

Research on the Promotion of Dalian Sophora Flower Festival to Urban Brand Based on SWOT-PEST

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ABSTRACT

The Dalian Sophora Flower Festival is one of the most distinctive and influential urban cultural and tourism events in China. As an important platform to showcase the ecological charm and cultural heritage of Dalian, it has been held for multiple sessions. Under the circumstances of intensified urban competition and the trend of integrating conference, business, culture, tourism and sports, the Dalian Sophora Flower Festival, relying on its own resources, has become a key force in promoting the shaping and dissemination of Dalian's urban brand. This paper takes the Dalian Sophora Flower Festival as the research object, based on the comprehensive analysis framework of SWOT-PEST, systematically explores the influence mechanism and promotion path of the Dalian Sophora Flower Festival on the urban brand, aiming to provide feasible ideas for enhancing the competitiveness of Dalian's urban brand.

KEYWORDS

Dalian sophora flower festival; Urban brand; SWOT-PEST

1 Introduction

Under the dual trends of the iterative upgrading of global tourism and cultural consumption and the intensification of urban brand competition, the integrated development of events and urban brands has become a key path to enhance urban recognition and attractiveness. As an important city in Northeast Asia, Dalian possesses dual resources of coastal scenery and sophora flower culture. The Sophora Flower Festival has been cultivated over several decades and has become a landmark festival IP of the city. However, currently, the Dalian Sophora Flower Festival has the problem that "low correlation between the ecological value of sophora flowers and the urban brand". The spillover effect of the festival has not been fully transformed into urban brand assets. Based on the SWOT-PEST framework, this study systematically analyzes the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of Dalian Sophora Flower Festival in the political, economic, social, and technological dimensions, and explores the path of in-depth integration of events and urban brands, so as to help Dalian shape the brand development model of "having events in all seasons and prospering the city through events".

2 Background and current situation

In recent years, relying on the advantages of the city's ecological endowment and cultural heritage, Dalian has given play to the leading role of characteristic cultural and tourism events and the linkage effect of the event economy, and constructed a coordinated development model of "gathering popularity through events and consolidating brands through industries". As an important window to show the city's open vitality and cultural charm, the Dalian Sophora Flower Festival directly drives the development of related industries such as tourism, hotels, catering and transportation. After decades of development, Dalian Sophora Flower Festival has gradually grown from a local characteristic cultural and tourism event to an important platform for ecological and cultural exchanges in Northeast Asia. However, there is still room for exploring the value of Dalian Sophora Flower Festival to the urban brand. The insufficient transformation from "event popularity" to "brand depth" reflects the need for the city to optimize the brand operation, resource integration and value accumulation of events.

3 SWOT-PEST analysis of Dalian Sophora Flower Festival on urban brand promotion

3.1 Internal strengths analysis

3.1.1 Political strength

As a frontier city for opening-up and cooperation in Northeast Asia, Dalian relies on the policy advantages of the "the Belt and Road" initiative and the development of Liaoning Coastal Economic Belt to take the lead in international exchanges and cultural and tourism cooperation. At the same time, the "Deepening Reform Plan of China (Liaoning) Pilot Free Trade Zone" further relaxes the restrictions on foreign investment access in the cultural and tourism industry,

creating conditions for introducing high-quality international cultural and tourism resources and deepening international cooperation on urban brands. The "Several Measures of Dalian to Support the High-quality Development of the Event Industry" clearly proposes to strengthen the attraction of exhibitions and conferences, and support diversified market entities to hold market-oriented event projects that promote the construction of "Two Leading Zones" and "Three Centers". This enables Dalian Sophora Flower Festival to attract more diversified market entities to participate in the preparation and holding process, thereby enriching the event format.

3.1.2 Economic strength

The Dalian Sophora Flower Festival has demonstrated the promoting effect of events on local economic development. The 34th Dalian Sophora Flower Festival received 4.3907 million tourists in 7 days, with a comprehensive tourism income of 4.519 billion yuan. At the same time, an investment promotion conference was held with the popularity of the Sophora Flower Festival, and 6 key projects were signed on the spot with a total amount of 216 million yuan, helping enterprises expand their markets and injecting new impetus into economic development. With the sophora flower culture as a medium, the Sophora Flower Festival builds an international economic and trade exchange platform. During the event, representatives from international sister cities and domestic and foreign enterprises gathered, and a good communication atmosphere was created through cultural events. The development of cultural events creates opportunities for economic cooperation, promotes the connection of resources between domestic and foreign enterprises, and facilitates investment and trade exchanges, thereby enhancing the Dalian's influence in the field of international economy and trade.

