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A study on China's time-honored catering brands: Achieving new inheritance of traditional brands

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ABSTRACT

The time-honored brand is the best brand retained from centuries of business and handicraft competition, representing inestimable brand, economic and cultural value. However, it has encountered the issue of heritage in the new era. To address this issue, in view of the critical role of customer word-of-mouth (WOM) in brand inheritance and reputation, this study constructed and examined the WOM path of time-honored catering brands by investigating 606 customers. Its conclusions highlight the positive antecedent of brand authenticity for customers' in-person WOM and EWOM. The path is influenced by the mediation mechanisms of response (awakening of interest), cognition (brand experience) and affection (brand identification). Moreover, the interaction between creative performance and brand authenticity can positively promote customers' brand experience. However, cultural proximity plays different roles in the stages of customers' brand attitudes and behaviors. The results provide managerial implications for how to promote the sustainable inheritance of traditional brands.

1. Introduction

Around the world, many traditional brands are struggling with their own decline (Li et al., 2019). Similarly, in China, the time-honored brand is the best surviving centuries of business and handicraft competition after generations of inheritance, showing irreplaceable value. Unfortunately, most traditional brands won in history but have lost today. A survey by the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China showed that the number of China time-honored brands dropped from approximately 16,000 in 1949 to 1128 in 2016 (Li et al., 2019). Only 10% are thriving, and many time-honored brands' survival and growth are at serious risk. Especially with the explosive growth of modern restaurants, traditional catering brands are experiencing unprecedentedly fierce market competition and challenges (Cheng et al., 2018; Troiville et al., 2019; Phung et al., 2019; Koh et al., 2009). How to survive and inherit traditional catering brands today is an urgent issue to be solved, which is related to the sustainable development of traditional excellent brands and the common treasure of mankind.

The customer perspective is critical for evaluating the development

of catering companies. Traditional catering references have explored consumer decision, intention, satisfaction, service experience, brand image, etc. (Sürücü et al., 2019; Halim and Hamed, 2005; Stanujkic et al., 2019; Tan and Chang, 2010). However, previous conclusions mainly highlight the customers' response to the consumption process and pay little attention to the future survival of traditional catering (Chen and Huang, 2016). Importantly, brand inheritance is mainly influenced by consumer word-of-mouth (WOM). The connotation and development of the time-honored catering brand indicates that it historically relies on customer in-person WOM to earn social reputation and loyalty (He, 2008; Tian et al., 2018). Today, information technology and social media are advancing rapidly. Electronic word-of-mouth (EWOM) is not limited by time and space, showing a wider promotion effect. Accordingly, customer WOM contributes to greater influence than transitional marketing tools, such as enterprise publicity (Steven Podoshen, 2006); customer WOM can change consumer brand attitudes, brand behaviors, and brand choices (Chu and Kim, 2011; East et al., 2008; Séraphin et al., 2019). Therefore, an excellent means of exploring the time-honored catering brand inheritance path is examining how to

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improve the customer WOM path. This new attempt can fill the theoretical gaps of traditional catering inheritance and provide managerial implications for its sustainable development in the new era.

Exploring the inheritance of the time-honored brands actually means constructing the formation path of customer WOM. Several issues have been raised and need to be addressed further. First, what is the guiding factor for customers in customer WOM about time-honored brands? Different from fast food and creative restaurants, etc., the essence and evaluation standards of the time-honored brand depends on recipe originality, craftsmanship, historical culture, brand spirit and so forth (Li, 2018). Inheritance points to brand authenticity as the core element of the time-honored catering brands. In other words, brand authenticity represents a symbol of the unique Chinese catering culture (Tsai and Lu, 2012; Modya and Hanksb, 2019), which is also regarded as a brand symbol and an attraction that determines customers' consumption motivation (Moulard et al., 2016). Therefore, this study asserts that brand authenticity is the critical leading factor for the inheritance of time-honored Chinese catering brands.

Second, how does the authenticity of time-honored brands promote customers' WOM? Few scholars have attempted to examine the relationship between brand authenticity and customer WOM (DiPietro and Levitt, 2019), especially in the context of time-honored catering brands. However, the stimulus-organism-response (SOR) theory contributes to a theoretical foundation for investigating the time-honored catering brands' WOM path (Chang et al., 2011). To this end, this study supposes that brand authenticity as a brand stimulus may promote customers' WOM in 3 stages: awaken, experience and identify (Moulard et al., 2016; Tsai and Wang, 2017; Kim et al., 2019). Recently, culture and creativity are considered important development factors (Zhang et al., 2019a,b). In the new era, can traditional catering improve customer experience with creative performance? Moreover, time-honored brands show profound cultural heritage. What role do customers' cultural backgrounds play in brand heritage? This study will systematically answer these questions to clarify the inheritance path of traditional catering brands.

The perspectives of WOM and creativity provide a new research scheme for the inheritance path of time-honored catering brands. Our research not only addresses urgent issues, providing a theoretical path for the brand inheritance of time-honored catering brands and clarifying the specific role of the influencing factors, but also expands consumer behavior theory (Liu and Jang, 2009), brand management theory (Hyun, 2009) and cultural theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). More importantly, our results are of great practical value and provide the significant contribution of specific managerial guidance for the sustainable development path of traditional catering brands.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. The time-honored brands

The phrase "time-honored brands" refers to well-recognized brands with unique regional cultural and historical value, traditional well-known brands that have passed down through several generations and established before 1956. These brands have a long history of recipes, crafts or services and have won a wide range of social praise (He, 2008; Tian et al., 2018). Because of the combination of unique traditional historical value and modern marketing brand concepts, the time-honored brand has become a popular research topic in academic circles (Shang and Chen, 2016). Related studies focus on the development of traditional catering brands, including traditional food technology, cooking (Li and Hsieh, 2004), protection, innovation (Lee, 2018; Koh et al., 2009) and business models of traditional restaurants (Indrawan et al., 2016). Some references reflect consumers' attitudes toward traditional food, including consumer brand image evaluation (Almlı et al., 2011; Sürücü et al., 2019), perception (Guerrero et al., 2010), motivation (Wang et al., 2015), and preferences (Balogh et al., 2016). Moreover, China time-honored catering brands are the most

unique and important branch of traditional catering. However, a large number of time-honored catering brands have gradually disappeared from the market (Mu, 2017). Few studies have focused on the realistic and severe problems of inheritance and development that time-honored catering brands face. The current research on time-honored catering brands mainly explores the following two aspects: First, the importance of brand value and realistic problems, such as the relationship between the brand equity of time-honored brands and generational transfer (He, 2008), and discussions on intangible value and brand value (Li, 2018; Grace and O' Cass, 2005; Sarker et al., 2019). Second, the exploration of time-honored brand development strategies, including micromarketing strategies (Leng, 2004), brand activation and revitalization (Forêt and Mazzalovo, 2014), and brand image design (Guo and Kwon, 2018). These studies mainly discuss the development of time-honored brands from the perspective of business management, and few scholars have conducted quantitative research from the perspective of customers. For example, Mu (2017) found that consumers' nostalgic psychology played a key positive role in cognition and purchase intention by constructing a purchase intention model of time-honored brands. Huang (2017) analyzed the difference in Chinese and foreign customers' experiences with time-honored catering brands from a cross-cultural perspective.

Accordingly, previous studies show the following gaps: (1) Previous studies mainly considered the perspective of enterprise management, ignoring the fact that customer WOM is a critical factor in time-honored brands' ability to earn a reputation and in their historical heritage (Tian et al., 2018). Therefore, this study is innovative in its research perspective on time-honored catering brands and explores brand inheritance from the perspective of customer WOM. (2) Current studies do not pay enough attention to the core element of brand authenticity or clearly explore the inheritance path of time honored brands from the customer perspective. Therefore, this study constructs a brand inheritance model of time-honored catering brands. (3) Although some scholars have paid attention to the impact of traditional catering on customer experience from a cross-cultural perspective or the perspective of innovation (Huang, 2017; Koh et al., 2009), fewer studies have answered whether cultural factors and creativity can improve customers' cognitive attitudes and behaviors regarding catering time-honored brands. To address these unresolved issues, we introduce the moderator variables of creative performance and cultural proximity.

