

Reflection on the Communication of Urban Image of Chaoshan Area in the Era of New Media

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Abstract. Since the “13th Five-Year Plan”, China has made remarkable achievements in the construction of new urbanization, and its development has also shifted from increment and expansion to a new stage dominated by stock renewal. In the tide of diversified construction of city, Chaoshan area with strong regional characteristics and cultural deposit has been frequently frustrated in shaping its urban image. Many untrue public opinions and rumors even appear on new media platforms and are widespread. How to effectively communicate the urban brand image of Chaoshan area and therefore promote regional economic development has become an aspiration of every Chaoshan person. In this paper, by collecting and analyzing questionnaires, we design a “CBIO” model. In order to improve communication effect of urban image of Chaoshan area, communication subjects should pay attention to key factors such as communication tactics, urban brand positioning and urban infrastructure construction.

1 Introduction

The competition between cities has gradually shifted from simple “economic competition” to “comprehensive competition” that incorporates the dimension of urban image. How to form and develop an urban image with regional characteristics has been in the spotlight among people. A favorable urban image can contribute to the improvement of economic level, and be internalized to increase the community’s sense of belonging and cohesion, further promote citizens in the locality to build a positive image for the construction and development of urban image and become a strong group motive to propel the dissemination of urban image. In the era of new media, video platforms, social platforms and live streaming platforms increasingly become gathering places for people to learn about the world and express their viewpoints. With the high-speed flow of information and decentralization of platforms, “multiple subjects” in the Internet world have replaced the previous dominant position of mass media. While injecting vitality into the society, the high-speed flow of information has also raised uncertainty, including those realistic-looking rumors.

Chaoshan area enjoys a global fame for preserving and inheriting traditional Chinese culture. But under the tide of new media, the image of Chaoshan area began to be questioned and smeared on the Internet. For example, over the last year, the discussions on the image of Chaoshan area on domestic and foreign mainstream social platforms (Weibo, Douban, Quora, etc.) have formed a “distorted” “pseudo-reality”¹, and Chaoshan area has

been pasted negative labels such as “men are superior to women” and “feudal superstition” and partly formed a “stereotype” against Chaoshan area through the wide and rapid diffusion of Internet media. This brings potential hazards to the development of urban image in the region. Therefore, how to get Chaoshan image out of the dilemma of “pseudo-reality” on the Internet platform, let more people understand an objective and real Chaoshan area, and promote urban development has become an issue to be concerned about. In this paper, to address this issue, by proceeding from the public’s cognition and expectation about current Chaoshan image, we determine whether generally negative comments on Internet platforms represent true views of most people in reality. Combined with the analysis results of questionnaire, we attempt to sketch factors affecting the communication effect of the urban image of Chaoshan area, with a view to lay the groundwork for urban image of Chaoshan area to step out of “pseudo-reality”¹ and achieve positive development in the future.

¹ Pseudo-reality is borrowed from the concept of “pseudo environment” by Walter Lippmann, a U.S. news critic, which refers to a “reality” processed by the communicator. Since this kind of processing is generally performed within the communicator, the audience often regards the processed “reality” as an objective “reality”.

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2 The Communication System of Urban Image

In the era of globalization, “urban communication” is still an important proposition of urban development. With the acceleration of urbanization in China and reinforced trend of economic integration throughout the world, the urban brand construction in China is faced with unprecedented opportunities and challenges. In general, the urban image communication system is mainly composed of the subject and object of communication, and disseminated through mass media and new media platforms. It should be noted that compared with the era of traditional media, the relationship between the subject and object of communication is no longer a one-way process as in the past. The audience has higher voice, stronger ability to participate, and gains more sense of participation in the transmission of Internet. With the advent of the era of new media, people’s subjective initiative has been reinforced like never before. The audience is no longer simply information recipients but become communicators at a new level. For this reason, the communication subject of urban image has become more diversified, and the subject and object of communication no longer have rigorous and clear boundaries.

Generally speaking, the urban image communication in the era of new media mainly involves the three participants.

