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Cultural Brand Dynamics in Festival Contexts: Examining How Brand Image Drive Brand Loyalty Through Word-of-Mouth Intention

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Abstract

Cultural festivals have emerged as powerful vehicles for destination branding and community identity construction. This study investigates the mechanisms through which brand image shape brand loyalty among festival participants, with particular attention to the mediating function of word-of-mouth (WOM) intention. Drawing on the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) framework, a quantitative survey was administered to 235 valid respondents who had attended the Jinan Spring Water Festival in China. Structural regression analysis confirmed that both brand image ($R^2 = 0.694$, $p < 0.001$) exert significant positive effects on brand loyalty. Bootstrap-based mediation analysis further revealed that WOM intention partially mediates both relationships, functioning as a key psychological conduit through which brand-related stimuli translate into enduring loyalty behaviors. These findings extend S-O-R theory to the cultural event domain and offer actionable guidance for practitioners seeking to cultivate loyal festival audiences through integrated branding and participatory engagement strategies.

Keywords

cultural festival branding, brand image, word-of-mouth intention, brand loyalty, S-O-R framework

1. Introduction

Cultural festivals occupy a distinctive position at the intersection of heritage tourism, creative industries, and place marketing. Unlike conventional product brands, festival brands are inherently experiential, deriving their identity from the collective memories, emotional resonances, and cultural narratives they generate among participants. As the global festival industry grows increasingly competitive, building durable brand loyalty has become a strategic priority for organizers and destination managers. The Jinan Spring Water Festival, held annually in Jinan, Shandong, China, provides an instructive context for investigating these dynamics [1]. Jinan is renowned for its exceptional concentration of artesian springs, which have shaped the city's cultural identity for centuries. First inaugurated in 2013, the festival was conceived as a strategic platform for leveraging this natural and cultural heritage to enhance the city's destination brand. Despite its considerable scale, little systematic empirical attention has been devoted to understanding how attendees develop lasting brand loyalty toward such events. Prior research has examined satisfaction, destination image, and personal involvement as loyalty antecedents, yet the role of brand image, and the mechanisms linking it to loyalty, remains underexplored, particularly within the Chinese cultural festival context. A central argument of this study is that

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the relationship between brand image and loyalty is mediated by participants' intention to disseminate positive word-of-mouth (WOM), which reflects the degree to which they are motivated to share their festival experiences with social networks, thereby reinforcing their own commitment while influencing potential attendees [2]. By positioning WOM intention as a mediating organism-state within the S-O-R framework, this study advances a more nuanced account of the loyalty formation process.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Brand Image and Brand Loyalty in Cultural Contexts

Brand image comprises the cognitive and affective associations consumers hold toward a brand, shaped through cumulative encounters with brand-related stimuli [3]. Extensive evidence links favorable brand image to heightened brand loyalty, including revisit behavior, resistance to switching, and brand advocacy [4]. However, some studies report non-significant or context-dependent effects, particularly when brand image is narrowly operationalized or intervening variables are overlooked [5, 6]. These inconsistencies highlight the need to examine mediating mechanisms, motivating this study. Accordingly: H1: Brand image positively affects brand loyalty:

H1: Brand image exerts a significant positive effect on brand loyalty.

2.2 The Mediating Role of Word-of-Mouth Intention

Word-of-mouth intention is defined as an individual's expressed propensity to voluntarily communicate positive brand evaluations or experiential narratives to members of their social network, whether through face-to-face conversation or digital platforms [7]. As a form of behavioral intention rooted in trust and satisfaction, WOM intention represents a qualitatively distinct behavioral tendency from simple repurchase: it signals that the consumer is sufficiently committed to the brand to stake their social reputation on an endorsement. WOM intention occupies an important mediating position in brand loyalty models for at least two reasons. First, the cognitive-affective processing that underlies WOM generation, reflecting on brand experiences, encoding them as narratives, and evaluating their social shareability, reinforces the consumer's own brand commitment through self-perception mechanisms [8]. Second, the social sharing of brand experiences creates a form of public commitment that psychologically constrains future behavioral flexibility, thereby deepening loyalty [9]. Empirical support for WOM as a mediator in brand loyalty formation has been documented across tourism, fashion, and financial services contexts [10], though its mediating function in cultural festival settings has received scant investigation. Drawing on the foregoing theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence, the present study proposes:

H2: WOM intention mediates the relationship between brand image and brand loyalty.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design targeting individuals who had attended at least one edition of the Jinan Spring Water Festival, including both residents and out-of-city visitors, selected through purposive sampling. A total of 270 questionnaires were administered via online platforms and on-site distribution, with 235 valid responses retained (87.0% response rate). All instruments were adapted from validated scales: brand image (30 items) [11], WOM intention (4 items) [2], and brand loyalty (6 items) [12], rated on a five-point Likert scale. Items were translated using a forward-backward procedure, and a pilot test with 60 respondents confirmed clarity and reliability. Data analysis proceeded sequentially: internal consistency was assessed via Cronbach's alpha, bivariate correlations were examined, direct effects (H1, H2) were tested using multiple regression, and mediation hypotheses were evaluated using Hayes' [13] PROCESS Macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples, all performed using SPSS 27.0.