3.1.3 Social strength

In 1992, Dalian Sophora Flower Festival was officially recognized as a national-level local event, attracting reports from many national media, which made Dalian Sophora Flower Festival move from a regional event to a national perspective and become an important window to display Dalian's urban image and cultural charm. As one of the events of Dalian International Opening Month, the 34th Dalian Sophora Flower Festival takes the sophora flower culture as a link, deeply explores local folk customs in Dalian, and realizes the inheritance and innovation of traditional culture through activities such as sophora flower-themed cultural and creative products and food. Additionally, as a grand event involving the participation of the entire population, it collaborated with colleges and universities to create characteristic activities. The themed activities such as caring for autistic children under the "Culture Tourism + Public Welfare" have enhanced citizens' sense of social responsibility, improved the city's cohesion and sense of belonging, and promoted the harmonious development of society.

3.1.4 Technological strength

By leveraging new media technologies, the dissemination channels of the Sophora Flower Festival have been significantly expanded. Social media platforms have become the forefront of information release and interaction. Through various forms such as pictures, videos, and live broadcasts, the wonderful moments of the Sophora Flower Festival are delivered to global audiences in real time. At the same time, the application of digital display technology has added unique charm to the Sophora Flower Festival. At the event site, VR and AR technologies are used to create an immersive sophora flower viewing experience area, making tourists feel as if they are in a dreamy world of sophora flowers. Through digital means, the historical culture and growth process of sophora trees are vividly presented, enabling visitors to gain rich knowledge while appreciating sophora flowers. This innovative experience deepens visitors' impressions of the Sophora Flower Festival and the city of Dalian, and promotes the advancement of Dalian's urban brand towards the direction of technology and innovation.

3.2 Internal weaknesses analysis

3.2.1 Political weakness

The special support policies for the Sophora Flower Festival are insufficient. The cultural tourism industry has received attention, but specifically for the unique event of Sophora Flower Festival, there is a lack of detailed and strong policy preferences in terms of financial subsidies and venue usage discounts. Compared to some well-known events in China, the Dalian Sophora Flower Festival is unable to rely on policy dividends to attract more high-quality resources, resulting in limited expansion of the event scale and influence. The consistency and stability of policies are poor. In terms of the theme and content planning of the Dalian Sophora Flower Festival, it is easily affected by short-term policy adjustments and lacks long-term stable policy guidance. This not only makes it difficult for the event organizers to formulate long-term plans, but also is not conducive to the shaping of Dalian Sophora Flower Festival's brand image, which to a certain extent weakens its driving force for promoting Dalian's urban brand.

3.2.2 Economic weakness

The Sophora Flower Festival relies on government financial support. The operation funds are mostly from public financial appropriations, the market-oriented financing channels are narrow, and the corporate sponsorship and commercial cooperation models are single, resulting in insufficient risk resistance of the activity. When local finances tighten, the scale of the activity is prone to be reduced. The economic radiation effect is limited to the short term. Although the Sophora Flower Festival can drive short-term tourism consumption, it lacks deep linkage with local industries such as catering, accommodation, cultural and creative industries, and fails to form a long-term economic chain. During the event period, the consumption boom is mainly concentrated around the core areas, and has limited impact on the remote suburbs and related industrial chains. This short-term economic effect is difficult to be transformed into the sustained value-added driving force of the city brand, making the Sophora Flower Festival lack a solid foundation when shaping the image of "Vibrant Dalian".

3.2.3 Social weakness

The event planning mainly focuses on the core area, failing to deeply integrate into the surrounding community life scenarios. The Sophora Flower Festival needs to strengthen its efforts in enhancing public participation and expanding social influence. It is necessary to increase the enthusiasm of citizens for the Sophora Flower Festival through more publicity and promotion activities, and further enhance the social influence of the Sophora Flower Festival and the value of the urban brand. The Sophora Flower Festival has shortcomings in integrating diverse cultural elements. Dalian combines Jiaodong culture, Russian customs and marine characteristics, but the Sophora Flower Festival lacks sufficient integration of these cultural elements and fails to form distinctive social memory points. Foreign tourists and local residents lack a carrier for cultural resonance in the activity, making it difficult for the social recognition of the urban brand to break through the shallow cognition of "sightseeing and checking in", which restricts its upgrading to a "cultural experience-type" urban brand.