2.1 Local government

There is a close relationship between the government and urban image, and they are mutually promoting and influencing [1] (Xie, Li and Li, 2000). The benign development of urban image is inseparable from government. Government agencies have abundant material resources, human resources, financial resources and information in terms of management. As the most authentic source, the government has unparalleled advantages over other communication subjects. The key to urban image communication lies in how to screen and extract excellent traditional cultural image and inner spiritual elements in the urban image [2] (Chen and Xie, 2021), on the premise that high-quality communication content is guaranteed, we should also learn about the characteristics of communication audience, grasp the data fed back by audience, constantly adjust and optimize the outdated communication methods, and improve the effect of urban image communication, by associating with new media platforms.

2.2 Local citizens

The traditional one-way communication mode of information has become a thing of the past. As an emerging medium, the new media platform has soon captured the public’s attention with its advantages, such as rapid, convenient, informative and interactive. Citizens are not only able to take advantage of new media to keep updated, but also able to become disseminator at any time to export content to the outside world [3] (Gao and Liu, 2016). The

shift from one-way to two-way represents the improvement of the public’s subjective initiative and social involvement, and also plays a supervisory and guiding role in public opinion. Taken together, under the influence of new media platform, citizens have dual identities and roles, and can serve as active disseminators of local urban image.

2.3 City visitors

City visitors are probably tourists who come to the city for sightseeing, businessmen on business trips, people who visit, study and work. One of the purposes of urban image communication is to enable visitors to gain an insight into the history and traditional culture of the city within a certain period of time, feel the unique charm of the city, and stimulate their willingness to publicize and share the areas that they have visited. The visitors are mainly from different regions of the world, instead of those living inside the city. Their arrival further spreads the image of the whole city to their respective social circles. For example, they may disseminate their traveling experience on the Internet in the form of picture or video, and eventually form a positive or negative word of mouth. Practice has proved that the number of pictures commented and shared will have a dramatic effect on the number of tourists received by scenic spots in the city [4] (Lai, Tang and Zhu, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, although more and more audience plunge themselves into the production process of information, local citizens, city visitors and netizens that have never been to the target city all have the right to express their viewpoints on the Internet. However, due to different backgrounds and experiences of the audience, their degrees of rationality and emotional expression differ. Individuals often show certain subjectivity, which finally alienates the real environment through the wide spread of the Internet. To date, the social image of Chaoshan area on the Internet is being built into “labeled pseudo-reality”. Although “netizens who have never been to the target city” will also make comments that are not necessarily true or are ungrounded on Internet platforms, their credibility is not high for the rational public, so they are not included as main participants of communication activities.

3 The Macro Environment in Chaoshan Area

To unscramble the nature of urban image communication activities in Chaoshan area more clearly, this paper holds that we should not stop short at analyzing the communication process and communication elements, but take into account the effects of the macro-environment, including politics, economy, social culture and technology (i.e. PEST theory²).

² PEST refers to the analysis of macro environment. The macro environment is also known as general environment. The target issue is analyzed from four aspects: politics, economy, social culture and technology.

3.1 Political environment

The development of urban image branding is inseparable from the vigorous push and dissemination of government policies. In recent years, with the help of profound cultural deposits in Chaoshan area, municipal governments in Chaoshan area show regard for the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage and take the initiative to apply for intangible cultural heritage projects [5] (wodsy.com, 2020). A variety of folk traditional culture festivals are held regularly, and well-known media producers are invited to produce promos or short videos belonging to Chaoshan image (e.g. “I am from Chaoshan”, etc.), to intensify publicity and build Chaoshan image, with the aim of telling Chaoshan stories well. At the same time, it actively accesses new media platforms to carry out communication activities, such as the 1st “Intangible Cultural Heritage” Online Shopping Festival in Shantou in 2020 [6] (cnr.cn, 2021).

3.2 Economic environment

The benign development of economy is the necessary prerequisite to stimulate the city to seek greater cultural influence and promote urban image communication. Over the past two or three years, the annual GDP growth rate in Chaoshan area has increased year by year. According to the data of economic operation in 2021, the year-on-year economic growths in Chaozhou City, Shantou City and Jieyang City in 2021 were 9.3%, 2.1% and 6.1% respectively. The sustained improvement of the macroeconomic environment in Chaoshan area is providing sufficient space to push forward the branding of urban image. However, due to the vague and oscillating positioning of three cities in Chaoshan, even Shantou, a special economic zone, can hardly find a solid and powerful economic growth point, while Chaozhou, as a “famous cultural city”, particularly needs to adhere to the road of branding on the basis of pinpointing cultural and tourism resources [7] (Cai, 2016).

