

Research on the Development Pathways of the Exhibition Economy from an Urban Branding Perspective

Yuxuan Guo*

The Sino-British College, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, 200031, Shanghai, China

*Corresponding author: Yuxuan Guo, judyjudy0904@qq.com

Copyright: 2025 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY-NC 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, and explicitly prohibiting its use for commercial purposes.

Abstract: This paper systematically explores development pathways for the exhibition economy from the perspective of city branding theory. The research indicates a strategic symbiotic relationship between city branding and the exhibition economy, characterised by “brand empowerment of exhibitions and reciprocal reinforcement of the brand by exhibitions”. Currently, China still faces challenges in this field, including insufficient strategic coordination, homogenisation of development models, short-term brand effects, and inadequate international operational capabilities. To address this, the study proposes constructing development pathways across three dimensions: strategic coordination, business model integration, and support optimisation. This involves guiding convention and exhibition industry planning with the core values of the city brand, promoting “convention and exhibition plus” industrial integration, and enhancing hardware, software, policy, and service support systems. Ultimately, this aims to achieve a virtuous cycle of interaction and coordinated development between the convention and exhibition economy and city brand building.

Keywords: City Branding; Exhibition Economy; Strategic Coordination; Business Model Integration; Development Pathway

Published: Dec 30, 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62177/apemr.v2i6.1011>

1.Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

Presently, global urban competition has shifted from mere economic scale rivalry to soft power contests centred on brand image. Urban branding has become a critical strategic asset for attracting high-end resources and enhancing comprehensive competitiveness. As a vital component of modern service industries, the exhibition economy plays an irreplaceable role in shaping and disseminating urban brands through its potent resource aggregation effects, industrial driving capacity, and image dissemination functions^[1]. However, common practical issues such as disconnects between exhibition activities and core city brand values, alongside imbalances between short-term gains and long-term brand development, constrain the full realisation of synergistic effects. Therefore, systematically examining and planning exhibition economy development pathways from a strategic city branding perspective not only enriches the theoretical frameworks of both city branding and exhibition economics but also holds significant practical implications for advancing urban economic restructuring and achieving sustainable development. This study aims to construct a theoretical framework that deeply integrates city brand development with the exhibition economy, providing differentiated and actionable practical guidance for cities with varying endowments^[2].

1.2 Review of Domestic and International Research

Domestic research on the exhibition economy and city branding exhibits a developmental trajectory from fragmented to

integrated approaches, and from descriptive analysis to mechanistic exploration. Early studies predominantly focused on evaluating the economic benefits of exhibitions or constructing single-dimensional city brands. Over the past decade, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the intersection of these two fields, such as examining the instantaneous enhancement of a city's international image through major exhibition events (e.g., the Olympics, World Expos), or analysing the value of the exhibition industry as a city marketing tool^[3]. Nevertheless, most studies remain confined to case analyses or strategic recommendations, lacking in-depth exploration of how city brand strategies can systematically guide the long-term development planning of the exhibition industry. The modelling and theoretical construction of the intrinsic mechanisms governing their interaction remain relatively underdeveloped. Overseas research commenced earlier, grounded in established theories such as destination marketing, event management, and urban regeneration. It places greater emphasis on quantifying the long-term impact of major events on urban brand equity (including awareness, reputation, and loyalty), while also addressing socio-cultural dimensions like community engagement and sustainability. Overall, existing research offers valuable insights for this paper; nevertheless, substantial scope remains for further exploration in constructing an integrated theoretical and practical framework applicable to China's urbanisation context^[4].

2.Theoretical Framework and Interaction Mechanisms of City Branding and the Exhibition Economy

2.1 Core Essence and Constituent System of City Branding

A city brand constitutes the holistic, generalised perception and associations formed in the public consciousness regarding a specific city, comprehensively reflecting its unique geographical, economic, cultural, and social elements. It represents a significant strategic intangible asset. Its composition forms a complex, multi-layered, and multi-dimensional system, which can be deconstructed into three core levels: The core layer comprises the city spirit and brand positioning—the city's unique value proposition, developmental vision, and cultural core—which determine the brand's distinctiveness and directionality; The intermediate layer comprises the city's behavioural identification system, encompassing governmental governance efficacy, corporate conduct standards, civic cultural literacy, and the quality and distinctiveness of economic and cultural activities. This layer embodies the practical fulfilment of brand commitments. The surface layer constitutes the city's visual and sensory identification system, including urban landscapes, landmark architecture, public art, environmental quality, and visual symbols such as logos and slogans. This layer serves as the most immediate vehicle for brand communication. The combined effect of these three layers forms the public's holistic perception of the city brand^[5].

