by the cultural tourism destination brand and opened his shop in Jingxing.

BO-1 stated, "Regarding the implementation of digital media communication for the Jingxing cultural tourism destination brand, I am quite optimistic. This optimism stems partly from government support and partly from the expectations of business operators. We are eager to share the benefits brought by digital media to the brand of the tourism destination; it allows the products we operate to be more widely disseminated. Therefore, we actively respond to the government's call to promote the use of digital media communication in various business activities".

Informant BO-4 expressed agreement with the views of informant BO-1.

BO-4 said, "Even though we are small and medium-sized enterprise operators, our group is quite large. We regularly organize events, and we can also contribute to the digital media communication of the local tourism destination brand. This brings us tangible benefits".

The informant BO-2, who runs a tourist souvenir shop in Jingxing Nanyukou Village, believes that online marketing through digital media platforms can help business operators promote awareness of Jingxing tourism destination place branding.

BO-2 reflected, "As far as I know, some online celebrity shops in Jingxing generally sell goods on the live broadcast platform of TikTok, which on the one hand increases their economic benefits, and on the other hand also improves the brand awareness of Jingxing tourist destination".

Business operators appeared to focus on economic benefits, as the informant mentioned that their products can be "more widely disseminated," thereby increasing their visibility and, consequently, profits (Puspanathan et al., 2022). Business operators serve as a bridge between the tourism destination and tourists (Yarcan & Çetin, 2021). Their activities not only promote cultural heritage but also contribute to its preservation and innovation. Business operators' activities directly shape public perception, drive customer engagement, and determine the overall positioning of the brand in the market (Jaitly & Gautam, 2021). As the primary touchpoints for customer interactions (Anumudu et al., 2022), business operators play a pivotal role in defining the brand experience and ensuring its alignment with the destination's identity.

Regarding the role of business operators, Informant BO-4 mentioned that they regularly organize events to assist in brand communication, which the researchers consider as part of their role. These activities contribute to increasing the visibility of the tourist destination brand, benefiting the operators. Additionally, stakeholder theory suggests that business operators have a responsibility to society (Dmytriiev et al., 2021). They should therefore consider the impact of their business activities on society and take measures to minimize negative effects in order to promote sustainable development in society (Utting, 2000).

4.1.3 Local Residents

Local residents in the traditional villages of Jingxing are also important stakeholders in the digital media communication of the destination place branding. They are not just observers of the process but active participants, as their hospitality can influence tourists' experiences. These residents also actively participate in creating digital media communication platforms and shooting promotional videos of local life for media dissemination, which attract the attention of tourists. One informant stated:

LR-4 stated, "I'm more than happy to be filmed. It's just my daily life, yet it serves the purpose of promoting my hometown. This will allow more people to see me on media platforms and develop an interest in my hometown. Even though I'm quite old and don't have to leave my house, I can still make more people know about me. This excites me, and of course, it brings some positive improvements to my life".

The informant LR-2, a local rural woman whose daily life was recorded by the TV station.

LR-2 said, "I usually do some housework at home, the women in the village will do some handwork, such as soles, weaving cloth, etc., the TV people came to say that they want to film us, in our families here are like this, when the women are weaving cloth, Na soles, they filmed me on TV, saying that they can promote our village".

The researchers found that local residents benefit from showcasing their daily life scenes on digital media platforms. While they may not have a decisive role, they are the main participants in the dissemination of the tourism destination brand. Notably, the involvement of local residents is proactive, as they are willing to share their daily lives based on the perception that it can contribute to the development of their hometown. As the dissemination of the tourism destination brand expands, local residents also derive economic benefits from such development. Correspondingly, stakeholder theory advocates for positive interaction with community residents during the tourism destination brand management process to achieve a mutually beneficial relationship between the brand and residents, promoting the sustainable development of the tourism destination (Garrod et al., 2012).