3.3 Sociocultural environment

The folk culture in Chaoshan area has a long history of and profound deposit, and most Chaoshan people attach great importance to the inheritance of traditional culture [8] (Wang and Cao, 2019). The sharing of solidarity and mutual assistance among Chaoshan people and their high cohesion disable Chaoshan culture from changing fundamentally, no matter how many wars and changes of times it has experienced [9] (Hong, 2018). However, it should be noted that whether for language or folk custom, Chaoshan natives should pay attention to intergenerational inheritance [10] (Hu, 2013), fully mobilize Chaoshan people’s passion for local inheritance in a way that young people are more delighted to hear and see, find communication schemes that conform to the values

of contemporary young people, are favored by young people, and realize the diversification of value, and foster cultural confidence.

3.4 Technical environment

With the rapid development of information technology and media technology, the new media operation mode (represented by the Internet) changes the way people communicate and spread information in an indirect way. The object of communication is no longer a pure object, but becomes a theme that can actively utilize media to participate in the communication. The number of users of major new media keeps surging, and people’s awareness of actively transmitting information has been constantly improved, which has provided unprecedented opportunities and challenges [11] (Song, Zhan and Hu, 2019).

4 Questionnaire Analysis of the Urban Image of Chaoshan Area from the Perspective of Audience

On the whole, macro conditions can lay a foundation for the development of urban image of Chaoshan area. However, the weak communication effect in the era of new media, as well as negative information and rumors on the Internet keeps impacting the urban image of Chaoshan area. Considering the non-authenticity of “pseudo-environment”, whether negative labels on the Internet represent the real viewpoints of most people is yet to be verified and mined. On this cognition premise, the author designed questionnaires and distributed them through two platforms, Weibo (“public discussion” media) and WeChat (“acquaintances socializing” media) and tried to avoid the impact of value similarity [12] (Shi et al., 2020). Finally, 369 valid questionnaires were retrieved. The content mainly includes three parts:

Part I- Basic information. Basic information was collected, such as gender, age and native place.

Part II- The attitude towards the construction mode of the urban image of Chaoshan, the cognition of urban image of Chaoshan and channels to understand the urban image of Chaoshan.

Part III- The attitude towards traditional culture, as well as the attitude, cognition and expectation for Chaoshan folk culture.

4.1 Discussion about main findings

The participants of our questionnaire included 131 males and 238 females. The age structure was concentrated in the age group of 18-35 (see Figure 1, ‘yrs’ means years old, such as 18-35 years old), and the proportions of Chaoshan natives and non-natives were similar (see Figure 2)

X\Y	Under 18	18-35 yrs	35-60 yrs	Above 60	Subtotal
Male	10 (7.63%)	114 (87.02%)	5 (3.82%)	2 (1.53%)	131
Female	7 (2.94%)	223 (93.70%)	6 (2.52%)	2 (0.84%)	238

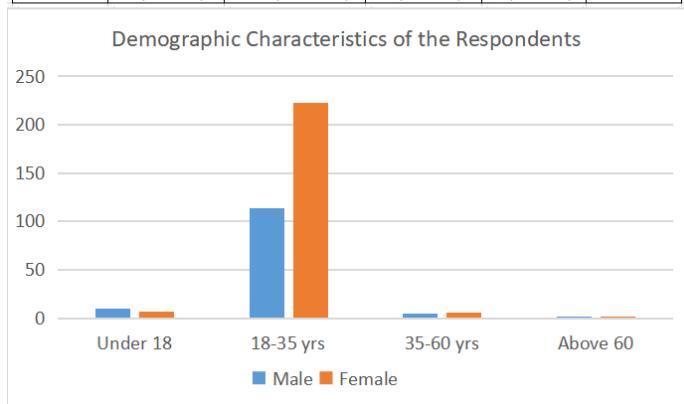


Figure 1 Demographic Characteristics of the Respondent

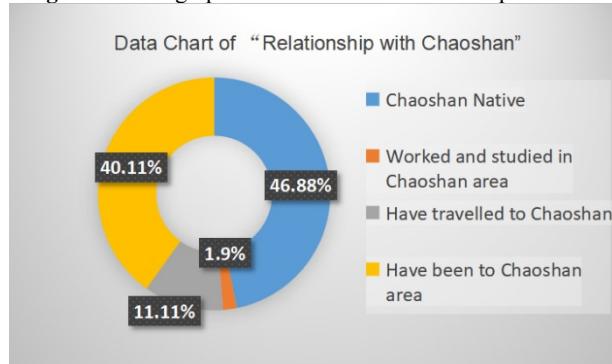


Figure 2 Data Chart of “Relationship with Chaoshan”