2.2. SOR theory and model construction

The stimulus-organism-response (SOR) theory was first proposed by Mehrabian and Russell (1974) and was later modified by Jacoby (2002). SOR theory emphasizes that some external influences provoke and change the individual's emotional and cognitive condition, leading to certain behavioral outcomes (Kamboj2018). The "S-O-R framework" consists of 3 components: stimulus, organism and response. The first "stimulating" component refers to "stimulating an individual's influence". In the restaurant experience, stimulation is an expression of the core features provided by the restaurant. Undoubtedly, brand authenticity, as brand packaging attraction (Moulard et al., 2016), is an external stimulus condition for the time-honored catering brands to awaken customers' interest and passion. Creative performance as a means of innovation, to some extent, belongs to an external stimulus.

The "organism" is a second component of SOR theory and refers to the customers' cognition and affection. The organism exists in the process from stimuli to customer responses (Kamboj et al., 2018). Cognition represents people's understanding of things or phenomena, which specifically includes psychological experience processes such as feeling, perception, imagination, and thinking. Further, affection is the attitude that people produce about whether objective things meet their own needs. After interest is aroused by brand authenticity, customers are more likely to engage with the brand, resulting in brand experience. Brand experience is a critical attribute of direct and lasting links for customers to connect with time-honored brands (Tsai and Wang, 2017;

Ong et al., 2018). When the experience notably meets customers' expectations of the brand, it will stimulate a high-level affection of brand identification (Kempf, 1999).

Behavior, as a final stage, is the response of customers to external stimuli. Positive brand experience and brand identification promote customers to form cognition and emotion for traditional brands and ultimately lead to the WOM behavior (Kim et al., 2019). In other words, to realize the WOM behavior regarding time-honored catering brands, customers may need to experience the intermediary mechanism process of awakened interest, brand experience and brand identification.

In addition, we need to consider some key accelerators. Some of time-honored Chinese catering brands perform poorly and are being eliminated (Li, 2018) because they fail to match changing consumer trends or lack innovation (Leng, 2004; Munthree et al., 2013). Creativity is the manifestation of the originality and genuineness of time-honored brands, which may be a great approach for customers to better understand the brands (Hornig et al., 2013). Further, cultural background, such as cultural proximity, is considered another significant factor affecting customers' experiences and value evaluations (Chang et al., 2011). The role of cultural background in customer attitude and behavior is still unknown. However, the time-honored brand has a distinctive cultural characteristic. Under this scenario, it is of great significance to explore the influence of cultural proximity on the customer's dining process. Based on these viewpoints, the study will explore the moderating effects of creative expression and cultural proximity.

Consequently, based on SOR theory, this study constructed a more complex two-stage mediating moderating model in Fig. 1.

2.3. Mediation roles of the awakening of interest

Brand authenticity refers to the degree to which a brand is perceived to be original and authentic, which means that it is unique rather than derivative (Akbar and Wymer, 2017). If the food is produced by traditional or manual methods, the product may be considered authentic (Cinelli and LeBoeuf, 2020). The connotations and historical value of time-honored catering brands all point to the high level of uniqueness and originality of the brands, and these characteristics are the core of the brands' attraction and stimulation of consumer demand. Experiencing authentic food is the primary motivation for customers to become interested and make decisions, which highlights the influence of authenticity on consumer decisions and behaviors (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020). Guèvremont and Grohmann (2018) assert that the nature of brand authenticity can awaken great interest from consumers. The awakening of interest reflects the stimulation of a customer's potential interest in something, which serves as an important factor in predicting

customer behavior (Machleit et al., 1993). If sensory and affective interest is awakened, they will have a strong need to participate in the brand experience and be satisfied through brand experience. In a word, the brand authenticity of time-honored catering brands will awaken customers' interest and enhance their in-depth brand experience, because customer interests can arouse their positive emotions. When customer interest is aroused, the impression of authenticity of time-honored catering brands will be deepened, thereby affecting customer brand experience. Thus, this study concludes that the authenticity of time-honored catering brands can enhance customers' experience by awakening their interest.

Hypothesis 1. Brand authenticity will affect customers' brand experience through awakening their interest.

2.4. Mediation roles of brand experience

In an ever more competitive market, brands must offer memorable experiences to their customers if they want to differentiate themselves and build a solid competitive position (Iglesias et al., 2019). Brand-related stimuli (i.e., product, design, atmosphere, packaging and publicity) is the main source of consumers' subjective response and feelings, which are called brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009; Carlson et al., 2019; Liljander et al., 2009; Ong et al., 2018). The concept of brand experience is of great interest to marketers because brand experience is crucial in determining consumers' brand attitudes and behaviors (Sahin et al., 2011). Scholars have confirmed that brand experience is the leading factor driving customers with positive brand attitudes (Shamim and Mohsin Butt, 2013) and driving brand identity (Rahman, 2014). Customers' understanding and identification of time-honored brands will be generated and enhanced easily when they have deep experiences, such as the mobilization of the senses, affection, behavior, and even intelligence (Füller et al., 2008). Further, some scholars assert that consumer brand experience is often closely associated with the authenticity represented by traditional culture and enhancement (Alexander, 2009). Brand authenticity is often used by companies to stimulate customer (Laub et al., 2018). The reason is that authenticity has become an important indicator of a brand, enriching the brand experience (Modya and Hanksb, 2019). If time-honored catering brands can show the characteristics of being original and genuine, their customer brand experience will be enhanced. Therefore, the authenticity of time-honored catering brands can enhance consumer brand experience and ultimately lead to positive brand identification.

Hypothesis 2a. Brand authenticity will affect customers' brand identification through brand experience.

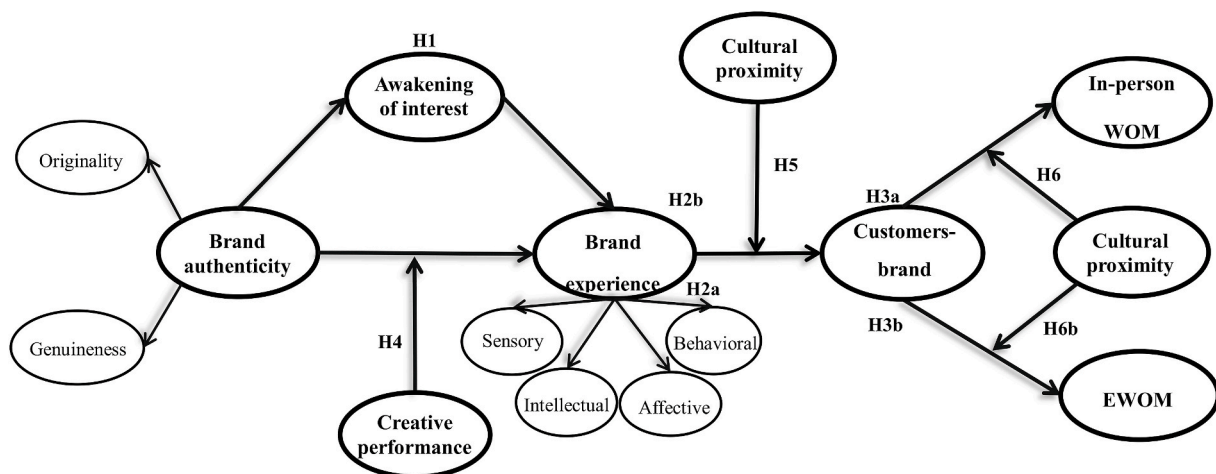


Fig. 1. Proposed research framework.

