

The Digital-Cultural Nexus: Brand Development Mechanisms of Small and Medium-sized Tea Enterprises in Guizhou, China

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Abstract

This study investigates how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in traditional industries leverage digital platforms and cultural resources for brand building amid digital transformation. Focusing on China's Guizhou tea sector, it integrates Resource Orchestration and Institutional Theory to propose a Digital-Cultural Coupling Framework (DCCF). A qualitative multiple-case design was adopted, drawing on triangulated data from interviews, firm documents, policy reports, and digital platform analytics. Thematic analysis reveals three core coupling mechanisms: (1) the institutionalization and narrative transformation of cultural resources, (2) the strategic use of digital platforms as infrastructures for meaning-making and trust-building, and (3) entrepreneurial orchestration across institutional and technological networks. The study extends existing theories by explaining how resource-constrained SMEs achieve brand legitimacy and differentiation through digital-cultural synergy. Practically, the DCCF offers transferable insights for SMEs and policymakers in developing economies seeking to integrate digital governance with cultural value creation to enhance regional competitiveness.

Keywords: SMEs; Brand Building; Digital Platforms; Cultural Resources; Guizhou Tea Industry

Received: September 30, 2025 | **Revised:** December 25, 2025 | **Accepted:** February 4, 2026

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Introduction

The ongoing advancement of globalization and the digital economy presents a paradoxical challenge for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in traditional industries. On one hand, technology affords unprecedented reach in communication, creating more opportunities; on the other hand, they face intensified competition and limited resources. In this context, branding has become a core resource for SMEs to achieve differentiated competition and sustainable development. Conventional wisdom suggests that the implementation of brand strategies by SMEs is often constrained by multiple factors such as capital, technology, and talent (Berthon et al., 2008), and often portrays SMEs as passive participants with limited resources, capable of only simple and reactive brand-building activities (Renton et al., 2015). However, digital transformation offers new opportunities. Existing research indicates that digital platforms can not only significantly reduce communication costs and market entry barriers but also help firms reconfigure trust relationships and market logic through supply chain integration and consumer interaction (Crammond et al., 2018; Li et al., 2018). This implies that SMEs are transitioning from "resource-limited passive adaptors" to "active agents shaping brand identities by leveraging digital capabilities" (Hu et al., 2023).

Concurrently, for traditional agricultural products like tea, the strategic significance of cultural and regional resources in brand building is increasingly prominent. Examples range from the "terroir" narrative emphasized by the European wine industry to the brand identities shaped by "certification" and "origin stories" for agricultural products in East Asia, all demonstrating the unique value of cultural resources in enhancing brand authenticity and differentiated competition (Dressler & Paunovic, 2021; Eggers et al., 2013). However, culture is not a naturally fixed asset; rather, it is constantly reconstructed and re-narrated under the influence of market logic and institutional forces (Buschgens et al., 2020). In this process, entrepreneurs and their external collaboration networks play a crucial role: they can foster brand growth through vision and narrative (Centeno et al., 2019), but may also become passive in strategic choices due to policy constraints and resource dependencies (Mitrega, 2023).

Although existing research has expanded the theory of SME brand building from multiple dimensions, significant gaps remain. First, many studies treat digital platforms as singular instrumental resources, such as channels for marketing communication, focusing on their function of reducing market entry costs, while overlooking their potential value as part of a systemic enabling mechanism deeply integrated into supply chain management, quality traceability, and brand trust building (Borah et al., 2022). Second, although academia acknowledges the importance of cultural resources, they are often viewed as static, pre-existing assets. The internal mechanism of how they are dynamically transformed through institutionalization (e.g., certification, standardization) and narrative construction into market interweavings perceptible to consumers remains underexplored (Buschgens et al., 2020). This gap is particularly critical in the context of the digital transformation of traditional industries.

The tea industry in Guizhou Province, China, provides a highly valuable context for investigating the above issues. Guizhou has been the Chinese province with the largest tea garden area and output for many consecutive years. Yet, its industry is predominantly composed of a large number of resource-constrained SMEs, mostly located in rural areas,

which are actively exploring paths to value upgrading through digitalization and branding. Against this backdrop, this study aims to achieve the following goal.

Research Objectives:

- 1) To explore the mechanism through which digital platforms function in the brand-building and communication processes of small and medium-sized tea enterprises in Guizhou.
- 2) To analyze how cultural and regional resources are transformed into differentiated advantages and foster consumer engagement through branding strategies.

Research Question:

- 1) How do digital platforms systematically enable the brand-building and communication processes of small and medium-sized tea enterprises in Guizhou?
- 2) How are cultural and regional resources transformed into differentiated brand capital and foster consumer engagement through processes of institutionalization and narrativization?

Literature Review

Digital Empowerment and SME Brand Building

Traditional literature often understands SME brand building based on the "resource constraints" paradigm, positing that their strategies are necessarily simplified and reactive (Renton et al., 2015). With the proliferation of digital technologies, digitalization is recognized as a crucial means for SMEs to overcome resource limitations (Chatterjee et al., 2022; Crammond et al., 2018). However, scholars remain divided on the role and function of digital platforms. Some studies view digital platforms as external tools characterized by lower transaction costs, facilitating customer connections and information exchange (Hokmabadi et al., 2024). Other research argues that digitalization is a systemic mechanism embedded within the enterprise, influencing organizational culture, leadership, and firm resilience (Leso et al., 2023; Li et al., 2018). In crisis environments, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, SMEs utilized social media for dynamic adaptation and business model innovation, demonstrating that digital platforms have become a significant source of enterprise resilience (Hu et al., 2023). Furthermore, cross-regional studies indicate that digital cooperation presents both opportunities and challenges; for instance, e-commerce collaboration between West/Central Africa and China reveals the risks and institutional constraints SMEs face in digital environments (Bentum-Micah et al., 2025). Collectively, these studies suggest that digital platforms should be viewed not merely as external communication tools, but as systemic brand management mechanisms.

