

# Marketing Research on Rural Agricultural Cultural Tourism Products under the Perspective of Symbolic Consumption

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## Abstract

This study focuses on the marketing of rural agricultural cultural tourism products under the perspective of symbolic consumption, aiming to explore the application strategies and effects of symbolic consumption theory in the rural agricultural and cultural tourism industry. Firstly, the basic concepts of symbolic consumption theory and its value in marketing are outlined, and then the symbolic features of rural cultural tourism products and their influence on consumers' purchasing decisions are analysed. Through the field study, the practical effects of marketing strategies based on symbolic consumption theory in the marketing of rural cultural tourism products are discussed in depth. This study not only provides theoretical support for the sustainable development of rural cultural tourism industry, but also provides practical guidance for related practitioners.

## Keywords

Symbolic consumption; rural agricultural cultural tourism products; marketing strategy.

## 1. Introduction

With the booming development of rural tourism, the marketing of rural agricultural cultural tourism products gradually highlights its importance and becomes an unignorable force to promote local economic development. In this context, it is especially crucial to conduct an in-depth study on the marketing of rural agricultural and cultural tourism products from the perspective of symbolic consumption. Symbolic consumption not only focuses on the material properties of products, but also emphasizes the symbolic meaning and cultural value carried by products.

The rise of this consumption pattern reflects modern consumers' pursuit of personalisation, differentiation and cultural identity. Baudrillard, through the symbolic analysis of the development of consumer society, recognized that in the development of consumer society, what human beings consume is no longer the material itself, but only the character value attached to the material, and the purpose of human consumption behaviour is transformed from the realization of the fundamental needs to the realization of the symbolic value, which is more embodied in the various cultural status quo of the development of consumer society and the hierarchy of the interpersonal relationship.

In the production society, consumers as "human beings" just play a bridge to connect the consumption and production. However, in the new consumer society, however, the "human beings" as consumers are integrated with consumption and production. Not only does the human being utilize his or her own value in this process, but also the relationship between human beings is introduced into the exchange process. As early as 10,000 years ago, in the early Neolithic era, Chinese farmers began to plant agricultural products for a living, in which the main purpose of growing agricultural products was just survival tools to fill their stomachs. However, in the 21st century, food such as grain, vegetables and fruits, beef and mutton have

been given symbolic value, and people are concerned about the concept of food safety such as "green, environmentally friendly and healthy" while pursuing food and clothing.

In the context of rural tourism, symbolic consumption means that tourists are not only buying a service or experience, but also looking for a cultural belonging and emotional resonance. Therefore, there is a necessity for the marketing strategy of rural agricultural and cultural tourism products to be closely integrated with the concept of symbolic consumption, and enhance its attractiveness to consumers by exploring and strengthening the cultural symbols of the products. For example, by telling the historical stories of the countryside, displaying unique folk customs, and creating cultural experiences with local characteristics, rural agricultural and cultural tourism products can be made more symbolic value, so as to meet the deep-seated needs of tourists.

In addition, the marketing of rural agricultural and cultural tourism products under the perspective of symbolic consumption also needs to pay attention to the psychological and emotional reactions of consumers. In the marketing process, the symbolic meaning of symbols should be fully utilized to stimulate the emotional resonance of consumers, which in turn prompts them to produce purchasing behaviour. At the same time, through social media and other channels to spread the symbolic significance of rural agricultural tourism products, can expand the visibility and influence of the product, and further enhance its market competitiveness.

## **2. Symbolic consumption and rural marketing**

Symbolic consumption theory, as an important theory in the field of modern marketing, mainly explores the fact that when consumers buy goods or services, they do not only pay attention to their use value, but also pay more attention to the symbolic significance they carry. The development of this theory is inextricably linked to the rise of the consumer society. With the improvement of people's living standards and the change of consumer attitudes, commodities are gradually endowed with symbolic values beyond their basic functions. In marketing, the application value of symbolic consumption theory has become increasingly prominent, which reminds marketers to pay attention to the cultural significance and social symbols behind products, and how to shape and enhance these symbolic values through branding and marketing activities[1].

In the marketing of rural agricultural and cultural tourism products, the theory of symbolic consumption also has important guiding significance. Rural agricultural and cultural tourism products are not only a kind of tourism service, but also carry multiple symbolic meanings such as regional culture, rural customs and ecological experience. Through the use of symbolic consumption theory, we can better understand the expectations and needs of consumers for rural agricultural and cultural tourism products, and then design a marketing strategy that better meets the market demand. For example, by tapping into rural cultural characteristics and creating a unique agricultural and cultural tourism brand, we can enhance the symbolic value of the product and attract more consumers who are interested in rural tourism[2].

Symbolic consumption theory also emphasizes that consumers' purchasing decisions are often influenced by multiple factors such as social, cultural and psychological factors. Therefore, in the marketing of rural agricultural and cultural tourism products, we need to take these factors into full consideration, and through accurate market positioning and differentiated branding strategies, we can satisfy the personalized needs of consumers for rural agricultural and cultural tourism products. At the same time, the theory of symbolic consumption also reminds us that the marketing process should pay attention to the emotional connection with consumers, by telling rural stories and conveying rural feelings, to enhance the consumer's sense of identity and sense of belonging to the product[3].