Another viewpoint on the effects of brand experience emphasizes that when a brand awakens the interest of consumers, internally consistent consumption desires will enhance brand depth experience (Coelho et al., 2018). The rationale for Hypothesis 2a is that brand experience is subjective and an internal consumer response. Over time, brand experiences may produce changes in affective bonds, participation behaviors, senses and intelligence (Prentice et al., 2019; Brakus et al., 2009). In this study, the sensory experience comprises the tactile, visual, auditory, olfactory, and gustatory stimulation generated in customers by brands (Iglesias et al., 2019). Because of the sense of history and cultural heritage of time-honored brand, the affective dimension captures the degree to which customers perceive it as an emotional brand (Iglesias et al., 2019). The intelligence level and behavioral level are the imagination, curiosity and customer attitude and behavior initiated by the brand, respectively (Das et al., 2019). These aspects compose the internal results of the stimulus that awakens the experience; in particular, contact with senses and behaviors greatly enhances the experience (Pinker, 1997). In the early stage of customer visits, marketers try to enhance the experience by awakening visitors with promotional materials (Kim and Ko, 2012). Some evidence in other research fields also shows that commercial websites enhance customers' online experiences by attracting their interest (Nah et al., 2011). In this study, the original attraction of time-honored catering brands can successfully awaken customer interest, which will trigger customers' motivation to participate in the experience and enhance their brand experience level (Jones and Runyan, 2013; Chhabra, 2010). When the customers' interests are aroused, they will identify the time-honored catering brands through in-depth brand experience. Therefore, the hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 2b. Awakening customers' interest will affect their brand identification through brand experience.

2.5. Mediation roles of customers' brand identification

Customers' brand identification is regarded as a high degree of brand understanding and recognition (Popp and Woratschek, 2017), which affects additional customer behavior toward the brand, including positive WOM and other supportive behaviors (Zhu et al., 2016). WOM has become one of the most effective marketing tools (Prentice et al., 2019). Arnett, German, and Hunt (2003) assert that brand WOM is a way of expressing and improving self-identity, and a behavioral response to customer identification. Individuals achieve identification with a specific brand after experience, which ultimately leads to a positive behavioral outcome (Alexander, 2009). Therefore, brand experience is often regarded to predict consumer behavior (Zarantonello and Schmitt, 2010). Further, brand identity as a link between brand and customer consistency promotes customers' intention to recommend (Berrozpe et al., 2019). More importantly, brand identification mainly occurs after a memorable positive brand experience (Merk and Michel, 2019), because positive brand experience forms an identity between the customer and the brand (Han et al., 2020). When the degree of customer brand experience with time-honored catering brands is high, customers will show positive brand identification psychology and support the brands through WOM (Han et al., 2020). Further, according to SOR theory, brand experience is the cognitive process of interacting with time-honored catering brands, identification represents the customer's brand attitude, and WOM is the display of customers' brand behavior. In the process of brand experience accumulation, customers gain a comprehensive understanding of the brand and take action (WOM) (Hanna and Rowley, 2011; Saleem et al., 2018). In other words, after obtaining a higher brand experience, customers will enhance their recognition of time-honored brands and immediately generate brand WOM to support their identification psychology.

Additionally, WOM includes two important forms of communication: in-person WOM and EWOM (Eelen et al., 2017). In-person WOM is the

real-time interaction between time-honored brand fans and other potential customers after the former's brand recognition (Klesse et al., 2015). In-person WOM with strong credibility has a high success rate in influencing other customers to visit. In the process of EWOM, customers have more time to think and reconstruct the communication content regarding time-honored brands (Sijoria et al., 2019). Whether it is In-person WOM in the traditional period or EWOM in the Internet era, it shows the important brand communication behavior after customer's brand identity. Therefore, this study asserted that customer brand experience will influence brand identification, resulting in both positive in-person WOM behavior and EWOM behavior.

Hypothesis 3a. Customers' brand identification mediates the relationship between their brand experience and in-person WOM.

Hypothesis 3b. Customers' brand identification mediates the relationship between their brand experience and EWOM.

2.6. Moderation roles of creative performance

Creative performance is described as the ability to generate new ideas, behaviors, concepts, designs and service programs. It refers to update old ideas into new and unique ideas (Wang and Netemeyer, 2004). Previous studies indicate that creative performance can present innovative service forms and improve product quality (Sternberg, 2012), which are key factors in improving brand experience (Füller et al., 2011). Especially, the combination of authenticity and creativity has become the key means for the development of tourism and leisure experience in the new period (Zhang et al., 2019). The authenticity of time-honored brands contributes to a key feature for customers in choosing to visit the restaurant (Ponnam and Balaji, 2014). However, customers evaluate brand experience not only for the brand's authenticity but also for its creativity (Darvishmotevali et al., 2018). In the construction of time-honored catering brands, different creative ways can be adopted to improve customers' brand experience, such as the presentation of unique ideas, new marketing strategies and new services (Darvishmotevali et al., 2018). The creative development of innovation products and services by brands can satisfy the changing needs of customers (Chang and Teng, 2017). Moreover, creativity is regarded as the best expression and transmission method of brand authenticity conservation and inheritance. It not only helps customers enhance their cognition and understanding of the original nature of the brand, but also influences customers' brand experience and enhancing the emotional connection between customers and brands (Schmitt, 2010). Therefore, this study concludes that the interaction between authenticity and creative performances of time-honored catering brands can enhance customers' brand experience.

Hypothesis 4. Creative performance will positively moderate the relationship between the brand authenticity and brand experience.

2.7. Moderation roles of cultural proximity

Unlike other brands, time-honored brands are well known for their splendid culture (Mu, 2017) and characteristics of regional cultures in China (Forêt and Mazzalovo, 2014). Some scholars argue that cultural background factors (e.g., cultural differences, cultural proximity, and cultural distance) can explain a variety of customer dining behaviors (Sheldon and Fox, 1988). For example, Chang et al. (2011) found that customers evaluated the local cuisine based on their own culinary culture and habits. In the background of time-honored catering brands, the process of customers' cognition (brand experience), attitude (brand identification) and behavior (WOM) may be affected by cultural proximity. Although many studies have proven that cultural proximity influences customers' visit motivation, interest, and familiarity (Weiermair, 2000; Huang et al., 2013), no direct evidence has confirmed that cultural proximity plays an important role in determining the

customers' brand attitudes and the backwards behavior of time-honored catering brands. Kivela and Crofts (2006) believe that restaurants have become the main channel for customers to experience local cultures, and the degree of cultural proximity is likely to affect their attitudes toward a customer destination. The time-honored catering brands represent unique regional cultures, and the degree of cultural proximity can affect the degree of customers' recognition of their brands (Forêt and Mazza-lovo, 2014), because previous research has shown that the unique food culture determines which customer groups are targeted (Kivela and Johns, 2003). Therefore, customers with the similar cultural backgrounds are likely to show a more positive brand identification after an in-depth brand experience. Therefore, another Hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 5. Cultural proximity will positively moderate the relationship between brand experience and brand identification.

Cultural background may influence the change of customer attitude to positive behavior. Culture includes factors such as common values, beliefs, attitudes, behavior norms, customs, rituals, ceremonies and perceptions (Warner and Joynt, 2002). Especially in China, there are differences in the cultures of different ethnic groups, geographical locations, and regions, etc. (Zhang et al., 2019), causing differences in customer preferences, tastes, and habits, etc., because cultural characteristics are deeply rooted and influence multiple individual behaviors and distinct cultural background of time-honored catering brands (Atkins and Bowler, 2001). For example, Barreto (2014) asserts that cultural differences can affect the expression of customers' WOM. When the cultural background is similar, customers are more likely to express their opinions and recommendations through WOM after understanding and recognizing the time-honored catering brands (Yaveroglu and Donthu, 2002). As part of a place's intangible cultural heritage, time-honored catering brands reflect local culture characteristics and create a sense of place (Gordin and Trabskaya, 2013). Customers with stronger cultural proximity can find cultural resonance with such brands and prefer to recommend the catering brand to others. If they have similar cultural backgrounds to the brands, customers can easily understand time-honored catering brands. Additionally, cultural proximity in a region plays social and other comprehensive roles as a background factor (Sahin and Baloglu, 2011), affecting the customer WOM (in-person WOM and EWOM). Therefore, this study concludes that customers with higher cultural proximity are more likely to have positive in-person WOM and EWOM after the identification.

Hypothesis 6a. Cultural proximity will positively moderate the relationship between customers' brand identification and in-person WOM.

Hypothesis 6b. Cultural proximity will positively moderate the relationship between customers' brand identification and EWOM.