In terms of the cognition and attitude towards the spread of Chaoshan traditional culture, most respondents gave positive comments and the keyword included: strong cultural atmosphere, long history, extensive and profound culture, etc. About 25% of the respondents thought that Chaoshan culture was “old and out-fashioned” and “lack vitality” (see Figure 3). Considering that 40.11% of the respondents of the samples had been

to Chaoshan area, but only 25% thought that Chaoshan image was negative, this was inconsistent with the generally negative and radical expressions of Chaoshan area on the Internet (e.g., Weibo, Douban and other open platforms). But whether their native place belonged to Chaoshan area or not, their cognition about “Chaoshan people’s appreciation of family inheritance” was basically the same (see Figure 4).

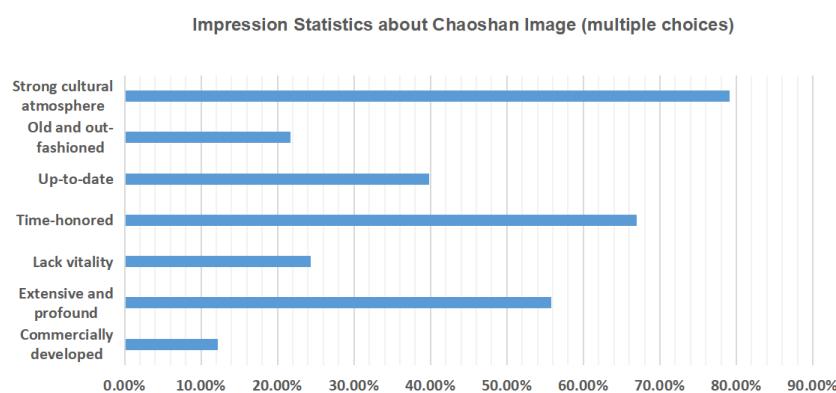


Figure 3 Impression Statistics about Chaoshan Image (multiple choices)

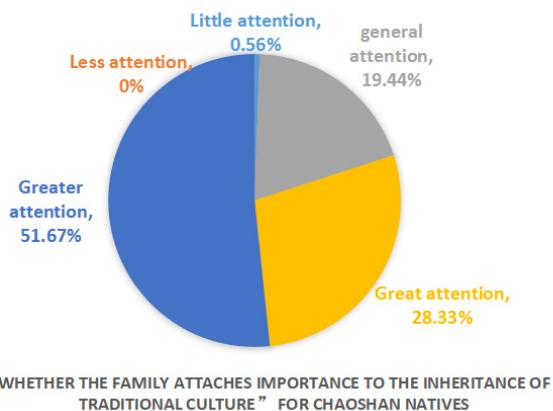


Figure 4 “Whether the family attaches importance to the inheritance of traditional culture” for Chaoshan Natives

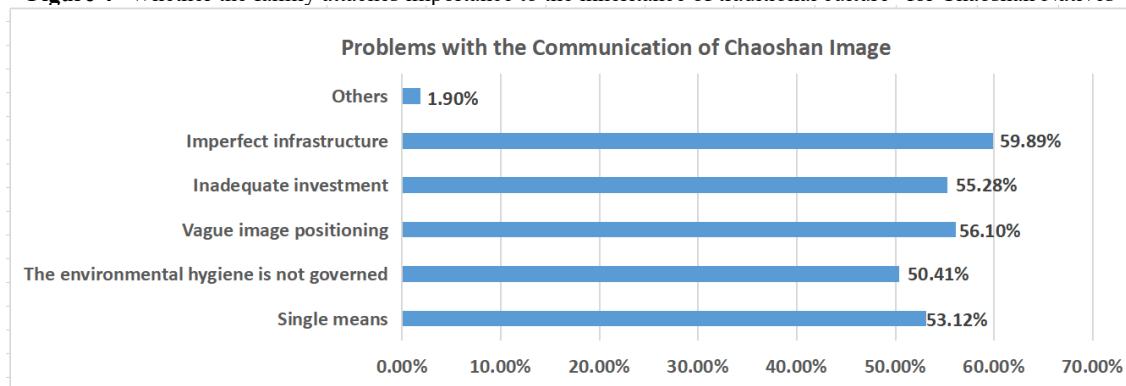


Figure 5 “Problems with the Communication of Chaoshan Image”