The Institutionalization and Market Transformation of Cultural Resources

Cultural and regional resources are core sources of brand authenticity and differentiation; however, their transformation into market value is not automatic. Eggers et al. (2013) earlier pointed out that culture must be transformed through "symbolization" into value propositions perceptible to consumers. Based on research in the wine industry, Dressler and Paunovic (2021) proposed a "terroir-certification-brand" transformation model: regional characteristics need to be institutionalized through certification systems before being translated into market capital via narratives. This process is particularly evident in agricultural product

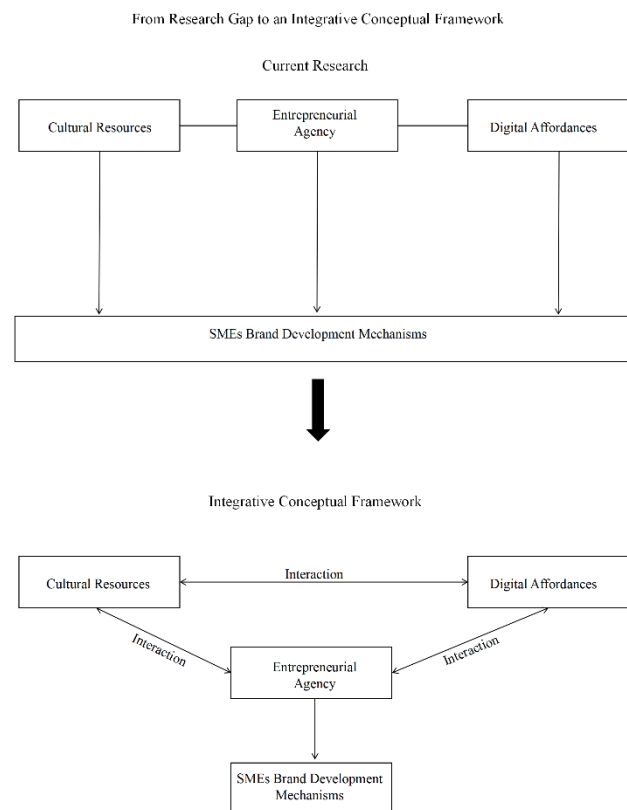
branding. Cultural resources do not automatically convert into brand value; Malik's (2024) study of China's ICT industry found that SMEs facilitate the integration of cultural and market logics through "commercial narratives," indicating that cultural resources are re-institutionalized in digital environments. The case study by Isensee et al. (2023) further notes that corporate culture and institutionalized narratives can build new competitive advantages for firms in sustainability discourses. These studies collectively demonstrate that the value of cultural and regional resources lies not only in their "existence" but also in their transformation through narratives, which can evoke emotional resonance among consumers. However, Buschgens et al. (2020) argue that cultural symbols are often reconstructed within an "imagined world," potentially serving market logic rather than cultural preservation. Therefore, how cultural resources are transformed into legitimate and differentiated market capital requires further discussion.

The Synergistic Role of Entrepreneurial Leadership and External Networks

SME brand building is not only a product of technology and culture but is also closely related to entrepreneurial leadership and its external networks. Centeno et al. (2019) pointed out that the entrepreneur's vision and narrative play a decisive role in brand identity formation. However, Mitreğa (2023) emphasizes that entrepreneurs often operate within a tension of "institutional dependence and autonomous narrative," requiring a balance between institutional constraints and strategic agency. Yadav et al. (2024) found that the combination of entrepreneurial leadership with social media, digital technology, and innovation capabilities significantly enhances the performance of SMEs in the handicraft industry. Yeboah's (2021) research showed that in Ghana, SMEs achieved growth by combining social networks with cultural capital. Oguntoye's (2025) study illustrates how micro-entrepreneurs leverage social media and external collaboration networks to drive business expansion. Existing research indicates that entrepreneurial leadership in brand strategy must be supported by external institutions, policies, and collaboration networks to truly translate into market outcomes.

In summary, although existing research has enriched the theoretical perspective of SME brand building from multiple dimensions, such as digitalization and culture, three significant shortcomings remain: First, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of the interaction mechanism between digital tools and regional cultural resources. Second, the role of entrepreneurs is often interpreted idealistically, without sufficient examination of the internal and external constraints they face. Third, within the context of traditional industries, insufficient attention has been paid to how brand strategy is embedded in the institutional environment and coordinated with market communication needs.

Furthermore, it becomes apparent that digital empowerment, cultural resources, and entrepreneurial leadership represent different dimensions of SME brand building. However, most existing studies tend to focus on a single dimension: either emphasizing the technical logic of digitalization, highlighting cultural construction, or separately analyzing the strategic role of entrepreneurs. What is lacking is an "integrative framework" capable of combining all three, revealing how SMEs, in resource-limited and institutionally complex environments, achieve brand development through the interaction of digitalization—cultural reproduction—entrepreneur and network synergy.



**Figure 1: From Research Gap to an Integrative Conceptual Framework
(Authors' own creation)**

As illustrated in Figure 1, current research has often treated digital affordances, cultural resources, and entrepreneurial agency as isolated dimensions, thereby failing to adequately uncover their systemic interrelations in the process of SME brand building. In contrast, the integrated conceptual framework proposed in this study frames these elements within an interdependent ecosystem grounded in social reality, with a particular focus on their dynamic interplay, mutual reinforcement, and deep contextual embeddedness within institutional environments.

It is worth further consideration that the coupling mechanism between digitalization and cultural resources manifests divergent structural configurations across different institutional environments. Within the Chinese context, the construction of brand legitimacy typically rests upon government- or industry association-led certification systems and trust networks rooted in social relations. Conversely, in Western market settings, legitimacy is more often derived from pluralistic and decentralized mechanisms of social validation, such as competitive certifying bodies, media evaluations, and spontaneous consumer word-of-mouth. Therefore, applying institutional theory to SME studies necessitates a careful dissection of the specific institutional trust structures in which they operate, ultimately requiring a deliberate contextual adaptation of the theoretical framework to enhance its explanatory power.