In the marketing of rural agricultural and cultural tourism products, symbolic features play a crucial role. These features, including cultural symbols and regional symbols, are the source of product uniqueness and attractiveness, and profoundly affect consumers' purchasing decisions. Firstly, the cultural symbols of rural agricultural and cultural tourism products are the embodiment of their core competitiveness. Rural culture, as a unique social phenomenon, unites regional history, tradition, folklore and lifestyle. In agri-cultural tourism products, these cultural elements are refined and transformed into symbols with symbolic meaning, such as traditional architectural styles, unique handicrafts, local festivals and activities. These cultural symbols not only convey the historical and cultural connotations of the countryside, but also stimulate the resonance of emotional values such as "nostalgia" and "idyllic life" in the hearts of consumers. Therefore, when consumers choose rural agricultural tourism products, they are often attracted by these culturally meaningful symbols, which in turn leads to purchasing behaviour.

Additionally, regional symbols are also indispensable to rural agricultural tourism products. Regional symbols are mainly reflected in the natural landscape, geographical features and local specialities. For example, the unique landscape scenery, climatic conditions or special agricultural products of certain regions may become the geographical symbols of rural agricultural and cultural tourism products. These symbols not only represent the geographic environment and natural resources of the countryside, but also construct a cognition and impression of a specific region in the minds of consumers. When consumers choose agricultural and cultural tourism products, these regional symbols can often trigger their curiosity and desire to explore, thus contributing to the formation of the purchase decision.

To sum up, the symbolic characteristics of rural agricultural tourism products are key factors in their marketing process. Through in-depth exploration and clever use of these cultural symbols and regional symbols, rural agricultural and cultural tourism products can not only highlight their uniqueness and attractiveness, but also stand out in the fierce market competition and achieve marketing objectives. At the same time, for consumers, these symbols also provide a richer and more diversified choice of agricultural and cultural tourism experience.

### 3. Content analysis of rural agri-cultural tourism marketing

Using the content analysis method, the information searched on the Internet with the keyword "rural product marketing" (a total of 180,000 words) was analyzed for high-frequency words, and the results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1:the Keyword Frequency

Words	Frequency	Words	Frequency
Agriculture Products	656	Agriculture	316
Country	313	development	245
Characteristic	204	Live streaming	201
Platform	194	Farmer	149
Consumer	138	Market	135
Culture	135	Picture	116
Pattern	103	Skill	95
Plant	72	Tradition	70
Internet	59	Fans	56
Resource	55	Experience	53
Quality	51	Number	50

Ecology	50	Narrative	45
Innovation	44	Era	44
Local speciality	42	Logistics	38
Image	38	Travel	38
Vegetables	37	Story	36
Delicious	34	Hometown	33
Beauty	33	Interaction	32

The word "farmers" appeared 149 times, which means that the marketing process of agricultural products needs to focus on displaying the element of "farmers", for example, in the production of promotional posters can show farmers picking agricultural products or the process of ploughing, agricultural products promotional copywriting to show the story of farmers and agriculture. The story of farmers and agriculture is shown in the copywriting of agricultural products.

The word "culture" appeared 135 times and the word "tradition" appeared 70 times, indicating that the marketing process of agricultural products needs to focus on combining the local characteristics of culture, and show the characteristics of the culture of the place of origin of the agricultural products in the promotional copy, pictures and videos.

The word "picture" appeared 116 times, indicating that in the process of marketing agricultural products, it is necessary to focus on the combination of graphics and text, not just words.

The word "experience" appears 53 times, indicating that many of the current agricultural marketing activities are in the form of experience picking + purchase, and if the online marketing needs to show as much as possible the original appearance of agricultural products picked from the farm.

The word "quality" appeared 51 times and the word "ecology" appeared 50 times, reflecting the importance consumers attach to the quality of agricultural products, i.e. the greenness and ecology of the place of origin.

The word "narrative" appears 45 times, the word "story" 36 times, and the words "hometown" and "beauty" 33 times, which shows that the marketing process of agricultural products should tell the story of hometown and awaken people's good feelings about their hometown.

## 4. Practical Analysis of Rural Agricultural Cultural Tourism Marketing

### 4.1. Background

Hu Xing Shan Yao Ethnic Township was established in 1956 and is located in the northwest part of Longhui County, at the eastern foot of the Xuefeng Mountains. It is approximately 100 kilometers away from the county seat and has an average elevation of 1350 meters. The region experiences typical high-altitude mountain climate conditions, earning it the nickname "Little Tibet of Longhui." The total area of the township is 93.3 square kilometers, with forested land covering approximately 67.37 square kilometers (about 72% of the total area). The township comprises 12 administrative villages and 126 village groups, with a total population of 17,115. Among them, the Yao ethnic group accounts for more than 48% of the total population, making it a unique settlement area for the Yao sub-branch known as "Huayao" or "Flower Yao." The region boasts abundant tourism resources, including diverse natural and cultural landscapes. Notable features include the oral tradition of the unwritten Yao language, the nationally recognized intangible cultural heritage of Huayao flower picking and Huayao Mingwa folk songs, as well as local customs such as Huayao wedding rituals and the traditional festival "Taolao Gui." The area also offers picturesque natural landscapes, including ancient villages,