2.2 The Multifaceted Value and Functional Positioning of the Exhibition Economy

The exhibition economy constitutes a comprehensive economic model centred on conferences, exhibitions, incentive travel, and festival events. Through its potent platform effect, it drives the development of related industries. Its value extends far beyond direct venue rentals and participant expenditure, manifesting in multidimensional functional contributions. Economically, it possesses a significant multiplier effect, powerfully stimulating downstream sectors such as accommodation, catering, transport, advertising, and logistics. Industrially, it serves as an efficient platform for technological exchange, product launches, and trade matching, fostering industrial upgrading and innovation diffusion. Socioculturally, large-scale events enhance community cohesion and enrich citizens' cultural lives. At the city branding level, its core functions lie in the “focus amplification effect” and the “experience shaping effect”. Through meticulously planned events, it concentrates global or regional attention on the city within a short timeframe, while providing participants with direct, immersive experiences of the city's image, efficiency, services, and culture. This makes it the most vivid and powerful medium for communicating the city's brand.

2.3 The Internal Logic and Functional Model of Their Interactive Integration

City branding and the exhibition economy form a symbiotic relationship of “value-cycle reinforcement”. City branding acts as a “gravitational field” and “navigator”, attracting high-quality exhibition projects through clear positioning while guiding differentiated industrial development. Conversely, exhibition events function as “accelerators” and “touchstones”, conveying brand value through concentrated exposure and experiential engagement. This compels cities to enhance infrastructure and management standards, thereby testing brand commitments. This creates a virtuous cycle where “brand empowers

exhibitions, and exhibitions nourish brand,” forming the core mechanism driving the synergistic advancement of soft power and economic growth.

3.Current Status and Challenges in China’s Urban Exhibition Economy and Brand Development

3.1 Major Achievements and Development Characteristics

After decades of development, China’s exhibition economy has risen to global prominence. Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen leverage their comprehensive strengths to host numerous international events, establishing themselves as major global exhibition cities. Meanwhile, locations such as Hangzhou and Boao have pursued differentiated paths by capitalising on distinctive resources, effectively enhancing their international recognition. The industry currently exhibits four key characteristics: deepening marketisation, with professional exhibition companies becoming the mainstay; pronounced trends towards specialisation and branding, giving rise to a cohort of industry-leading brand exhibitions; accelerated technological integration, with smart and green exhibitions becoming mainstream; and optimised regional distribution, expanding from the eastern coastal regions to central and western areas, revealing a trend towards coordinated development.

3.2 Principal Challenges and Underlying Contradictions

China’s exhibition economy and brand development still face multiple challenges in achieving synergistic progress: Firstly, a disconnect exists at the strategic level, with urban planning and brand strategies failing to effectively align with the exhibition industry, resulting in mismatched exhibition themes and city positioning. Secondly, development models exhibit pronounced homogenisation and extensive growth, characterised by a blind pursuit of exhibition centre scale and quantity while neglecting unique characteristics, leading to resource wastage. Thirdly, brand effects remain short-term, prioritising exposure during events over long-term cultivation, hindering the establishment of sustained influence. Fourthly, international operational standards remain inadequate, with gaps persisting compared to leading global cities in terms of branded exhibition numbers, rule-setting influence, and professional services. Utilisation rates at some venues are low, exposing the risk of “having venues but no events”.

3.3 In-depth Analysis of Root Causes

These issues stem from multifaceted complexities: institutionally, compartmentalised management leads to fragmented policies and inefficient coordination; developmentally, excessive reliance on government initiatives undermines market mechanisms and societal engagement; resource-wise, there is a severe shortage of high-calibre, multidisciplinary professionals; and evaluation-wise, performance metrics prioritise short-term hardware indicators over scientific assessment of long-term benefits like brand value and knowledge spillovers, thereby incentivising short-termism.

4.Developing Pathways for the Exhibition Economy Under City Brand Leadership

4.1 Strategic Synergy Pathway: Guiding Convention and Exhibition Industry Planning with Brand Core Values

Cities must elevate the development of the exhibition economy to the core level of their city brand strategy, achieving a fundamental shift from “hosting events for the sake of hosting events” to “hosting events for the sake of the brand”. The primary task is to conduct scientific and precise city brand positioning and auditing, clearly defining the city’s Unique Selling Proposition (USP) and core value proposition. Building upon this foundation, an integrated top-level design for both MICE sector development and city branding must be formulated. This ensures every major MICE event—whether introduced, nurtured, or created—closely aligns with and serves the city brand’s overarching strategy. For instance: while a city branded as a “historical and cultural metropolis” should concentrate on developing conferences and exhibitions related to cultural creativity, heritage preservation, and tourism. Concurrently, a permanent interdepartmental coordination mechanism should be established, led by municipal leadership and encompassing commerce, publicity, culture and tourism, planning, and foreign affairs departments. This mechanism must break down departmental silos, forge policy synergy, and ensure the effective implementation of strategic objectives.