3. Methodology

This study used a questionnaire survey to collect data and used structural equation modeling (SEM) for data analysis. The latter is a quantitative research method with positivism, a methodology often used in restaurant research (Chou et al., 2020; Han et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2014). Questionnaire surveys can reduce the interference of the surveyor with the respondents. Furthermore, SEM can test the relationship between multiple variables at the same time in this study. It provides a more complete test of the entire proposed theoretical model, avoiding inaccurate standard error estimates or evaluation biases due to non-independent observations (Liu, 2018). Therefore, the method can well test the problem of Hypothesis relationship and customer's WOM path formation in this study.

3.1. Sampling

To make the investigation in this study more accurate, data were collected using questionnaires completed by customers; an intercept

approach was utilized in Fujian Province (Zhang and Xu, 2019). We followed several lines of reasoning and consulted several resources to select the samples. First, according to the definition and industry standards for China's time-honored brands, a brand must have been established before 1956 and must possess unique products, skills or services. Further, the brand must show bright regional cultural characteristics and historical and cultural value and have a good reputation. Second, as the conditions for becoming a time-honored brand are relatively strict, we selected 11 time-honored brands with broad social awareness distributed throughout China (shown in Fig. 2). For example, Quanjude (全聚德) was founded in 1864 of the Qing dynasty, with a history of 157 years. Founder Yang Quanren, famous for making Beijing roast duck, pioneered the roast duck. At present, the roast duck technology has been selected as a national intangible heritage project. Moreover, Quanjude's "all-duck feast (全鸭席)" and more than 400 special dishes are known as "The First Chinese Food". Zhou Enlai, the former prime minister of the People's Republic of China, has repeatedly chosen Quanjude's "all-duck feast" as the state banquet. Overall, Fig. 2 showed the typicality and representativeness of our research objects. Third, before the survey, we asked the respondents to choose the time-honored catering brands with which they had the deepest impression or experience to complete the questionnaire. Therefore, the people who had no consumption experience with time-honored catering were not asked to participate.

3.2. Data collection

To efficiently gather quality research data, the data were collected using the following steps. First, we conducted survey training for investigators, such as the questionnaire distribution process and anonymous surveying, etc. Second, several trained assistants were instructed to intercept customers who passed through the research area near restaurants and to distribute the questionnaire (Zhang et al., 2019). Third, we clarified the purpose of the questionnaire and the procedure for completing it and answered any doubts. Fourth, the respondents were asked to fill in the items one by one. Then, the research assistants checked the questionnaire before it was collected and gave restaurant coupons as a token of appreciation. Finally, the questionnaires were completed from January to April 2019. A total of 700 questionnaires were distributed, and 689 questionnaires (98.42%) were recovered. After checking the validity of the collected questionnaires, 83 invalid questionnaires (with completely self-consistent data and incomplete data) were excluded, leaving 606 questionnaires (86.57%) for the data analysis. Table 1 summarizes the detailed statistics of the respondents.

3.3. Measurement

The study scales consisted of the following constructs: Brand authenticity, Awakening of interest, Brand experience, Brand identification, Creative performance, Cultural proximity, In-person WOM and EWOM. The scales were originally developed in English and then translated into Chinese. Thus, a back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1976) was conducted by four professors and researchers in the tourism management research field to retain the original meanings of the items and obtain the Chinese version of the scale. Moreover, to make the measurement more accurate, we adopted a 7-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree) (Styliadis et al., 2017).

A maturity scale based on the previous literature was used in this study. Specifically, (1) *Brand authenticity* was measured using the scale of Modya and Hanksb (2019) containing 8 items, which comprised the two sub-dimensions of Originality (3 items) and Genuineness (5 items). (2) We assessed *Awakening of interest* using 4 items from Tercia et al. (2020), measuring the degree of customers' interest in time-honored caterings (3) From Brakus et al. (2009), we used 11 items (e.g., *Sensory*, 2 items; *Intellectual*, 3 items; *Affective*, 3 items; and *Behavioral*, 3 items). To measure *Brand experience*. (4) Five items adapted from Popp and Woratschek (2017) were used to measure *Customers' brand*



Fig. 2. The case of China’s time-honored catering brands investigated in this study.

Table 1
Background of participants.

Items	Frequency	Percent	Items	Frequency	Percent
Gender			Education background		
Male	329	54.3%	Junior high school or below	21	3.5%
Female	277	45.7%	Senior high school	111	18.3%
Age			Junior college	129	21.3%
21–30	233	38.4%	University	311	51.3%
31–40	262	43.2%	Master or Doctor	34	5.6%
41–50	81	13.4%	Monthly income (\$)		
51 or over	30	5.0%	510 or below	174	28.7%
Number of experiences			510–730	140	23.1%
Once	84	13.9%	731–1160	153	25.2%
2–3 times	224	37.0%	1160–1820	103	17.0%
4–5 times	115	19.0%	1821–5600	32	5.3%
6 times or over	183	30.2%	5601 or over	4	0.7%

identification, reflecting the degree to which the customers’ identified the time-honored brands. (5) We used 6 items adopted from Darvishmotevali et al. (2018) to measure Creative performance, showing customers’ perception of the creative ideas, behaviors or measures conveyed by time-honored brands. (6) Cultural proximity was also measured by 6 items (Huang et al., 2013), which reflected the degree of proximity between the permanent residence culture of customers and the culture of the time-honored brands they visited. (7) The variables of In-person WOM (3 items) and EWOM (7 items) were measured by items from Eelen et al. (2017). (8) Some variables related to demographics were controlled, including gender, age, education background, monthly income and number of experiences with relevant brands (Fu et al., 2016; Pan et al., 2017).

3.4. Data analysis

The mean, standard deviation, factor loading, composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE) and Cronbach’s alpha value of measurement variables are shown in Table 2. All of the Cronbach’s alpha values were above 0.797, indicating the high level reliability for each construct (Ryu et al., 2019). The standardized factor loading of each

item was significant above 0.700, satisfying the threshold value of exceeding 0.60 (Gieling and Ong, 2016). Moreover, the value of CR was within the range of 0.796–0.944 (above 0.70), and the value of AVE ranged from 0.640 to 0.725 (above 0.50), which demonstrated the reliability and convergent validity of each construct (Bagozzi and Yi, 1989). Further, Cronbach’s alpha value was higher than the 0.70 cut-off recommended by Chow and Chan (2008), showing the high level of internal consistency of each construct.

To confirm the construct validity, we used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to examine the first and second factor structures (Zhang et al., 2019; Sijoria et al., 2019). The first factors include awakening of interest, customers’ brand identification, creative performance, cultural proximity, in-person WOM and EWOM. The results demonstrated a good fit with a one-factor analysis ($\chi^2 = 1377.853$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 3.288$; CFI = 0.947; IFI = 0.947; NFI = 0.925; RFI = 0.917; TLI = 0.941; AGFI = 0.833 and RMSEA = 0.062). In an alternative second-factor analysis, the model of brand authenticity, including the two dimensions of originality and genuineness, indicated an acceptable fit ($\chi^2 = 88.183$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 4.641$; CFI = 0.979; IFI = 0.979; NFI = 0.973; RFI = 0.960; TLI = 0.969; AGFI = 0.932 and RMSEA = 0.078). This study also assessed the CFA of the brand experience dimensions of sensory, intellectual, affective and behavioral, which indicated an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2 = 164.964$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 4.874$; CFI = 0.970; IFI = 0.970; NFI = 0.962; RFI = 0.948; TLI = 0.958; AGFI = 0.900 and RMSEA = 0.080). The CFA examination results indicated that the first- and second-factor structure models were considered acceptable for future study.

As shown in Table 3, there was a high level of correlation between the structures.

Therefore, the variance inflation factor test (VIF) needed to be examined to determine whether there was a high level of collinearity between each construct. The results showed that all the VIFs of the constructs were less than 5.51 (Liu, 2018), indicating that collinearity was not a serious issue. Further, this study confirmed discriminant validity between each pair of constructs because the values of AVE were greater than the correlation coefficient (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

In addition, this study used similar steps to measure each variable of serious correlations between variables (Craighead et al., 2011). According to the previous suggestions, the values of common method variation (CMV) needed to be calculated (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We applied Satorra-Bentler’s scaled chi-square difference method using SPSS 21.0. Finally, the results of the common factor model showed that the first factor that was extracted only explained 48.5% of the variance below the 50% threshold (Podsakoff, 1986). Therefore, there was no concern about potential common method variation in this study.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics and confirmatory factor analysis.