Theoretical Framework

To systematically understand the interrelationships among digital platforms, cultural resources, and entrepreneurial agency, this study draws upon Resource Orchestration Theory (Sirmon et al., 2007) and Institutional Theory (Scott, 2013). Resource Orchestration Theory emphasizes that a firm's competitive advantage stems not merely from possessing resources but from the processes of structuring, bundling, and leveraging them to create value. In this study, digital platforms and cultural resources are viewed as critical resources, with the entrepreneur's core role being their effective "orchestration." Concurrently, Institutional Theory posits that organizational behavior is deeply influenced by the three institutional pillars: regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive. The "institutionalization" of local culture (e.g., through certifications) pertains to regulative and normative processes, while its "narrative transformation" is deeply rooted in cultural-cognitive processes.

Consequently, this study proposes an integrative framework (as illustrated in Figure 1): brand building in SMEs is a process involving the coupling of resource orchestration and institutional construction.

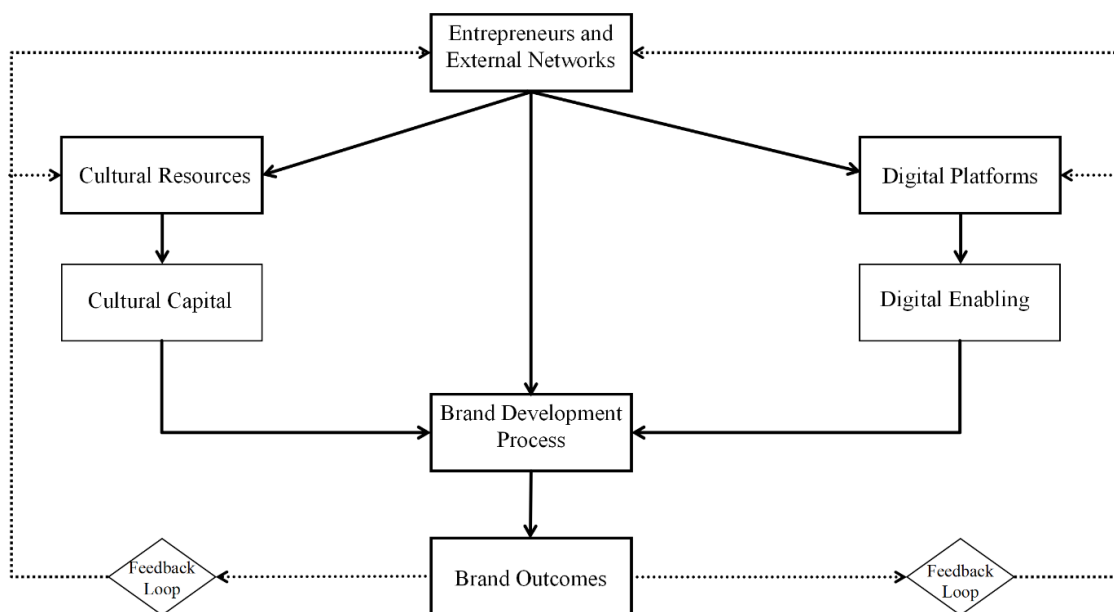


Figure 2: Digital-Cultural Coupling (Authors' own creation)

The Institutionalization and Narrative Transformation of Cultural Resources: The left side of the framework emphasizes that original cultural resources (e.g., geographical endowments, traditional craftsmanship) do not automatically become brand capital. They must first be transformed into "institutionalized cultural capital" with market legitimacy through institutionalization processes (e.g., obtaining organic certification, geographical indications). Subsequently, through narrative transformation (e.g., storytelling about terroir, visualising tacit knowledge), this capital is imbued with emotional resonance and symbolic meaning, becoming transmittable brand stories.

The Translation and Enablement Function of Digital Platforms: The right side of the framework indicates that the role of digital platforms extends far beyond being passive

channels. As a "socio-technical system," platforms operate through mechanisms of translation and enablement, converting abstract cultural symbols and data (e.g., traceability information) into consumer-perceivable experiences (e.g., narratives of transparency, visual impact). Thus, they function as a "translation interface" for cultural narratives and an "infrastructure" for trust construction.

The Strategic Synergy of Entrepreneurs and External Networks: The central part of the framework highlights the core role of the entrepreneur. Operating within the support and constraints of external networks (policy, finance, platform partnerships), entrepreneurs exercise strategic agency. Their core function is resource orchestration: identifying, structuring, and astutely bundling digital and cultural resources to guide the effective coupling of the process of "narrative transformation of cultural resources" with the process of "translational enablement by digital platforms," ultimately driving brand construction.

The Coupling Process and Outcome: The brand construction process at the center of the framework is the locus where the digital and cultural paths converge and couple. Successful coupling enables effective value co-creation, ultimately yielding brand outcomes (e.g., differentiated advantage, consumer trust). Furthermore, the feedback loop arrows in the framework indicate that brand outcomes, in turn, influence entrepreneurial strategy, reinforce the market value of cultural resources, and promote the iterative use of digital platforms, forming a dynamically evolving, self-reinforcing brand development system.

The theoretical value of this framework lies in its transcendence of perspectives that treat technology, culture, and agency in isolation. It provides a dynamic model for analyzing how SMEs can achieve brand development through strategic "orchestration" despite resource constraints. Based on this framework, this study will conduct a comparative case analysis of two Guizhou tea enterprises to delve into its underlying mechanisms.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2018) to investigate the mechanisms of how digital platforms enable empowerment and how cultural and geographical resources are transformed. The case study method is suitable for exploring complex phenomena within their real-life contexts (Eisenhardt, 1989), making it particularly appropriate for analyzing the practices of SMEs in Guizhou's tea industry. This suitability is based on two factors: first, Guizhou's tea industry is in a growth phase, having recently become the leading province in China in terms of tea garden area and output, making it a significant supplier of raw tea leaves. Second, most tea enterprises in Guizhou are SMEs, predominantly located in rural areas and subject to various resource constraints. Therefore, selecting typical cases can better explain the mechanisms underlying brand development.