In view of the current weak communication of the urban image of Chaoshan area, most respondents ascribed it to the vague positioning of the city and imperfect infrastructure (see Figure 5). Specially, this was manifested in three aspects (see Figure 6 and 7):

① A clear urban image was not built. Even though the municipal governments in Chaoshan area had designed urban image promos, and the audience had learned about Chaoshan culture, most respondents' cognition source of Chaoshan culture was still interpersonal communication. Chaoshan area didn't have an authentic and credible image focus and this probably left room for the diffusion of unreal rumors about Chaoshan image on the Internet.

② There was no unified planning and correct guidance, and various communication subjects in the society (principally governments, organizations, non-organizational groups and individuals) didn't form a synergy on communication. In the era of new media, most of the fragments about Chaoshan were improvisations without professional editing, and the content was of low quality. What's more, in the existing popular film

and TV works, Chaoshan elements were obviously scarce. These conditions were not conducive to the formation and development of the real urban image of Chaoshan in the heart of audience.

③ The urban image lacked brand characteristics of its own. The urban image brand strategy has been adopted and proved to be effective by more and more cities. Chen and Xie [13] (2021) argued that the application of city branding to the shaping of urban image required the city to form identification with the audience by means of marketing and communication according to its unique cultural deposits, environment, humanistic style and economic strength, etc., taking the functional and spiritual attributes of the city as the content, so as to win the audience's recognition of urban brand image. Regrettably, in this respect, nearly 50% of the respondents considered that the development of Chaoshan city didn't form its own brand characteristics, which echoed with ① and once again proved that in the development of urban image of Chaoshan area, the communication effect at the level of audience cognition was indistinctive.

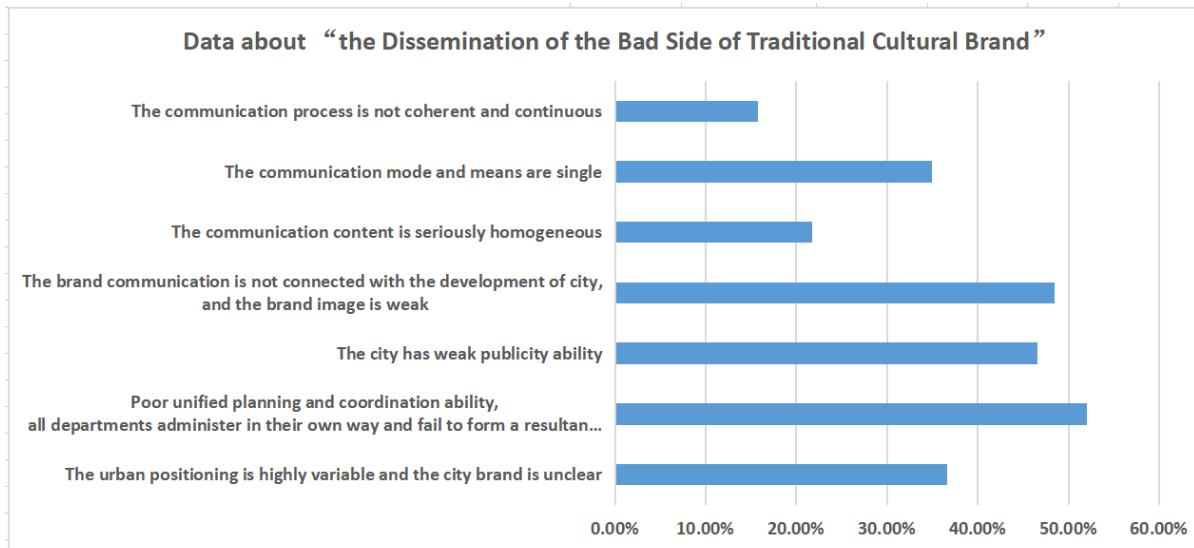


Figure 6 Data about “the Dissemination of the Bad Side of Traditional Cultural Brand”