Constructs and factors	Factor Loading	CR	AVE
Brand authenticity (Modya and Hanksb, 2019)			
Originality (Cronbach's alpha = .844)		.842	.640
This time-honored catering brand was a pioneer in the industry.	.799		
This time-honored catering brand is innovative.	.758		
This time-honored catering brand is unique.	.840		
Genuineness (Cronbach's alpha = .904)		.906	.658
This time-honored catering brand is sincere.	.815		
The gourmet recipes of the time-honored catering brand is real.	.829		
This time-honored catering brand is honest.	.842		
This time-honored catering brand is undisguised.	.755		
This time-honored catering brand is legitimate.	.811		
Awakening of interest (Cronbach's alpha = .913) (Tercia et al., 2020)			
I would like more information about this time-honored catering brand.	.835		
Learning more about this time-honored catering brand would be useful to me.	.857		
I'm curious about this time-honored catering brand.	.849		
I am intrigued by this time-honored catering brand.	.865		
Brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009)			
Sensory (Cronbach's alpha = .797)		.796	.662
I find this time-honored catering brand interesting in a sensory way.	.809		
This time-honored catering brand does appeal to my senses.	.818		
Intellectual (Cronbach's alpha = .885)			
I engage in a lot of thinking when I encounter this time-honored catering brand.	.835	.863	.677
This time-honored catering brand does caught my imagination.	.838		
This time-honored catering brand stimulates my curiosity and problem solving.	.795		
Affective (Cronbach's alpha = .860)			
This time-honored catering brand induces feelings and sentiments.	.855	.885	.720
I do have strong emotions for this time-honored catering brand.	.851		
This time-honored catering brand is emotional.	.840		
Constructs and factors	Factor Loading	CR	AVE
Behavioral (Cronbach's alpha = .843)			
I engage in physical actions and behaviors when I use time-honored catering brand.	.878	.848	.653
This time-honored catering brand results in bodily experiences.	.835		
This time-honored catering brand is not action oriented.	.700		
Customers-brand identification (Cronbach's alpha = .920) (Popp and Woratschek, 2017)			
This time-honored catering brand says a lot about the kind of person I am.	.845	.920	.697
This time-honored catering brand's image and my self-image are similar in many respects.	.822		
This time-honored catering brand plays an important role in my life.	.845		
I am very attached to the time-honored catering brand.	.818		
The time-honored catering brand raises a strong sense of belonging.	.844		
Creative performance (Cronbach's alpha = .926) Darvishmotevali et al. (2018)			
Employees of the time-honored catering brand could carry out his/her routine tasks in resourceful ways.	.803	.926	.677
This time-honored catering brand could come up with novel ideas to satisfy customer needs.	.829		
This time-honored restaurant offers a variety of dishes for customers to choose from.	.754		

Table 2 (continued)

Constructs and factors	Factor Loading	CR	AVE
This time-honored restaurant has new perspectives on old difficulties.	.835		
This time-honored restaurant provide methods for solving problems when existing answers are not apparent.	.860		
This time-honored catering brand is creative.	.850		
Cultural proximity (Cronbach's alpha = .919) Huang et al. (2013)			
I've always wanted to visit this time-honored catering brand.	.835	.918	.653
This time-honored catering brand make me feel like home.	.833		
This is a place where most people want to go.	.801		
To experience this time-honored brand is a new attempt.	.742		
This time-honored catering brand could increase my knowledge of history.	.830		
This time-honored restaurant a mysterious place	.802		
In-personal WOM (Cronbach's alpha = .875) Eelen et al. (2017)			
Recommending this time-honored catering brand to other people.	.848	.875	.701
Talking with others about this time-honored catering brand.	.798		
Defending this time-honored catering brand when others speak poorly about it.	.864		
Constructs and factors	Factor Loading	CR	AVE
E-WOM (Cronbach's alpha = .934) Eelen et al. (2017)			
Expressing your opinion about this time-honored catering brand online.	.792	.944	.708
Sharing ideas for new products and experiences of this time-honored catering brand online.	.838		
Participating in a discussion on the brand website of this time-honored catering brand.	.861		
Liking this time-honored catering brand on WeChat or Weibo.	.849		
Sending or sharing online messages or promos of this time-honored catering brand to others.	.849		
Writing an online review about this time-honored catering brand.	.850		
Writing something or post a video about this time-honored catering brand. Online	.849		

4. Results

To test the research Hypothesis in this study, a two-step procedure was followed. First, SEM was applied in AMOS 20.0 to test the overall model structure. Further, we used a bootstrap confidence interval approach, Monte Carlo approach 2000 resampling, 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI) and p-values (Liu, 2018) to examine the mediating effects. Second, this study employed hierarchical regressions to test the moderating effects with STATA 13.0 (Zhang et al., 2019). Fig. 3 shows the standardized path coefficients, and each direct path was significant at $P < .001$. Further, the overall model fit the data well ($\chi^2 = 1929.127$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.954$; CFI = 0.940; IFI = 0.940; TLI = 0.935; NFI = 0.912; AGFI = 0.823; RFI = 0.905 and RMSEA = 0.057).

4.1. Mediating effects test

This study tested the mediators of awakening of interest, brand experience and customers' brand identification using SEM. First, Hypothesis 1 proposed that awakening of interest mediated the relationships between brand authenticity and brand experience. As illustrated in Fig. 3, the two sub-dimensions of brand authenticity (Originality, $\beta = 0.970$; Genuineness, $\beta = 0.944$; all $p < .001$) directly affected the mediator of awakening of interest ($\beta = 0.779$; $p < .001$). Moreover,

Table 3
Means, standard deviations, correlations and discriminant validity.

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	VIF
Brand authenticity													
1. Originality	(.800)												
2. Genuineness	.800	(.811)											2.72
3. Awakening of interest	.684	.660	(.852)										4.00
Brand experience													
4. Sensory	.702	.721	.720	(.814)									3.47
5. Intellectual	.709	.733	.769	.804	(.823)								3.69
6. Affective	.640	.608	.755	.698	.797	(.849)							4.99
7. Behavioral	.665	.701	.770	.733	.797	.764	(.808)						3.94
8. Customers-brand identification	.653	.666	.772	.722	.760	.727	.734	(.835)					5.51
9. Creative performance	.702	.700	.791	.722	.748	.736	.736	.830	(.823)				4.60
10. Cultural proximity	.646	.652	.747	.713	.748	.725	.744	.833	.805	(.808)			5.16
11. In-person WOM	.616	.628	.759	.666	.718	.670	.729	.804	.747	.808	(.837)		4.38
12. E-WOM	.615	.637	.749	.666	.721	.725	.693	.834	.793	.807	.829	(.841)	5.23
Mean	5.355	5.521	5.212	5.306	5.237	5.163	5.293	5.209	5.248	5.337	5.300	5.111	
S.D.	1.118	1.021	1.173	1.100	1.149	1.231	1.153	1.152	1.058	1.088	1.150	1.178	

*P < .05; **P < .01; ***P < .001. Correlation values above 0.608 were significant at *p < .001. Square root of average variance extraction are shown on the diagonal in bold.