Case Selection

This study follows the principle of theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Starting with purposive screening, the sample structure was iteratively refined based on theoretical relevance and variance during the analytical process to ensure the selected cases could robustly support theory building (Eisenhardt, 1989). The sample selection process adhered to a progressive path of "industry association recommendation → screening for

communication activeness → theoretical typicality extraction," aiming to construct an explanatorily potent case matrix for analyzing brand communication mechanisms within the Digital-Cultural coupling framework.

Stage 1: Construction of the Initial Sample Pool

Beginning with a recommended list¹ from the Guizhou Provincial Tea Association (comprising 93 organizations), relevant business information was obtained via queries in the National Enterprise Credit Information Publicity System. In accordance with the "Standards for the Classification of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises" (MIIT Enterprise [2011] No. 300), and based on indicators including workforce size, operating revenue, and industry type, large-scale state-owned enterprises, conglomerates, and non-profit organizations were excluded. This resulted in an initial sample pool of 51 enterprises that met the SME criteria and possessed a foundation for independent brand operations.

Stage 2: Screening for Digital Communication Activeness

Given the research focus on brand communication mechanisms within the "Digital-Cultural coupling framework," a digital communication behavior assessment model was further employed to systematically evaluate the online communication performance of the 51 enterprises. The assessment covered three dimensions:

Platform Coverage: Whether the enterprise had established official accounts or stores on major social and e-commerce platforms such as Douyin, WeChat Official Accounts, Taobao/Tmall, and Xiaohongshu.

Brand Content Activeness: Whether consistent updates were maintained on these platforms and if the content style was unified.

User Interaction Performance: Basic user engagement metrics such as comment volume, likes, and repost rates following content publication. Using a combination of web search tools and manual recording analysis, 8 enterprises demonstrating active digital communication were identified for the next screening stage. These enterprises possessed fundamental digital communication capabilities and exhibited relatively clear differentiation in brand positioning and communication strategies, providing a solid basis for sampling.

Stage 3: Theoretical Sampling and Final Selection

The final selection was guided by the following criteria, applied to the 8 shortlisted enterprises:

Degree of Integration Practice: The extent to which digital platforms were utilized to explicitly integrate cultural and regional resources into the brand.

Brand Strategy Differentiation: The variance in strategic brand positioning and approaches.

Data Accessibility: The feasibility of successfully contacting founders or marketing managers for interviews, or obtaining supplementary internal documents and media materials.

¹ The "Recommended List of Guizhou Tea Enterprises" was obtained from the Guizhou Provincial Tea Association website (<http://www.gzscyhx.cn/cxhy/hymd/gys/>), accessed on March 15, 2024.

Table 1: Multi-Stage Sample Selection Process for Case Study (Authors’ own creation)

Stage	Procedure	Main Screening Steps	Criteria / Conditions	Remaining Enterprises	Result
1	Industry Association List + SME Filtering	1) Industry Association List 2) Filtered by business scope and type	Guizhou Tea Association List; SME classification standard (MIIT Enterprise [2011] No. 300)	93	51 SMEs identified
2	Digital Activity Assessment	1) Search “Enterprise Name” + Platform 2) Identify digital presence and social media/e-commerce activity 3) Excluded enterprises with low digital engagement	Has visible brand identity; At least one active platform with updated content in the past 6 months; >500 eligible reviews/comments	51	8 active SMEs shortlisted
3	Sampling	1) Selected enterprises of varying size and digital strategies 2) Ensured diversity and theoretical saturation	Considered three key dimensions: Firm size; Strategic differentiation; Data accessibility	8	2 final cases selected

Table 2: Company Profile (Authors’ own creation)

ID	Enterprise Size	Year of Establishment	Main Product Types	Major Communication Platform	Strategic
CA (Company A)	Medium	2001	Green tea, Black tea	Tmall, JD.com, Douyin	Efficiency-oriented
CB (Company B)	Small	2010	Organic ecological zinc selenium tea	Douyin, Tmall, Wechat, Xiaohongshu	Narrative-oriented

Through the aforementioned screening process, two small and medium-sized tea enterprises were ultimately selected as typical cases. Although the sample size is limited, the two firms exhibit significant divergence in their strategic positioning (efficiency-oriented vs. narrative-oriented). Company A (CA), a medium-sized enterprise, focuses on large-scale e-commerce and supply chain efficiency, representing the digital transformation path of medium-sized firms. Company B (CB), a small-sized enterprise, leverages ecological narratives and social media storytelling strategies to pursue a differentiated brand path. They respectively embody two typical developmental logics within the Guizhou tea industry's process of digitization and branding. This selection aligns with the logic of theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) and is therefore capable of revealing the divergent pathways of SME brand construction under digital enablement. Through robust case evidence, it achieves pattern matching between theory and data (Eisenhardt, 1989). Forming a complementary contrast in their mechanisms of digital enablement and cultural embedding, the two cases collectively provide a relatively comprehensive reflection of the primary pathways for brand development in the Guizhou tea industry.

Data Collection

To ensure the systematicity and reliability of the research, multiple data sources were employed for triangulation (Yin, 2018).

1) Collection of Enterprise-Related Materials: In-depth interviews were conducted—one each with the Marketing Director of CA and the founder of CB (approximately 60-80 minutes per interview). The interviews were carried out face-to-face between March and April 2024. The content focused on the enterprises' brand positioning, communication strategies, digital practices, and challenges faced. All interviews were conducted with the informed consent of the participants. The audio recordings were transcribed, resulting in nearly 20,000 words of textual material, which served as a key basis for analyzing the logic behind corporate communication decisions and resource allocation. Beyond the interviews, the research team collected internal and public documents from the enterprises, including official website materials, corporate reports, and brand brochures. These documents supplemented detailed information on the enterprises' digital marketing and brand management practices; Public sales data and customer reviews from the past year were systematically compiled for CA's Tmall flagship store (35 SKUs) and JD.com flagship store (13 SKUs), totaling 1,123 reviews. Digital communication content from CB was also obtained, including 54 WeChat Official Account articles and 594 Douyin short videos (with 8,906 followers, 99,000 likes, and a total view count of approximately 1.35 million).