4. Data Analysis Results

4.1 Reliability Analysis

A pilot test administered to 50 participants prior to full data collection confirmed the reliability of all three measurement instruments. As reported in Table 1, Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.881 to 0.921,

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all exceeding the widely accepted threshold of 0.70 [14]. These findings validate the psychometric adequacy of the adapted instruments for use in the present cultural festival context.

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Coefficients

Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Reliability Level
Brand Image	30	0.881	Good
WOM Intention	4	0.912	Excellent
Brand Loyalty	10	0.889	Good

Note. N = 50 (pilot sample). Reliability levels follow Hair et al. [14]: α ≥ 0.90 = Excellent; 0.80–0.89 = Good; 0.70–0.79 = Acceptable.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 2 presents the Pearson correlation matrix for the four focal constructs based on the full sample of 235 respondents. All inter-construct correlations were positive and statistically significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. Brand image demonstrated the strongest bivariate associations, correlating most strongly with brand loyalty ($r = 0.839$) and WOM intention ($r = 0.752$), followed by WOM Intention ($r = 0.744$). These patterns of association provide preliminary evidence supporting the proposed hypotheses prior to regression-based testing.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation Coefficients Between Study Variables (N = 235)

Variable	Brand Image	WOM Intention	Brand Loyalty
Brand Image	—		
WOM Intention	0.752***	—	
Brand Loyalty	0.839***	0.672***	—

*Note. *** p < 0.001.*

4.3 Hypothesis Testing: Direct Effects

Table 3 summarizes the results of simple regression analyses testing Hypotheses 1. Brand image significantly and positively predicted brand loyalty ($\beta = 0.833$, $t = 21.806$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.694$), indicating that brand image alone accounts for approximately 69.4% of the variance in brand loyalty. H1 is therefore supported, confirming that favorable brand image can substantive predictors of festival brand loyalty.

Table 3: Simple Regression Results for Direct Effects on Brand Loyalty

Predictor	β	t	p	R^2	F
Brand Image → Brand Loyalty	0.833	21.806	< 0.001	0.694	475.502

Note. N = 235. Standardized regression coefficients are reported.

4.4 Mediation Analysis

Mediation hypotheses H2 were tested using Hayes' [13] PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap resamples. Tables 4 report the results for the mediation models. As shown in Table 4, brand image significantly predicted WOM intention ($a = 0.861$, $SE = 0.049$, $t = 17.608$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.765, 0.957]) and directly predicted brand loyalty while controlling for WOM intention ($c' = 0.712$, $SE = 0.052$, $t = 13.716$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.610, 0.814]). WOM intention, in turn, significantly predicted brand loyalty ($b = 0.148$, $SE = 0.052$, $t = 2.838$, $p = 0.005$, 95% CI [0.046, 0.250]). The bootstrap-estimated indirect effect of brand image on brand loyalty through WOM intention was statistically significant ($ab = 0.127$, $SE = 0.046$, 95% CI [0.040, 0.221]), as the confidence interval excluded zero. These results support H2 and indicate partial mediation, with WOM intention channeling a meaningful portion of brand image's influence on loyalty.

Table 4: Mediation Analysis: WOM Intention as Mediator of Brand Image → Brand Loyalty

Path	Coefficient	SE	t / z	95% CI
Brand Image → WOM Intention (a)	0.861	0.049	17.608***	[0.765, 0.957]
Brand Image → Brand Loyalty (c′, direct)	0.712	0.052	13.716***	[0.610, 0.814]
WOM Intention → Brand Loyalty (b)	0.148	0.052	2.838**	[0.046, 0.250]
Indirect Effect (ab)	0.127	0.046	—	[0.040, 0.221]

*Note. N = 235. Bootstrap resamples = 5,000. ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001. Indirect effect CI excludes zero, indicating significant mediation.*

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5. Discussion

The findings yield important insights into cultural festival branding dynamics. The confirmation of H1 is consistent with established branding literature identifying brand image as a primary loyalty antecedent [5]. Perceptions of cultural authenticity, aesthetic richness, and symbolic resonance with Jinan's spring heritage emerged as particularly powerful loyalty drivers, aligning with Tahir et al. [4] finding that destination image directly predicts tourist loyalty. The mediation results for H2 contribute the study's most distinctive theoretical contribution, demonstrating that WOM intention functions as a psychological conduit through which brand image enhances loyalty, extending existing mediation frameworks in festival marketing [8, 10]. The partial mediation suggests brand image influences loyalty through both WOM intention and direct pathways such as attitudinal commitment and affective attachment, consistent with Tessema et al. [2].

6. Conclusion

This study confirms that brand image significantly enhances brand loyalty among Jinan Spring Water Festival attendees. Furthermore, word-of-mouth intention partially mediates this relationship, indicating that brand image fosters loyalty both directly and indirectly through participants' willingness to share positive experiences. Theoretically, this study extends the S-O-R framework to cultural festival branding by identifying WOM intention as a key mediating mechanism. Practically, festival organizers should cultivate a culturally authentic brand image and facilitate experience sharing to reinforce attendee loyalty. These findings underscore the importance of integrating brand image management with social communication strategies in cultural festival contexts.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) declare no conflicts of interest.

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