4.1.4 Tourists

As an essential element in destination branding research, tourists play a crucial role in influencing the marketing outcomes of a tourism destination branding through their travel preferences and individual behaviors. Understanding the behaviors of tourists is therefore a vital aspect of destination branding and marketing for a region.

T-1 stated, "I am fascinated by traditional culture and architecture, and, of course, I showcase my travels on my personal media platforms, which brings me a sense of satisfaction. If a place with history can be presented to me through modern digital media, it is undoubtedly exciting. This would make my travels more convenient, and

information dissemination more efficient. I believe I would introduce it to my friends, and we would come here often”.

Informant T-2 is a fan of architectural culture tourism, and his views are representative.

T-2 mentioned, “As an architectural culture tourism enthusiast, I can deeply understand the history, culture and architectural features of Jingxing through field visits, and then share these knowledge and experience through social media, blog or video, so that more people can know the charm of Jingxing. The spread of this way can not only let people have a deeper understanding of Jingxing, but also attract more people to travel to Jingxing”.

The view of T-2 is shared by the informant T-3, who is a traditional village photography enthusiast. As a tourist, his views are also worth referring.

T-3 said, “My friends recommended Jingxing to me, and they are actively establishing the digital media communication of the destination brand, which is very necessary. It brings a lot of convenience to travelers, and I can book accommodation, transportation, and more in advance.....”

T-3 also mentioned, “I shared the photo of the traditional village of Jingxing in my WeChat moments, and many friends asked me where it was... It was like discovering a treasure trove of traditional architecture. It was so exciting! This is my personal experience as a tourist, and I think it is also the role of tourists that I want to share, that is, to realize the spread of Jingxing tourist destination brand through the word of mouth and recommendation of tourists”.

Tourist interviewees consistently mentioned "convenience" as a key aspect, and the researchers posit that this represents the most prominent feature of digital media communication in the context of tourism. During the interview process, tourists also mentioned that they are willing to recommend it to their friends. It can be analyzed that the tourists' experience is exciting and pleasant, which is a direct manifestation of the role of tourists as experiencers and feedback providers. Indeed, Balakrishnan et al. (2011) identified a crucial and motivational link between tourism destination branding and tourist decision-making. This sentiment was shared by the researchers as well, who experienced being tourists at the Jingxing Traditional Village while actively engaging in on-site observations at the destination.

Correspondingly, stakeholder theory encourages destination managers to consider the voices of tourists in decision-making processes (Mahamad et al., 2021) and, whenever possible, involve them in the development of tourism products and services. It is therefore reasonable that the government, businesses operators, and local residents all endorse digital media platforms for communicating with tourists, deeming these platforms not only convenient but also imbued with a sense of trendiness, contributing to tourist satisfaction.

Stakeholder theory posits that a brand is shaped by the interests, needs, interactions, and involvement of multiple stakeholders, including residents, businesses, government entities, and tourists (Duarte Alonso & Nyanjom, 2017). In summary, this study finds that the four stakeholder groups play distinct roles in the digital media communication of the Jingxing traditional village's tourism destination branding. The positioning of these roles stems from the evident responsibilities the various stakeholders assume in the place branding's media communication.

4.2 Government Role Among Stakeholders

The distinct roles of the four types of stakeholders were elucidated in the previous section. Moving on, this study discusses the government's leading role among the stakeholders in the digital media communication of the tourism destination brand.

As one of the most significant stakeholders, the Jingxing County government has propelled the development of the Jingxing Traditional Village tourism brand by introducing policies related to digital media communication. The government serves as both a development planner and policymaker, requiring clear plans and policies to achieve its objectives. Moreover, among the various stakeholders, the government's role is the most direct in tourism destination branding. This is primarily because the government stands to gain the most visibly from Jingxing's digital media branding, especially by contributing to government officials' achievements and political performance.