2) Acquisition of External Environmental Data: Through publicly available government information and industry contacts, policy documents related to the development of Guizhou's tea industry were obtained. These included the Guizhou Tea Industry Development Reports (also known as the Tea Industry Green Papers) compiled jointly by relevant Guizhou departments and industry experts from 2015 to 2020, and the "Regulations on the Development of the Tea Industry in Guizhou Province" issued by the Guizhou Provincial Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs.

3) Digital Platform Data Analysis: Product information, user reviews, and sales data for both enterprises on major e-commerce platforms were manually and systematically recorded. Furthermore, 32 live streaming sessions conducted by the enterprises on platforms like Douyin and Little Red Book were observed, and interactive comments during these streams were systematically compiled. All data collection complied with platform terms of service, and no automated crawling tools were used.

Data Analysis

This study employed the thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) to code, categorize, and synthesize the data. Initially, all interview transcripts, corporate archives, policy documents, digital platform data, and social media content were thoroughly reviewed multiple times. Open coding was conducted using NVivo software, employing an open-coding strategy to capture key concepts and behavioral patterns within the data as comprehensively as possible. Examples of initial codes included "traceability QR codes," "cold-chain logistics," "organic certification," "local narratives," and "live-streaming interaction comments."

Through processes of clustering and comparative analysis, dispersed codes were integrated into conceptual categories. Cross-case comparison was then performed to identify both similarities and differences. For instance, codes related to digital platforms (such as "doubled sales," "consumer trust," and "craftsmanship demonstration interaction") were grouped under the theme "Systemic Enabling Mechanisms of Digital Platforms." Conversely, codes pertaining to local culture and narrative (e.g., "Fenggang Zinc-Selenium Tea certification," "high-mountain cloud mist narrative," "hand-firing tea technique") were consolidated into the theme "Institutionalization and Narrative Transformation of Cultural and Geographical Resources." During the processes of coding and cross-case comparison, no new codes or themes emerged following the analysis of the second case, indicating that theoretical saturation had been achieved. To enhance the study's reflexivity and analytical transparency, the research team continuously maintained reflective memos throughout the coding and interpretation stages, periodically examining the potential influence of the researchers' own assumptions or pre-existing theoretical stances on theme formation. This analytical process ultimately yielded the thematic matrix presented in Table 3.

Data Validity and Reliability

To ensure methodological rigor, several validation strategies were employed. Data triangulation was implemented by combining semi-structured interviews, company archives, and digital platform data. Two researchers independently performed thematic coding using NVivo, with any discrepancies resolved through discussion until consensus was achieved. Throughout the analysis, reflexive memos were kept to document analytical choices and potential researcher biases. Additionally, member checking was conducted with two key informants to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. Together, these measures strengthen the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the qualitative findings.

Table 3: Thematic Matrix Presents the Three Main Themes (Authors' own creation)

Theme	Sub-theme	Conceptualized Codes
Digital Platforms as Systemic Enabling Mechanisms	Operational and Supply Chain	- Cold-chain ,logistics direct-from-origin, distribution model. - Full supply chain transparency, traceability QR code - Online sales performance improved, sales volume doubling
	Building Brand Trust and Consumer Relationships	- Real-time tea garden footage,organic certification process - "Clean tea" generated high levels of user engagement. - Live streaming and short-form videos were utilized to demonstrate craftsmanship and foster interaction.
	Institutionalization and Market Transformation of Cultural Resources	- Organic tea certification ,Fenggang Zinc-Selenium Tea, geographical indication. - National Key Agro-Led Enterprise
Strategic Alignment of Entrepreneurial Leadership and External Networks	Narrative Construction of Geographical Symbols	- Unique terroir characteristics,zinc/selenium-rich soil, high-altitude ecology. - Brand stories incorporated historical heritage, Central Experimental Tea Farm. - "Private tea garden customization" service
	Knowledge Translation of Traditional Craftsmanship and Emotional Resonance	- This narrative strategy evoked consumer "yearning for a harmonious life with nature" and "gift-purchasing intentions." - User responses indicated emotional experiences, "therapeutic", "healing." - Promotional materials highlighted the "tacit knowledge" of "inheritors of traditional processing techniques."
	Entrepreneurial Strategic Vision and Orientation	- Build a nationally renowned tea brand. - Integrating tea with cultural tourism and wellness. - "Organic, ecological, and high-end" product positioning strategy.
Leveraging External Policy and Capital Resources	Leveraging External Policy and Capital Resources	- Financial support, specialized loans from the Postal Savings Bank of China,government industrial development funds - Advantageous and Characteristic Industrial Cluster Project" ,
		- "Guizhou Products Outbound" platform.

Research Findings

Through thematic analysis of the data and cross-case comparison, common patterns were identified and divergent pathways distinguished, ultimately leading to the formation of three core themes: the mechanism of digital-platform-enabled empowerment, the institutionalization and narrative transformation of cultural and regional resources, and the interaction between entrepreneurial leadership and external networks. These findings address the two research objectives of this study. First, the role of digital platforms has transcended that of communication tools to become a systemic branding mechanism. Both cases demonstrate that digital platforms not only convey brand messages but also reconfigure operational efficiency, traceability, and trust-building processes for SMEs. Second, both enterprises integrated cultural and ecological resources into their brand stories through a process of "institutionalization + interactive narration." When cultural and regional resources undergo institutional certification and are presented via digital media, they become unique capital for enhancing consumer engagement and brand loyalty. Concurrently, the entrepreneur's values influence the brand vision, and the entrepreneur's external collaborative network is a key factor supporting brand growth.