3.2.4 Technological weakness

The current technology mainly focuses on the presentation level and lacks in-depth development of immersive interactive experiences. For instance, VR panoramic coverage only covers a few core scenes and fails to extend to urban cultural districts and characteristic industrial parks, making it difficult to form an overall perception of technological empowerment. Besides, the technological iteration speed cannot keep up with the development pace of smart tourism. The smart services of the Sophora Flower Festival still rely on traditional information dissemination methods, and the mobile platform service functions are limited, failing to integrate all-chain services such as reservation, guided tours, and consumption. This not only reduces the efficiency of tourist experience but also puts Dalian at a disadvantage in the competition for the "Smart Cultural Tourism City" brand, weakening the exemplary value of the Sophora Flower Festival as a city's technological showcase.

3.3 External opportunities analysis

3.3.1 Political opportunity

The "14th Five-Year-Plan" for the Development of Culture and Tourism clearly proposes to cultivate characteristic events and promote the linked development of event economy and urban brands, which provides directional guidance for the quality improvement and upgrading of the Sophora Flower Festival. At the same time, the construction of Liaoning Coastal Economic Belt has been included in the national regional coordinated development strategy. As a core city, Dalian can strengthen the regional radiation power of the Sophora Flower Festival with the help of policy dividends and build an important node for cultural and tourism exchanges in Northeast Asia. The Dalian municipal government focuses on cultivating festival activities as the city's cultural brand and clearly gives preferential treatment to events with international influence in terms of funds and resources. The Sophora Flower Festival expands the integrated business models of "sophora flower + ocean" and "ecology + culture", which is conducive to extending the activity's connotation from a single flower appreciation to the diversified display of urban ecology and historical culture, and further enhancing the brand recognition of Dalian as a "romantic city and ecological city".

3.3.2 Economic opportunity

In the post-pandemic era, there has been a significant increase in public demand for nature and ecology-related experiences, providing a broad market foundation for the Sophora Flower Festival centered on the ecological landscape of sophora flowers. This consumption trend promotes the transformation of event from a "niche festival" to a "mass cultural and tourism IP", attracts more cross-regional tourists, drives the income growth of related industries such as

transportation and accommodation, and strengthens the brand label of Dalian as an "ecological tourism destination". The deepening of regional economic cooperation brings additional dividends. The Northeast Asian Economic and Trade Circle is accelerating its integration. The connection of cross-regional tourism routes makes the Sophora Flower Festival an important node of summer tourism in Northeast China. Through the agglomeration effect of human flow, logistics and capital flow, it enhances Dalian's hub position in the regional economy and endows the urban brand with a new connotation of "dynamic economy".

3.3.3 Social opportunity

With the improvement of living standards, people are no longer satisfied with merely sightseeing, but are eager to participate in in-depth cultural experiences. The interactive links such as "reciting, appreciating and tasting sophora flowers" in the Sophora Flower Festival precisely meet this social demand, which helps to attract more citizens and tourists to participate, expand the social influence of the event, and thereby enhance Dalian's urban popularity. At the same time, the atmosphere of social public welfare is becoming increasingly strong, which empowers the Sophora Flower Festival. "Cultural Tourism + Public Welfare" gathers social forces, allowing more people to feel Dalian's humanistic care and adding a warm background color to the promotion of the urban brand. In the process of cultural tourism integration in the three northeastern provinces, there are more cross-regional cultural exchanges, which provides opportunities for the Sophora Flower Festival to learn from the excellent experiences of other regions, enrich the event content, and enhance the attractiveness of the urban brand.