BO-3 explained, “To promote the digital media communication of the tourism destination brand, the government has provided us with many preferential policies. For example, if businesses promote the cultural tourism brand of Jingxing Traditional Village architecture on their own websites, they will be recognized as star enterprises and receive tax incentives in terms of corporate taxation. This indeed has a significant impact on business operators”.

This viewpoint was endorsed by informant BO-2.

BO-2 mentioned, “The government leads the policy direction, and its ability to guide the public towards the goals it aims to achieve is unparalleled by other interest groups”.

Local villagers also believe that the government can make their lives better and are willing to trust the government in this regard.

LR-2 stated, "The government advocates for us villagers to learn digital technology and has organized training sessions, which makes us feel intrigued. The activities promoted by the government utilize various incentive policies to guide the villagers. As policymakers, the government's guidelines bring us benefits when we comply with them".

Stakeholders usually include organizations, companies, or regional development entities. In the context of this study, stakeholders are individuals falling within the determined categories, endowed with the authority, legitimacy, urgency, and proximity necessary for implementing digital media communication to develop the Jingxing tourism destination brand. It is evident that the government, being an institution, possesses both the greatest authority and urgency in the development of this tourism destination brand, rendering its role the most direct and impactful.

Additionally, the interviewees consistently highlighted the government's use of "policies" to guide local residents and business operators, driven by the prospect of greater benefits. Collaboration and dialogue between the government and businesses are acknowledged as pivotal mechanisms for upholding overall social stability and sustainability (Kardos, 2012). Business operators, local residents, and tourists, whether directly or indirectly managed by the government, are subject to the influence of government policies and development initiatives, thereby affecting the economic performance of a region. In summary, the role of the government among the various stakeholder groups is the most prominent.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study, grounded in stakeholder theory, examined the roles and perspectives of different stakeholders in digital media communication for the tourism destination branding of Jingxing Traditional Village. In-depth interviews with 16 stakeholders revealed four distinct categories with specific contributions to brand development. The government promotes social responsibility and guides sustainable development through policy initiatives, holding a dominant position due to its authority and resource allocation capabilities. Business operators enhance brand awareness via inter-organizational activities and act as intermediaries between the destination and tourists. Local residents engage actively with the tourism brand, sharing daily life and cultural practices, thereby reinforcing authenticity. Tourists influence the brand through their experiences and feedback, highlighting the importance of incorporating tourist voices in decision-making and even in product and service development.

The findings underscore the critical importance of collaborative stakeholder engagement in destination branding, particularly in economically disadvantaged regions. Digital media platforms serve as essential tools for co-creating a cohesive and authentic brand identity, enabling stakeholders to reach both local and global audiences. For policymakers, the study suggests prioritizing structured frameworks and equitable access to digital resources to ensure sustainable tourism development. Digital marketers should actively involve local residents and tourists in content creation and feedback processes to strengthen brand authenticity and engagement.

Despite the rich insights, the study acknowledges limitations due to its small sample size and focus on a single village. Future research could expand the scope by including multiple rural destinations, employing quantitative methods to validate these findings, or conducting comparative analyses across diverse socio-economic contexts. Such research would deepen understanding of stakeholder roles in digital destination branding and inform more effective strategies for rural tourism development.

6. Limitation and Recommendations

Although the 16 in-depth interviews and multiple observations conducted in this study yielded meaningful findings, a larger sample size could offer more extensive insights into the research topic and stakeholder theory. A broader sample would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse perspectives and dynamics among stakeholders, particularly in different cultural or economic contexts. Additionally, the study's focus on a single case study of Jingxing Traditional Village, while providing depth, limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could expand to include multiple case studies across various regions to identify common patterns and unique challenges in place branding.

To address these limitations, future research could develop in two directions: first, employing quantitative methods to conduct large-scale validation of the findings; second, implementing cross-regional multiple case comparative studies. Simultaneously, subsequent research should adopt more inclusive approaches such as stratified sampling to ensure adequate representation of marginalized groups and small-scale operators, thereby more comprehensively capturing diverse perspectives in place branding.

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