Basic Enterprise Information

Company A (CA): Established in 1996, CA is a national key leading agricultural industrialization enterprise and one of the top 100 companies in China's tea industry. The company has established production bases leveraging the resource advantages of the Selenium/Zinc-rich green tea industrial belt in Meitan County and Zunyi City. In recent years, participating in Tmall Supermarket's "Direct Sourcing from Origin" agricultural support program, it established an e-commerce logistics center at the origin, promoting cold chain storage and direct shipping from origin warehouses to enhance online efficiency and brand exposure.

Company B (CB): Established in 2010, CB is an organic tea enterprise integrating tea garden cultivation, organic/green certification, production and processing, domestic and foreign trade, and internet marketing. It currently owns approximately 3.2 km² of green and organically certified tea gardens. The company adheres to the business philosophy of "Green & Organic, Health & Wellness, Quality First, Honesty & Trustworthiness."

The Systemic Enabling Mechanism of Digital Platforms

During the initial coding phase, we found that CA repeatedly emphasized keywords such as "traceability," "cold chain logistics," and "online direct sourcing." These elements were categorized under the theme of "Digital Empowerment." For instance, CA collaborated with Tmall to establish a direct supply base for Guizhou tea and the largest local e-commerce logistics center for tea at its origin in May 2021. This center integrates tea planting, deep processing, cold chain storage, and direct shipping from the origin. This model reduced delivery times from 3-4 days to 1-2 days and lowered logistics costs by 20%-30%. Within six months of operation, CA's online sales revenue doubled. By optimizing the supply chain, it responded to consumer demands for "freshness" and "speed." Furthermore, upon receiving the product, consumers can scan a QR code to trace the production process and quality of their tea, including key information such as the tea garden's location, altitude, picking time, fertilization, and pest control records. This ensures the authenticity of the tea's origin and provides

comprehensive information, achieving full transparency from production to consumption. Consumer feedback described the products as "authentic" and "trustworthy."

Conversely, CB built a highly engaged consumer community by publishing short video content featuring real-time scenes from the tea gardens, organic certification processes, and interviews with tea farmers (cumulative views exceeding 1.35 million). The interaction rate for content tagged with "Clean Tea" (indicating no pesticides, no chemical fertilizers, natural) was significantly higher than that for general product promotions. This demonstrates that digital narratives can effectively evoke emotional resonance, transforming the platform into a "vehicle for trust-building."

These practices indicate that digital platforms are not merely marketing tools but systemic mechanisms embedded in enterprise operations and supply chain management. On one hand, they enhance efficiency and traceability; on the other hand, they strengthen consumer trust in the brand.

The Institutionalization and Narrative Transformation of Cultural and Regional Resources

In the second stage of coding, data related to "organic certification," "geographical indications," and "traditional techniques" were categorized under the theme of "Cultural and Regional Resources." Firstly, regional and ecological characteristics do not exist in the market in their "natural" form; rather, they are institutionalized and transformed into brand capital through certification and narrative. CB repeatedly used terms like "Fenggang Zinc-Selenium Tea" and "Clean Tea" on Douyin and WeChat Official Accounts, creating a cultural atmosphere through videos of tea gardens and local stories. The "Organic Tea Certification" from Fenggang County not only provided a credibility endorsement for the brand but also offered a differentiated advantage in the market. Descriptions such as "high mountains and clouds" and "zinc-rich soil" were perceived by consumers through promotional videos and packaging narratives, further solidified into shared cultural symbols through interactions (comments, likes, shares). These symbols are reinterpreted during digital interactions, aligning with contemporary consumers' pursuit of "authenticity." Therefore, through the processes of institutionalization and narrativization, ecological resources are transformed into significant cultural assets in brand building for tea enterprises, evolving from cold certification labels into warm brand identity, and are further amplified through dissemination on digital platforms.

Secondly, by using short videos to introduce the processing techniques of master tea makers employing traditional methods—such as the "hand-feel" during roasting, temperature judgment during fixation, and the pressure applied during rolling—tacit knowledge that is difficult to quantify was translated into visible and perceptible content through close-up shots and live explanations by farmers. This stimulated consumer recognition and identification. Furthermore, using live streaming to showcase real scenes of tea gardens and the daily lives of tea farmers transcends the product itself, constructing a "panoramic story" about the local scenery and community life. This creates an emotional connection with consumers, deepening their imagination and identification with a healthy, natural lifestyle. Interactive bullet comments and live chat messages during streams, such as "This reminds me of my hometown" and "Respect for the artisans," demonstrated that this cultural narrative successfully evoked cross-regional consumer empathy, transforming localized cultural resources into universal emotional value—an outcome unattainable through product advertising alone.

The Synergistic Role of Entrepreneurial Leadership and External Networks

The coding results also revealed that keywords like "entrepreneurial vision," "long-term persistence," and "policy support" centrally reflected the interaction mechanism between entrepreneurs and external networks. Entrepreneurs demonstrated significant agency in brand strategy, but their actions were profoundly influenced by external networks such as policies, finance, and platform partnerships, creating a dynamic balance between "external dependency and strategic autonomy." For example, the efficiency-oriented mindset of CA's chairman drove the company to engage in deep cooperation with platforms like Tmall and JD.com, adopting their data standards and operational norms, which shaped a standardized brand development path. Over eight years, the company cumulatively received 40 million RMB in loan support from the Guizhou Branch of the Postal Savings Bank of China, alleviating working capital pressure. These examples illustrate that entrepreneurs operate within the tension of "external dependency and strategic autonomy" (Mitreğa, 2023). Successful entrepreneurs need to skillfully navigate between policy support, platform cooperation, and market demand, transforming external resources into driving forces for brand growth. Through platform selection, partnership evaluation, and strategic decision-making, they connect "product-digital-culture" into a cohesive strategy.