4.2 Pathways for Industry Integration: Forging a Differentiated, Experiential Brand Exhibition System

Promote deep integration between the exhibition economy and the city's leading industries, distinctive resources, and cultural life to construct an "exhibition+" ecosystem. Firstly, implement the "exhibition+leading industries" strategy. Focusing on the city's pillar industries and strategic emerging sectors, cultivate a portfolio of globally influential specialised brand exhibitions. This will position exhibitions as barometers and catalysts for industrial development, thereby reinforcing the city's economic brand image. Secondly, advance the integration of "exhibition + cultural tourism" by developing locally distinctive festivals, sporting events, and performing arts activities. Seamlessly combine exhibition venues and major events with city tourism routes and cultural experience products to extend visitor stays, boost overall consumption, and vividly showcase the city's cultural appeal. Thirdly, develop "exhibition + digital economy" by actively employing digital technologies such as big data, cloud computing, and VR/AR to create new smart exhibition models integrating online and offline experiences. This approach overcomes physical space limitations, enhances participant engagement, and simultaneously shapes the city's image as an innovative and intelligent frontier. Through such sector integration, a distinctive exhibition brand cluster highly aligned with the city's brand characteristics and difficult to replicate will ultimately emerge.

4.3 Supporting Optimisation Pathways: Establishing an Internationalised, Professional Sustainable Development Environment

A robust support system is fundamental to the sustained, healthy development of the exhibition economy and its effective empowerment of city branding. Regarding hardware support, scientific planning of exhibition facility layouts is essential, prioritising the practicality and flexibility of venue functions alongside synergistic integration with surrounding transport, hotel, and commercial infrastructure, avoiding blind pursuit of scale or foreign trends. Software support constitutes the core competitiveness. Efforts should focus on cultivating a cohort of internationally competitive local exhibition industry leaders, while vigorously attracting and nurturing a high-calibre professional workforce proficient in international protocols, project management, and brand marketing. Policy support requires refining targeted assistance measures concerning land use, financing, taxation, and talent acquisition, thereby fostering a stable, equitable, transparent, and predictable business environment. Service support requires comprehensively enhancing the city's international service standards, including streamlining visa procedures, providing multilingual information services, establishing a high-calibre volunteer corps, and ensuring urban environmental and public health safety. By delivering an exceptional attendee experience, every participant should become an active ambassador for the city's brand. Furthermore, significant emphasis must be placed on the green, low-carbon, and sustainable operation of exhibition activities, positioning this as a key manifestation of the city's responsible brand image.

Conclusion

This study systematically demonstrates the strategic, symbiotic interaction between city branding and the exhibition economy. It identifies core challenges currently faced by Chinese cities in this domain: insufficient strategic coordination, extensive development models, transient brand effects, and inadequate support systems. The fundamental solution lies in transforming the development paradigm—shifting from isolated, fragmented exhibition economy development towards a systematic, integrated approach guided by the city's core brand values. This involves advancing exhibition industry planning, business model innovation, and environmental development. Successful implementation relies on effective collaboration among diverse stakeholders—including government, enterprises, industry organisations, and communities—alongside sustained investment and brand maintenance grounded in a long-term perspective. The study's three-dimensional pathway model—strategy-business format-support—provides urban administrators with an integrated action framework.

Funding

No

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

Reference

- [1] Liu, S. P., & Liang, W. (2009). *The exhibition economy and urban development*. Beijing: China Business Press.
- [2] Wang, C. L., & Guo, Y. Z. (2012). *Exhibitions and urban brand marketing: Theory and practice*. Shanghai: Gezhi Press.
- [3] Liu, Z., & Yang, B. J. (2025). Green branding: Literature review, integrated framework and research prospects. *Times Economy and Trade*, 22(10), 64–71.
- [4] Ma, Y., & Chen, X. L. (2020). Research on high-quality development of China's exhibition industry. *Research on Economics and Management*, 41(1), 112–127.
- [5] Jiang, L. L., & Sun, H. (2025). Pathways for urban brand development from a semiotic perspective. *Journal of Liaoning Technological University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 27(4), 57–60.