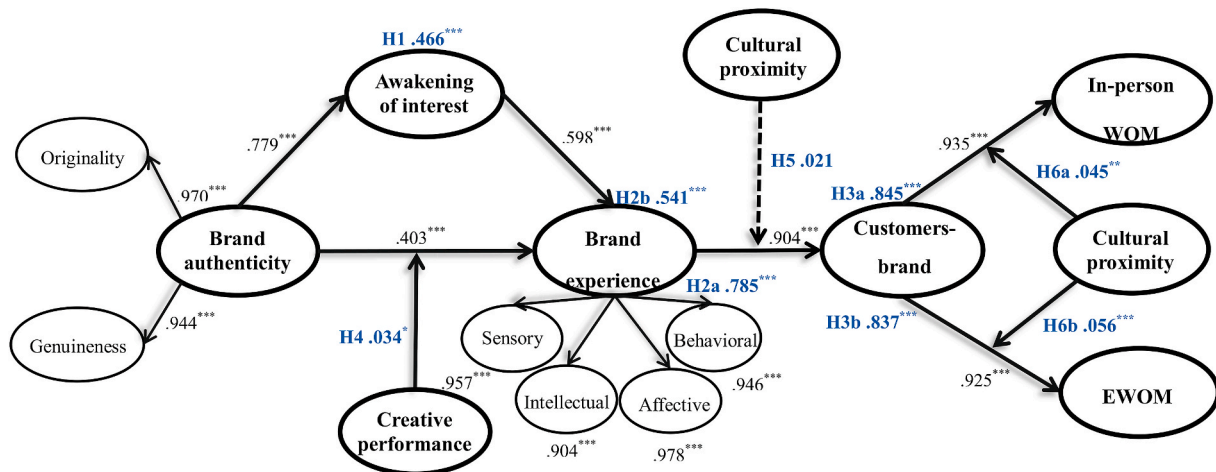


Fig. 3. Research framework results. $\chi^2 = 1929.127$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 2.954$; CFI = 0.940; IFI = 0.940; TLI = 0.935; NFI = 0.912; AGFI = 0.823; RFI = 0.905 and RMSEA = 0.057.

awakening of interest was positively associated with brand experience ($\beta = 0.598$; $p < .001$). The average indirect effects of brand authenticity on brand experience through awakening of interest were significant ($\beta = 0.466$, $p < .001$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

Second, the mediating effect of brand experience was examined in terms of the predictions of hypotheses 2a and 2b. The direct effects of brand authenticity on brand experience (Sensory, $\beta = 0.957$; Intellectual, $\beta = 0.904$; Affective, $\beta = 0.978$; Behavioral, $\beta = 0.946$; all $p < .001$) were positive and significant ($\beta = 0.403$, $p < .001$). Additionally, brand experience had a positive effect on customers' brand identification ($\beta = 0.904$; $p < .001$). Thus, brand experience played a mediator role on the relationships between brand authenticity and customers' brand identification ($\beta = 0.785$; $p < .001$) and the relationship between awakening of interest and customers' brand identification ($\beta = .541$; $p < .001$). As such, Hypotheses 2a and Hypotheses 2b were supported.

Hypotheses 3a and Hypotheses 3b predicted that customers' brand identification played a mediator role in the relationships among brand experience, in-person WOM and EWOM. Customers' brand identification affected in-person WOM ($\beta = 0.935$; $p < .001$) and EWOM ($\beta = 0.925$; $p < .001$) positively and significantly. The results showed that customers' brand identification mediated the relationship between brand experience and In-person WOM ($\beta = 0.845$; $p < .001$). Further, brand experience had a positive and significant effect on EWOM through customers' brand identification ($\beta = 0.837$; $p < .001$), which

demonstrated that Hypotheses 3a and 3b were supported. As seen in Table 4, no confidence intervals of the two-tailed tests contained 0 (Saleem et al., 2018), confirming that the mediator variables for awakening of interest, brand experience and customers' brand identification were fully supported with Hypotheses 1 to 3.

4.2. Moderating effects test

The relationships between brand authenticity and customer WOM were also moderated by creative performance and cultural proximity. As shown in Table 5, Models 1 and 3 were the baseline models, including the control variables and independent variables of brand authenticity and brand experience. Models 2 and 4 added interaction effects, which examined Hypotheses 4 and 5. The results indicated that the coefficient for the interaction term brand authenticity \times creative performance was positive and significant for brand experience ($\beta = 0.034$; $p < .05$).

Further, a slope test was used, and a two-dimensional diagram was drawn to further confirm the interaction effect's specific development trend. Fig. 4 demonstrates that when the customers perceived that the time-honored catering brands had a high level of creative performance, the effects of brand authenticity on brand experience were enhanced. Moreover, the results showed that the interaction effect of brand experience and cultural proximity on customers' brand identification was not significant ($\beta = 0.021$; $p = .204$), which did not support Hypothesis 5.

Table 4
Mediating effect test for H1 to H3.

Hypothesis path	Standard error	Estimates	Bias-corrected 95% CI		Percentile 95% CI		Results
			Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper	
H1: Brand authenticity→Awakening of interest→Brand experience	.049	.466***	.377	.576	.365	.560	Support
H2a: Brand authenticity→Brand experience→Customers-brand identification	.029	.785***	.716	.834	.722	.837	Support
H2b: Awakening of interest→Brand experience→Customers-brand identification	.061	.541***	.416	.662	.413	.655	Support
H3c: Brand experience→Customers-brand identification→In-personal WOM	.022	.845***	.799	.883	.800	.884	Support
H3d: Brand experience→Customers-brand identification→E-WOM	.021	.837***	.790	.872	.793	.874	Support

*P < .05; **P < .01; ***P < .001.

Table 5
Results of the moderators test with H4 and H5.

Variables	Brand experience				Customers-brand identification			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Coef.	t	Coef.	t	Coef.	t	Coef.	t
Intercept	.160	1.00	1.077	2.22**	.257	1.54	.801	1.74
Control variables								
Gender	.056	1.29	.056	1.28	-.065	-1.40	-.067	-1.42
Age	.072	2.49*	.070	2.43*	-.014	-0.46	-.017	-0.54
Education	-.041	-1.77	-.039	-1.68	-.050	-2.02*	-.051	-2.08*
Monthly economic	.044	2.10*	.041	1.99*	-.039	-1.72	-.038	-1.71
Number of experiences	.070	3.33***	.071	3.39***	.047	2.07*	.285	2.92**
Creative performance								
Cultural proximity					.583	16.25***	.481	5.45***
Independent Variable								
Brand authenticity	.412	12.85***	.233	2.45***				
Brand experience					.400	10.48***	.285	2.92**
Interaction								
Brand authenticity* Creative performance			.034	2.00*				
Brand experience* Cultural proximity							.021	1.27
Model statistics								
R ²	.756		.757		.765		.766	
R ² _{adj}	.753		.754		.763		.763	
F	264.11***		232.76***		278.58***		244.21***	

*P < .05; **P < .01; ***P < .001.

A similar procedure method was used to examine Hypotheses 6a and 6b. Table 6 summarized the moderating effects of cultural proximity. Model 6 showed that the moderator of cultural proximity associated with customers' brand identification and in-person WOM was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.045$; $p < .01$). Further, there was also a positive interaction effect of customers' brand identification and cultural proximity on EWOM ($\beta = 0.056$; $p < .001$). As shown in Fig. 5 and Fig. 6, the simple slope analysis showed that at a higher level of cultural proximity,

there were two more significant positive correlations between customers' brand identification, In-person WOM and EWOM. Thus, Hypotheses 6a and Hypotheses 6b were supported.

4.3. Robustness checks

To examine whether the results of this study have strong stability, the same procedure including SEM and regression analyses was used to test the mediating moderating models (Tsai et al., 2015; Liu, 2017). The independent variable of brand authenticity was separated into two dimensions of originality and genuineness in the alternative model. Fig. 7 summarized the output path estimates, which showed that all direct paths were significant. The overall fitness of the alternative model was worse than that of the proposed model ($\chi^2 = 2529.291$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 3.873$; CFI = 0.911; IFI = 0.911; TLI = 0.904; NFI = 0.884; AGFI = 0.802; RFI = 0.875 and RMSEA = 0.069).