3.3.4 Technological opportunity

At present, the integration of emerging technologies such as metaverse, 5G and artificial intelligence with the cultural and tourism industry is accelerating. Metaverse technology can create a virtual sophora flower feast, allowing global users to participate in interactions through digital avatars, breaking through time and space limitations and expanding the influence of the event, helping Dalian shape the brand image of a "pioneer city of digital cultural tourism". At the same time, the popularization of smart tourism infrastructure creates conditions for technology implementation. As the core city in the smart city cluster in Northeast China, Dalian has mature hardware foundations for technologies such as AR navigation and AI customer service. The Sophora Flower Festival can develop "digital collectibles of sophora flowers" to stimulate cultural and creative consumption, improve tourists' experiences through technological innovation, materialize the brand image of "Smart Dalian", and enhance city's competitiveness in the cultural and tourism technology track.

3.4 External threats analysis

3.4.1 Political threat

In recent years, festivals have been required to "de-commercialize and de-standardize". If the Sophora Flower Festival fails to promptly adjust its overly commercialized operation model that heavily relies on commercial sponsorship, it may face the risk of tightened approval. Regional competition also poses pressure. Cities along the Bohai Sea such as Qingdao and Yantai have successively introduced festival support policies. Qingdao International Beer Festival and Yantai Wine Festival, which have formed a diversion of tourists from the Northeast Asia market. Moreover, stricter environmental protection policies put forward higher requirements for the Sophora Flower Festival. The detailed rules on ecological protection of large-scale activities in the Dalian Municipal Ecological Civilization Construction Regulations increase the cost of venue arrangement and passenger flow control. If not implemented properly, it may damage Dalian's brand image of "ecological livability".

3.4.2 Economic threat

Fluctuations in the macro-economy directly affect the willingness of cultural and tourism consumption. In recent years, the growth rate of domestic residents' disposable income has slowed down, and some potential tourists have reduced their cross-regional travel budgets. The construction and maintenance of scenic spots, the improvement of supporting facilities and the enhancement of service quality all require significant capital investment. If the tourism revenue and cost expenditure cannot be effectively balanced, the economic benefits of the Sophora Flower Festival may be affected. The homogeneity of festival activities in the Bohai Rim region leads to intensified regional economic competition. The online sales of the 34th Qingdao International Beer Festival alone reached 23 million yuan. The Yantai Wine Festival, relies on industrial clusters to form a "tourism + consumption" closed loop, which to a certain extent diverts the customer groups and commercial resources of Dalian Sophora Flower Festival, and the uniqueness and competitiveness of the urban brand in the regional tourism market are impacted.

3.4.3 Social threat

New tourism experience projects and entertainment methods are constantly emerging, such as virtual reality tourism and theme parks. These new activities have attracted the attention of a large number of tourists, thereby reducing the appeal of traditional flower appreciation activities. The influx of a large number of tourists during the Sophora Flower Festival may put certain pressure on the local ecological environment. If the problems cannot be effectively addressed during the event organization and management process, it may trigger social public opinion's questioning about the environmental protection of the activity, thereby affecting Dalian's brand image as an ecologically friendly tourist city. In addition, the living space and public facilities of local residents in Dalian will be squeezed to a certain extent during the Sophora Flower Festival, which may arouse residents' resistance to the activity, thus having a negative impact on the promotion of the urban brand.

3.4.4 Technological threat

The official website and mobile application of the event have limited functions and cannot fully present the rich content and characteristic activities of the Sophora Flower Festival, resulting in poor online promotion effect and limited spread of the urban brand. Facing the rapid development of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things, the application progress of the Sophora Flower Festival in intelligent navigation, environmental monitoring and tourist flow early warning is relatively slow, making it difficult to meet the expectations of modern tourists for technologically advanced tourism experiences. In addition, the level of online marketing and social media operation needs to be improved. The infrequent updates of social media accounts, the lack of attractiveness of content, and the failure to make full use of emerging communication channels such as short videos and live broadcasts will have a negative impact on the coverage and influence of brand promotion.

4 Promotion countermeasures

As a well-known tourist city, Dalian is facing a major opportunity to reshape its position in the new global tourism pattern and enhance its international influence. In this context, Dalian should take the Sophora Flower Festival as a core strategic fulcrum, strengthen the four-in-one coordination mechanism of "policy-economy- society-technology" internally through multi-dimensional strategic layout, and accurately grasp the opportunities brought by regional economic integration under the RCEP and the dividends of the digital technology revolution externally. At the same time, it should avoid the environmental and social pressures caused by excessive tourism and the risks that may be caused by over-reliance on technology, and build the brand image and competitive advantage of a "famous cultural and tourism city in Northeast Asia".

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