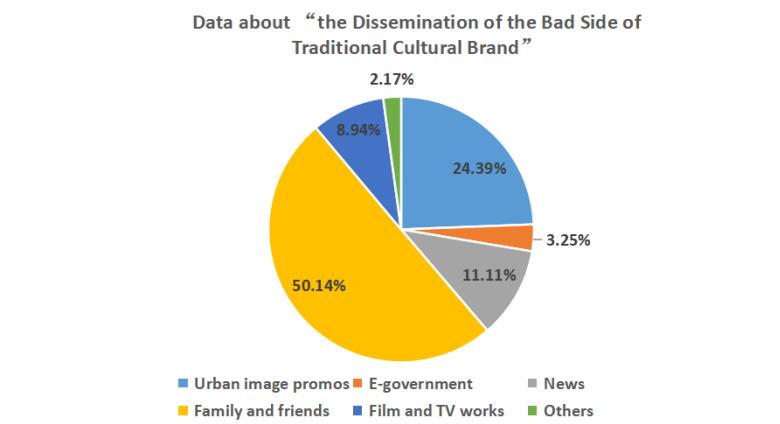


Figure 7 Statistics of “Channels for obtaining Chaoshan Cultural Information”

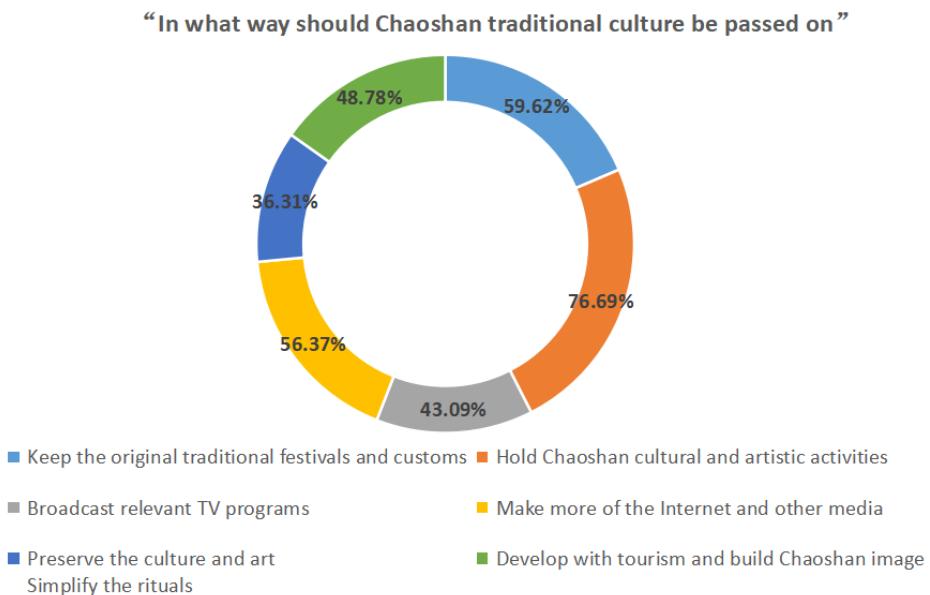


Figure 8 “In what way should Chaoshan traditional culture be passed on”

Another noteworthy result indicated that even if the respondents were generally young and fully interested in Chaoshan culture (see Figure 8), even 59.62% of the respondents wished that Chaoshan culture can maintain its traditional visage. This result also contradicted the label of “feudal superstition” which the Internet platform

attached to Chaoshan image. As a matter of fact, in the eyes of most respondents, the positive role played by the spread and inheritance of traditional culture in Chaoshan area was worthy of recognition, and they can make people produce a sense of identity and cohesion, while pleasing their body and mind (see Figure 9).