Specifically, the mediating effects of awakening of interest on the relationship between originality and brand experience ($\beta = 0.381$; $p < .001$) and the relationship between genuineness and brand experience ($\beta = 0.253$; $p < .001$), which provided evidence regarding Hypothesis 1. Further, originality ($\beta = 0.465$; $p < .001$) and genuineness ($\beta = 0.499$; $p < .001$) affected brand experience through awakening of interest. Additionally, brand experience mediated the effect of awakening of interest on customers' brand identification ($\beta = 0.579$; $p < .001$), which still supported Hypotheses 2a and Hypotheses 2b. Moreover, customers' brand identification positively and still significantly mediated the

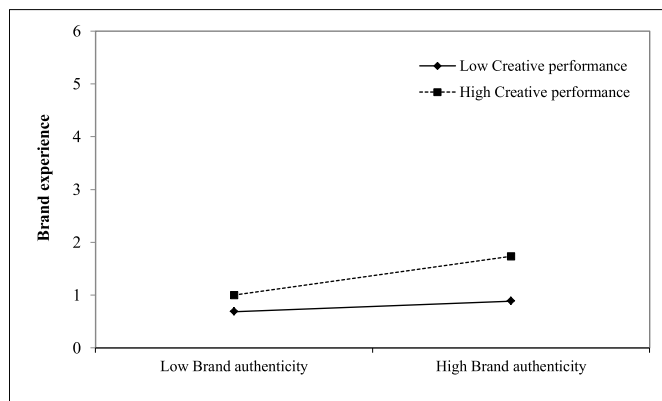


Fig. 4. Interaction of brand authenticity and creative performance on brand experience.

Table 6
Results of the moderator test with H6a and H6b.

Variables	In-personal WOM				E-WOM			
	Model 5		Model 6		Model 7		Model 8	
	Coef.	t	Coef.	t	Coef.	t	Coef.	t
Intercept	.288	1.60	1.427	3.15**	.200	1.20	1.610	3.87***
Control variables								
Gender	-.011	-0.22	-.016	-0.31	-.087	-1.83	-.093	-1.98
Age	.014	0.42	.006	0.17	.060	1.93	.049	1.60
Education	.030	1.13	.028	1.06	-.030	-1.22	-.033	-1.34
Monthly economic	.009	0.37	.008	0.31	.005	0.21	.003	0.14
Number of experiences	.094	3.60***	.091	3.51***	.058	2.41*	.055	2.29*
Cultural proximity	.501	11.59***	.288	3.24***	.456	11.41***	.192	2.34*
Independent Variable								
Customers-brand identification (CBI)	.375	9.17***	.131	1.34	.466	12.36***	.164	1.83
Interaction								
CBI* Cultural proximity			.045	2.74**			.056	3.69***
Model statistics								
R ²	.722		.726		.774		.779	
R ² _{adj}	.719		.722		.771		.776	
F	222.28***		197.55***		292.51***		263.06***	

*P < .05; **P < .01; ***P < .001.

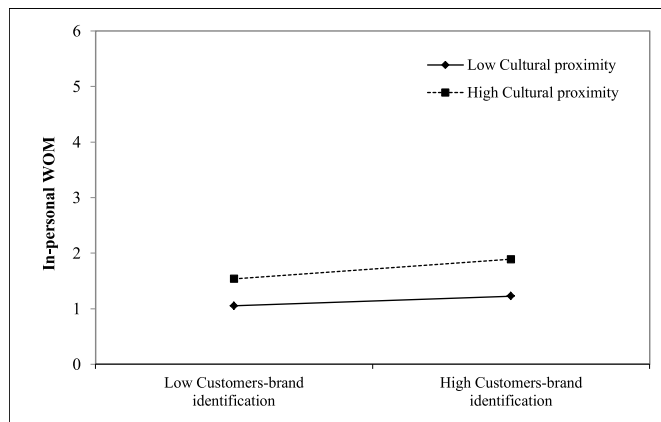


Fig. 5. Interaction of customers' brand identification and cultural proximity with in-person WOM.

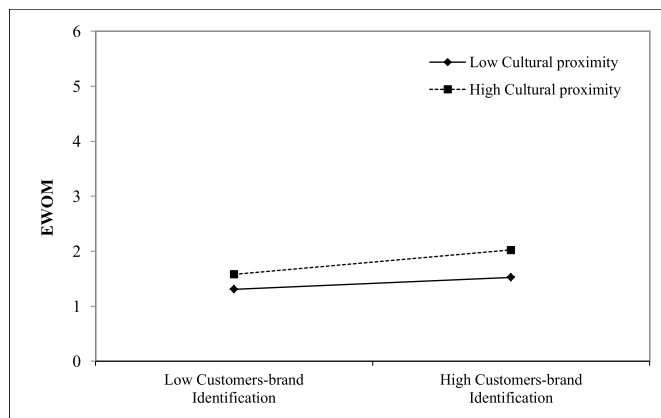


Fig. 6. Interaction of customers' brand identification and cultural proximity with EWOM.

relationships among brand experience, in-person WOM and EWOM (H3a: $\beta = 0.799$, H3b: $\beta = 0.788$; all $p < .001$). Therefore, Hypotheses 3a and 3b were fully supported. Next, we evaluated two moderators. The

interaction effects of originality \times creative performance were not significant for brand experience ($\beta = 0.029$; $p = .087$), but genuineness \times creative performance ($\beta = 0.051$; $p < .01$) was positive and significant for brand experience, which partially supported Hypothesis 4. Similarly, the moderating test results of cultural proximity were identical to the proposed model validation results. Undoubtedly, the structural model proposed in this study was robust.

5. Conclusions

The inheritance path of traditional catering brands has always been an issue that needs urgent theoretical response (Tian et al., 2018). This study analyzes the development characteristics of time-honored catering brands and finds the significance of customer WOM for brand heritage. Based on SOR theory, we construct and test the WOM path. First, this study has proved that brand authenticity is a critical leading factor and the interaction between brand authenticity and creative performance can promote the traditional brand inheritance. Brand authenticity reflects the originality and genuineness of time-honored catering brands, which is one of the characteristics that distinguish these brands from other catering brands. However, the heritage of time-honored catering brands needs creative elements to improve customer experience in the performance reflects the combination of historical and innovative elements to enhance customer experience, leading to customer brand WOM behavior.

Second, customers' responses to the brand (awakening of interest), cognition (brand experience) and attitudes (brand identity) are the important mediating factors for their WOM. SOR theory consolidates the theoretical foundation of the inheritance path model. As the stimulus, brand authenticity can successfully awaken customers' potential interest for experience. The brand experience process mobilizes customers' positive senses, behaviors, affections, intelligence and other comprehensive feelings (Brakus et al., 2009), leading to brand identification towards traditional brands. Consequently, customers manifest desired behaviors such as in-person WOM and EWOM, showing positive results for brand recognition (Dimitriadis and Papista, 2010). This study highlights the positive effects of cognition (brand experience) and affection (identification) on customers' WOM in the context of time-honored catering brands.

Third, an interesting finding shows that cultural proximity can strengthen the behavior (WOM) of customers after brand identification, but it cannot strengthen the formation process of customers' brand

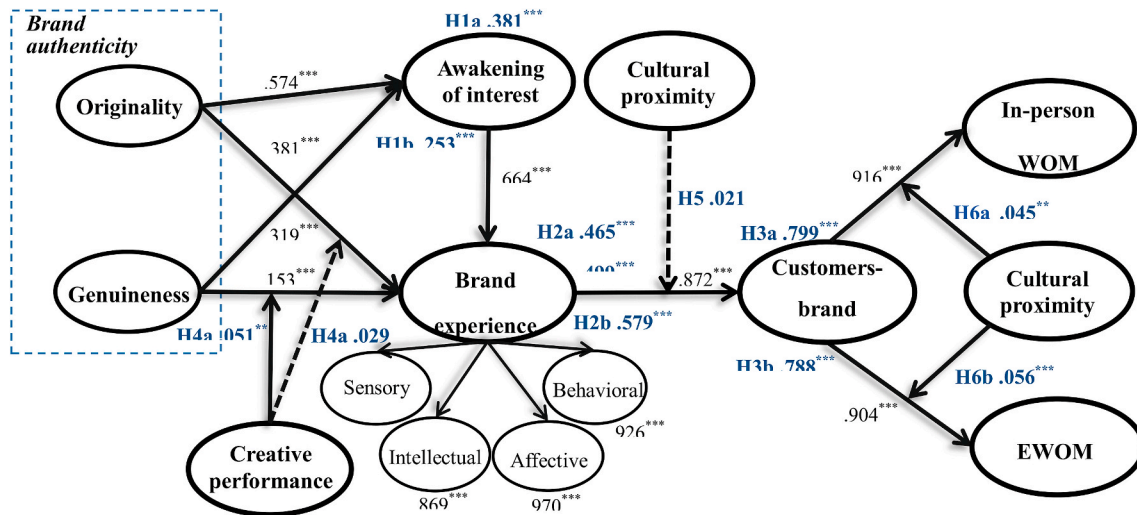


Fig. 7. Alternative model results-Separate the dimension of brand authenticity into originality and genuineness.

identification. Customers with higher cultural proximity are willing to express common cultural emotions and generate desired behavior. It is easier to convey the cultural connotation and essence of time-honored brands. Brand identification is a direct consequence of affective mobilization in the process of brand experience (Stryker, 2004). Further, customers' brand identification is actually the evaluation of intuitive feelings in the process of high-level experience (Lin and Sung, 2014). This evaluation is mainly aimed at the experience level of catering products, especially food, rather than cultural backgrounds. It is difficult to enhance or weaken the influence of customer brand experience on brand identification through cultural proximity.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Given the decline and failures stemming from serious issues with time-honored catering brands (Li, 2018), the study results contribute significant theoretical value and breakthroughs to the research field.