Discussion

The Dynamic Institutionalization of Cultural Resources: From "Regional Endowment" to "Transferable Brand Capital"

Cultural resources do not automatically become sources of brand differentiation; rather, they gain market acceptance through institutional certification and narrative translation. CB, for instance, transformed regional concepts like "clean tea" and "ecological tea" into trusted brand symbols by obtaining "organic certification" and "Fenggang Zinc-Selenium Tea certification." Furthermore, through short videos and live streams, it visualized the "tacit knowledge" involved in tea production, thereby completing the transformation from "regional endowment" to "emotional value." This finding aligns with the "terroir-certification-brand" model proposed by Dressler and Paunovic (2021), demonstrating that the conversion of local cultural resources into brand capital is not a one-time achievement through institutionalization but requires continuous re-narration and reproduction facilitated by digital platforms. Moreover, in the digital media environment, the institutionalization of cultural resources is no longer a one-way, authoritative determination but a dynamic process co-constructed by consumers through platform interactions, echoing Buschgens et al.'s (2020) assertion that cultural symbols are reconstructed within market logic. For example, user comments in CB's live streams, such as "This reminds me of my hometown" and "Respect for the artisans," represent a reinterpretation of cultural symbols. This indicates that cultural resources become dynamic capital that can be amplified by digital mechanisms and re-created by consumers. The essence of cultural resource branding is thus reproduction within market logic and digital interaction. However, a potential concern is that cultural symbols are often reinterpreted in market contexts; while serving differentiated competition, they may deviate from authenticity. The cases in this study also reflect this paradox: while enterprises leverage ecological and cultural symbols to build brand advantages, they simultaneously reshape cultural narratives to adapt to digital communication logic and consumer preferences.

Digital Platforms as "Translation Interfaces" for Cultural Narratives and "Trust Infrastructure"

The role of digital platforms extends far beyond the traditional understanding of being mere "communication channels" or low-cost tools; they function as socio-technical systems for translating cultural narratives, building trust, and enhancing efficiency. CA transformed "cold data" such as tea garden location and fertilization records into consumer-perceivable "transparency narratives" via traceability QR codes, thereby enhancing consumers' trust perception. CB, on the other hand, materialized abstract ecological concepts like "high mountains and clouds" into visual experiences through Douyin videos. This translational function reveals a deep coupling between digital technology and cultural resources: platforms are not just carriers of information but interfaces for meaning generation. When technical logic (e.g., data traceability) intersects with cultural logic (e.g., local sentiment) on platforms, it fosters collective consumer recognition of brand "authenticity." This finding challenges the perspective that views digitalization purely as "instrumental rationality" (e.g., Hokmabadi et al., 2024) and aligns with the view emphasized by Li et al. (2018) regarding "digital mechanisms embedding into organizational culture." Furthermore, digital platforms act as "cultural technology" and "amplifiers" in SME brand building, reshaping the market value of cultural resources through narrative translation and interactive participation.

Additionally, by systematically embedding into corporate governance processes, digital platforms enhance operational efficiency and consumer trust. This result is consistent with Crammond et al.'s (2018) argument that digital platforms lower market barriers and also supports the judgments of Borah et al. (2022) and Cao and Weerawardena (2023) regarding digital technology restructuring brand competition logic.

A noteworthy point not explicitly detailed in the findings is the high cost of producing quality communication content. Additionally, content homogenization is prevalent within the industry. This indicates that digital platforms are not a universally applicable solution. Even for enterprises with relatively better resources like CA, sustained investment in manpower and funds is necessary to maintain content output. This contrasts with the optimistic view of entrepreneurial leadership presented by Yadav et al. (2024). While digital platforms may help overcome resource constraints in the short term, they could potentially intensify competitive pressure and raise the threshold for brand differentiation in the long run.

Entrepreneurial and Network Synergy: Strategic Agency within Institutional Constraints

Entrepreneurs in brand building are not isolated actors but operate within a network of tensions among multiple institutional logics, including policies, platforms, and market demands. CA transformed external resources into an efficiency-oriented brand path by aligning with e-commerce platform logistics standards and government loan programs. CB reinforced its ecological narrative by leveraging social media and organic certification policies. This "agency within dependency" revises the idealized description of the entrepreneurial role in traditional literature (e.g., Centeno et al., 2019) and aligns more closely with the dialectical relationship of "institutional dependence and strategic autonomy" noted by Mitreğa (2023). It is important to note that the entrepreneur's cultural background and values directly influence their approach to resource integration: for instance, CB founder's adherence to the "health and wellness" philosophy led to a preference for ecological narratives over price competition. This suggests that the entrepreneur's cultural cognition, combined with external networks, co-shapes

the differentiated path of brand strategy, rather than it being driven solely by technology or the market.

Theoretical Contribution and Practical Implications

On a theoretical level, this study constructs a "digitalization-cultural reproduction-entrepreneur and network synergy" framework, integrating the often-isolated dimensions of technology, culture, and agency into an interactive theoretical model. This model not only reveals that SME brand building is a dynamic process involving the coupling of multiple elements but also emphasizes that cultural resources become a core mechanism for sustainable competitive advantage through digital institutionalization and narrative transformation. This perspective breaks through the static view of culture (e.g., Buschgens et al., 2020) and offers a new path for digital empowerment research by incorporating a cultural turn.

Moreover, in prior research, Resource Orchestration Theory (ROT) and Institutional Theory (IT) have often been applied separately—the former emphasizing the efficiency of internal resource integration within firms, while the latter focuses on the constraints of the external institutional environment. The "Digital–Cultural Coupling Framework" proposed in this study is built upon a multi-level interactive logic of "digital platform–enterprise–cultural resources." Digital platforms are reconceptualized as a "translational institutional nexus," which not only amplifies the flow of resources and information but also facilitates the generation of cultural meaning and the construction of trust. Entrepreneurs act as proactive coordinators of "cultural–digital coupling," transforming cultural resources into brand capital through processes of institutionalization and narrativization. This framework reveals a novel pathway through which SMEs in developing economies achieve brand co-creation via digital enablement and cultural reproduction.