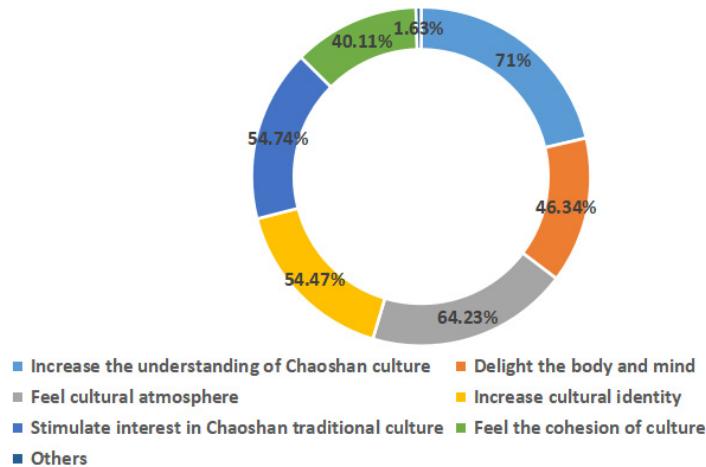


Figure 9 “Harvest from Participating in Chaoshan Traditional Cultural Activities”

5 Influence Factors of the Communication Effect of Urban Image of Chaoshan Area

Combined with the results of questionnaire survey and relevant academic literature, “CBIO factors affecting the communication effect of the urban image of Chaoshan area” can be summed up (see Figure 10). That is to say,

with the subject and object of communication being clarified, we considered that the key to truly change the urban image of Chaoshan in a positive direction was whether the communication subject (i.e., all municipal government departments, non-governmental organizations or groups in Chaoshan area; Chaoshan natives) paid sufficient attention to “communication tactics”, “urban brand positioning”, “infrastructure construction” and others.

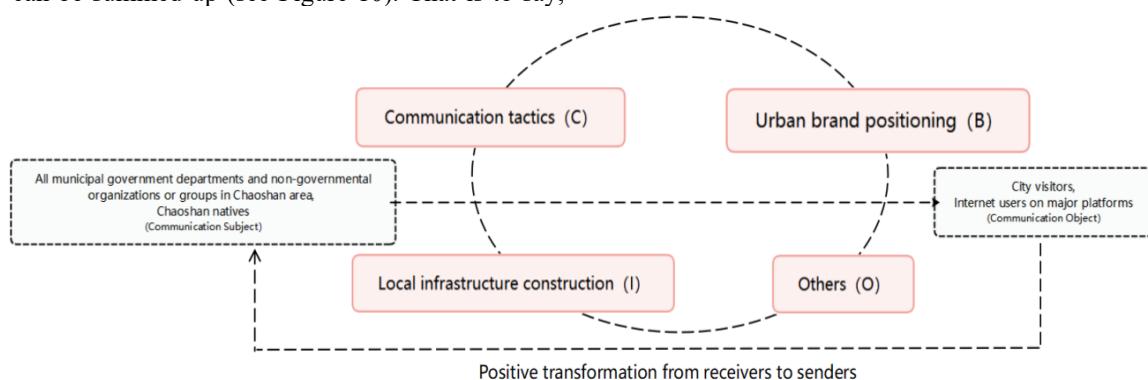


Figure 10 CBIO Factors affecting the Communication Effect of the Urban Image of Chaozhou

Specifically, the communication tactics of urban image of Chaoshan area guided by brand communication should connect the subject and object of communication. Meanwhile, the subject and object of communication were interchangeable in the era of new media. If the communication subject can exert a communication effect and bring positive experience to the communication object, the communication object was likely to become communication subject at a new level and get involved in the communication activities of urban image spontaneously (e.g. shared pictures and videos). However, as of the writing of this article, Chaoshan area didn't perform satisfactorily in four factors affecting CBIO, which was mainly manifested as follows: (1) communication tactics (the communication means were monotonous and the publicity structure was vague); (2) urban brand positioning (vague image positioning and insufficient connection); (3) infrastructure construction (imperfect infrastructure); (4) others (wanton pricing of characteristic cultural products, etc.).

6. Conclusion

Based on the negative information and labeling of Urban image of Chaoshan area on the Internet in recent years, by taking the form of questionnaire, combined with existing literature, this paper puts forward “CBIO factors affecting the communication effect of urban image of Chaoshan area”, in an attempt to present a potential solution to the currently relatively weak urban image communication in Chaoshan area. Objectively speaking, more follow-up efforts are required to convey the urban image of Chaoshan area, such as the use of empirical analysis, and the collection of larger sample size to verify the correlation between CBIO factors and the communication effect of urban image of Chaoshan area. In addition, it should be noted that the model proposed in this paper is still established on the traditional concept of communication process. In the era of new media, the boundary between communicator and recipient is no

longer clear. Their roles are interchangeable and appear concurrently. It is necessary to deliberate on and examine the traditional communication model more deeply.

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