First, this study is the first to provide a specific path of traditional catering brand inheritance. The theoretical process highlights the core driver of brand authenticity and the accelerator of creative performance. Although many scholars have emphasized the unique historical and cultural value of traditional catering brands (Tian et al., 2018), to date, few studies have focused on addressing the brand decline and constructing a theoretical path of traditional catering brand inheritance, especially in remodeling from a new customer perspective rather than an enterprise perspective (Li et al., 2019; He, 2008). Importantly, the critical leading factor of brand authenticity is placed in the present and the future, not just historical period (Lu et al., 2015; Sims, 2009). Only the combination of old originality and new creativity approaches can contribute to the process of high levels of customer WOM (Lu et al., 2015; Wang and Netemeyer, 2004). This study is a new attempt to explore the creative performance of time-honored catering brands in terms of products and services because the variable is often used to represent the influence of employee service behavior (Darvishmotevali et al., 2018). Therefore, creativity based on brand authenticity needs to be valued in the future.

Second, the findings contribute to the different influences of cultural background factors on traditional catering customers in attitude and behavior processes. The conclusions respond to the previous arguments about the influence of cultural distance on individuals (Huang et al., 2013). They further help us to re-understand the different roles of cultural proximity in the three stages of before, during and after a visit. Many studies have proven that customers with greater cultural differences have more novelty interest and motivation before they visit

(Huang, 2017; Huang et al., 2013). However, the different findings in this study provide direct evidence for cultural proximity strengthening or weakening customer attitudes and behaviors after visits rather than before visits as indicated in a previous study (Sims and Rebecca, 2009). Moreover, on the basis of the influence of cultural differences on customer motivation, we distinguish and expand the different roles of cultural proximity in different stages of customer experience, especially in the context of traditional cultural brands. The results complement the research on cross-cultural customer psychology and behavior and cultural theory (Huang, 2017).

Third, this study provides a new perspective to address and confirm the relationship between brand authenticity and customer behavior. Although previous studies have highlighted that authenticity, as an attraction, plays an important role in customer satisfaction, evaluation and motivation (Zeng et al., 2012; DiPietro and Levitt, 2019). This study expands the research on the influence of brand authenticity on customer WOM. More importantly, the research identifies the three-stage organism process through customers' responses (awakening of interest), cognitive processes (brand experience) and attitude formation (brand identification) (Lu et al., 2015; DiPietro and Levitt, 2019). This conclusion highlights that customer cognition and attitude are significant bridges in the process of forming their WOM (Moulard et al., 2016). In addition, the paths of mediating mechanisms broaden the SOR theory and facilitate theorizing how to realize traditional brand inheritance in the new period.

5.2. Managerial implications

The research results provide an important development path for the realization of time-honored catering brand inheritance. First, time-honored catering enterprises should protect their unique traditional secret formulas and manual skills to ensure the original flavor. For example, provide sufficient fund to train restaurant artisans and use original recipes. In addition, the management system of process inheritance and brand expansion need to learn from the modern enterprise development model based on their own traditional characteristics, which helps to adapt to the changing customer' demands. On the other hand, it is necessary to ensure the consistency of brand culture in services, products, and marketing; the core position of the traditional elements of time-honored catering brands, including brand logo, brand style and brand design, must be ensured. For example, authentic food ingredients and decoration features should be used, and the staff should wear cultural costumes, which will enhance the aesthetic and create a more unique and authentic service experience (Lu et al., 2015). In

addition, unlike other forms of catering such as takeout, authenticity requires a sense of presence, and live production can enhance the sensory and emotion experience. However, it is important to maintain the social distancing of the dining tables to serve the customers and allow them to enjoy the authenticity in the loose space. In each link, time-honored catering enterprises should pay attention to the cultural storytelling to highlight their historical competitiveness, such as origin of each dish, technology process, founder experience, etc.

Second, authenticity alone may no longer be enough to ensure the sustainable development of a traditional restaurant (Lu et al., 2015). Time-honored catering brands must realize that creative products and services are the driving factors of competitive advantage (Liang and James, 2014). It may include product windows and creative feature films and projects that enhance customers' intuitive perceptions of the brand (Bogicevic et al., 2019). The manifestation of time-honored products can be more diversified and creative and include the modeling of dishes, plate presentation, tableware, etc. Further, the combination of traditional and modern elements needs to be emphasized. Time-honored brands can also use creative derivatives to stimulate a diverse consumption experience, such as creative tableware souvenirs, time-honored seasonings, etc. (Ryu and Zhong, 2012). Further, personalized service should be available when necessary. Transparent window can be applied to show the cooking process, which is conducive to tourists not only get taste experience, but can also understand traditional brands visually. Moreover, due to the differences in regional tastes, managers should make appropriate improvements to adapt the taste to local people, such as reducing the spiciness.

Third, customers' WOM is spontaneous behavior, but providing online and offline WOM platforms for customers is still an initiative that time-honored catering brands must take seriously. Therefore, creating social media platforms and online communities is essential (Bernritter et al., 2016). For example, the strong tone and style of the cultural atmosphere designed by the manager is a community activity with a sense of identity, which will maintain emotional bonds through social media interaction. Further, festivals, special events should be actively taken advantage of to provide customers with promotional material about time-honored brands, pushing the customers to share brand information (Collins-Dodd and Lindley, 2003; Eelen et al., 2017). Moreover, establishing an internal connection between time-honored brands and customers is the key to maintaining WOM, which can highlight customers' identification. For example, providing time-honored brand membership, benefits and feedback systems can enhance the offline one-to-one connection between customers and brands, acting as a channel for highlighting customers' unique identities.

5.3. Limitations and future research

Although this study creates a new path model for solving the issue of time-honored catering brand inheritance and the results make great significant contributions, some limitations can provide insights for future research. This study collected data from Chinese customers of time-honored catering brands. However, research on cultural proximity needs to involve cross-cultural samples, and it is better to use a multinational sample to highlight the influence of cultural distance on customer attitudes and behaviors. Future research may examine different groups in transnational cultures to ensure the universality and external validity of the Hypothesis model proposed in this study (Hwang and Ok, 2013). Further, an examination of the results through a comparative study of transnational samples is needed, such as in different countries. In addition, SEM was used in this study to discuss the inheritance of time-honored catering brands from the perspective of customers' WOM. The multilevel model may be the best way to examine the influence of brand authenticity on customers' WOM. Unfortunately, there were a total of 1128 time-honored authorized enterprises in 2016, and only one in ten of them is thriving. Further, time-honored catering brands are few, and there may be fewer than 30 typically successful

time-honored catering brands that satisfy our study sample needs (Li et al., 2019), and this is insufficient to meet the data standards for the multilevel method. Future research may not only be limited to samples of time-honored catering brands but also attempt to study traditional catering enterprises. The robustness of the model may be further examined through a multilevel analysis method. Finally, future research can use qualitative interviews to investigate the relationship between spatial distance, crowding degree and customer brand authenticity experience in a new, post-COVID 19 world order.

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