At the practical level, for enterprises, brand communication should be regarded as a long-term strategic undertaking rather than a short-term marketing tactic. Companies need to systematically plan their integrated communication resource pathways, continuously build digital communication and cultural narrative capabilities, and incorporate the in-depth development of local cultural resources into their core brand strategy. For policymakers, systematic support should be provided at the intersection of digitalization and cultural integration. Governments can establish specialized support funds and training systems, improve regional brand certification standards and digital communication infrastructure, promote the coordinated development of the digital economy and cultural industries, and formulate differentiated support plans targeting small and medium-sized enterprises. For digital platforms, a shift from a purely commercial intermediary to an institutional intermediary role is needed. This involves optimizing algorithm recommendation mechanisms, establishing dedicated local brand zones, enhancing the visibility of regional brands in national and even global markets, and fostering the diverse dissemination of cultural content for inclusive growth. For industry associations, their networked and coordinative advantages should be leveraged to construct a shared brand communication ecosystem. This includes establishing industry-wide brand databases, facilitating experience exchange and cross-enterprise collaboration, and formulating communication standards and training mechanisms. This multi-layer collaborative mechanism will bolster the competitiveness of local industries and contribute to sustainable cultural development. At a broader level, the mechanisms identified also support rural revitalization and align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth; SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure).

Table 4: From Resource Orchestration and Institutional Theory to the Digital–Cultural Coupling Framework (Authors' own creation)

Dimension	Resource Orchestration Theory (ROT)	Institutional Theory (IT)	The "Digital-Cultural Coupling Framework" (DCCF) Proposed in This Study
Core Unit of Analysis	Firm-level resource orchestration and capability development	Institutional environment (regulative, normative, cultural-cognitive) and legitimacy construction	A triadic interactive system of "digital platform–enterprise–cultural resources," emphasizing multi-level embeddedness and resource synergy
Role of Platforms	An external enabling mechanism for resource acquisition and integration	An emerging institutional arena and a carrier for legitimacy construction	A dynamic translational hub: functioning both as infrastructure for resource amplification and as a core mechanism for cultural meaning generation and consumer trust building
Logic of Cultural Resources	A passive intangible asset that can form a competitive advantage through internal integration	Reflects institutional norms and cultural constraints; enterprises must conform to gain legitimacy	Cultural resources are viewed as reproducible institutional capital: transformed into symbolic and emotional brand value through processes of certification, narration, and platform dissemination
Role of Entrepreneur	An orchestrator and utilizer of internal resources	An institutional follower or an institutional entrepreneur	An active coordinator of "cultural–digital" coupling: reorganizing resources and recreating meaning within external networks (platforms, policy, finance)
Core Mechanism & Theoretical Innovation	Structuring–bundling–leveraging	Legitimation, isomorphism, and institutionalization	The digital-cultural coupling mechanism: achieving a dual cycle of brand building and institutional evolution through the platform-driven institutionalization → narrative transformation → consumer meaning co-creation of cultural resources.

Conclusion and Suggestion

This study, through case studies of two small and medium-sized tea enterprises in Guizhou, has explored the mechanisms by which digital platforms, cultural and geographical resources, and entrepreneurial leadership function in brand building. The findings reveal that: First, digital platforms not only reduce communication and transaction costs but also act as a governance mechanism embedded in firm operations, reconfiguring supply chain efficiency and the logic of consumer trust. They serve as a translation platform and amplification channel for cultural and geographical resources, thereby reshaping the market value of culture. Second, cultural and geographical resources are not static assets; rather, they undergo dynamic reproduction through institutionalization via certification, narrative transformation, and consumer interaction. Via digital platforms, they become significant capital for brand differentiation. Third, entrepreneurs, navigating the constraints and support of external policies, finance, and platform partnerships, play the role of "digital-cultural translators," mediating the tension between digital governance and cultural narrative.

While the analysis focuses on the Guizhou tea industry, the proposed Digital–Cultural Coupling Framework (DCCF) offers transferable insights for other traditional or resource-based sectors across developing economies—such as handicraft, agri-food, or cultural tourism industries—where digital transformation and cultural heritage coexist. The identified mechanisms provide a theoretical lens for understanding how resource-constrained SMEs can achieve brand legitimacy and competitiveness through digital–cultural synergy.

Limitations and Future Research

The cases in this study are all from the same region and industry. Future research could compare branding mechanisms across different regions or industries. Furthermore, although the study involved consumer interaction data, it did not delve deeply into the reception differences of cultural narratives among different audience segments. Subsequent studies could employ quantitative ethnography or experimental methods to examine the mediating effects of cultural narratives on consumer trust and loyalty. Although the Digital–Cultural Coupling Framework was developed within China's institutional and cultural context, its theoretical logic—emphasizing that digital platforms can act as a “quasi-institutional intermediary” for integration and enablement in contexts where informal institutions and relational networks are highly active—is particularly applicable to emerging economies where social trust and market legitimacy depend heavily on local networks, community interactions, and platform-based certification, often outside formal institutional channels. Conversely, in environments with mature formal institutions, clearly defined market rules, and stable enforcement mechanisms, the influence of cultural factors on brand building tends to be systematically absorbed, potentially diluting their explanatory power as a key variable. Future studies could explore comparative cross-regional analysis to validate the Digital–Cultural Coupling Framework. Moreover, integrating consumer-side ethnographic data may enhance the model's explanatory scope.

Declaration of AI Use

During the preparation of this manuscript, authors used a generative AI-assisted tool (ChatGPT) to improve the clarity, language, and readability of the text. All AI-generated suggestions were carefully reviewed, edited, and verified by the authors, to ensure accuracy, completeness, and academic integrity. The AI tool did not contribute to the study design, data collection, data analysis, or the development of scientific conclusions. The authors retain full responsibility for the content of this manuscript.

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