serene ancient tree parks, magnificent waterfalls like the Dato Falls, dreamlike grassland vistas, terraced fields, golden seas of silver flowers (jasmine), and steep mountain gorges. In recent years, Hu Xing Shan Yao Ethnic Township has capitalized on the “whole-region tourism” opportunity, promoting cultural strength through tourism and vice versa. The development strategy focuses on “culturally strong villages, economically prosperous villages, industrially thriving villages, and ecologically beautiful villages.” Three dominant industries have emerged: jasmine flower cultivation, tourism, and high-altitude ecological fruits and vegetables. The township has achieved rapid economic and social development, harmonious ethnic relations, improved infrastructure, enhanced village appearance, higher living standards, and overall progress in social services. Notably, the Huayao Scenic Area was designated a provincial scenic spot in 2006 and was included in the “New Xiaoxiang Eight Scenic Spots.” In 2009, the Hu Xing Shan-Huayao Scenic Area received national-level recognition and was featured in premium tourist routes during China’s Golden Week. The township has also been recognized as a national ecological town and a beautiful rural demonstration site. In 2020, it successfully hosted the Hunan (Summer) Rural Cultural Tourism Festival and was honored as a “Civilized Village and Town in Hunan Province,” an “Advanced Collective in Poverty Alleviation and Development in Hunan Province,” and a model for ethnic unity and progress. The Huayao Township was selected as a pilot unit for ethnic rural revitalization in Hunan Province. In 2022, it was included in the second batch of key rural tourism towns (townships) in Hunan Province. The case study “Huayao Flower Picking: Revitalizing Huayao through Flowers” was recognized as a typical example of “China’s Folk Culture and Art Village” construction. Additionally, the renowned Chongmudong and Datuo villages, known as “Hunan’s Ethnic Characteristic Villages” and “China’s Ethnic Characteristic Villages,” respectively, have contributed to the township’s cultural and tourism landscape. Datuo Village, in particular, has been recognized as a “Hunan Special Tourism Village,” one of the first “Chinese Traditional Villages,” a “Historical and Cultural Village in Hunan Province,” and one of the “Ten Most Beautiful Ethnic Characteristic Villages in Hunan.” The ancient tree forest within Datuo Village has been designated as a provincial cultural heritage site. The township’s achievements also include being named one of the first “Ancient Tree (Famous Tree) Parks” in the province. Another key village, Baishuidong, has been recognized as a priority village for rural tourism and a model for beautiful rural construction in Shaoyang City. Baishuidong Village is known for its five distinctive product categories: everyday agricultural products like jasmine flowers and rice, high-end agricultural products such as tea and mushrooms, handicrafts, cultural and creative products, and folk tourism products.

## **4.2. Agricultural Products**

### **4.2.1. Everyday Agricultural Products**

Similar to many rural areas, the residents of Baishuidong Village cultivate everyday agricultural products. During my interviews, I spoke with a farmer who returned to Baishuidong Village in 1992 after working elsewhere since 1988. His primary focus has been agriculture, particularly the cultivation of jasmine flowers. He owns 1-2 acres of jasmine flower fields, primarily selling to external buyers. On average, his monthly income ranges from 7,000 to 8,000 RMB, but during challenging times, it can drop to as low as 2,000 to 3,000 RMB. Since jasmine flower cultivation lacks distinct local characteristics, he has never considered online sales, relying mainly on local markets.

### **4.2.2. High-End Agricultural Products**

In exploring the market for high-end agricultural products, I interviewed both tea factory workers and farmers cultivating matsutake mushrooms. Baishuidong Village residents predominantly grow high-end tea leaves, which are typically sold through bulk purchases by provincial tea companies or direct sales to military and environmental protection agencies.

Notably, cold tea is popular in cities such as Changsha, Zhuhai, and Hong Kong. Additionally, Baishuidong Village's tea leaves have made their way to international markets, including the United States and Islamic countries. The local community has received assistance from Hunan University, as evidenced by the charming packaging designs for tea displays, created collaboratively with the university. Despite these efforts, the tea industry faces two significant challenges: finding new customers and determining appropriate pricing for high-end tea. These issues contributed to a decline in tea sales from nearly 1.2 million RMB in July last year to the current monthly income of 700,000 to 800,000 RMB. When asked about online sales attempts, the responsible party mentioned a past live-streaming event facilitated by Hunan University. However, the high price point of their premium tea (40 RMB per 50 grams) made it challenging to stand out in a market where cheaper alternatives dominate. Nevertheless, they remain hopeful about finding suitable online influencers to expedite inventory sales.

#### **4.2.3. Matsutake Mushrooms**

Baishuidong Village also produces another high-end specialty: matsutake mushrooms. With an average price of 700 RMB per kilogram (canned at 98 RMB per jar and packaged in gift boxes exceeding 200 RMB), matsutake mushrooms are sought after. However, most sales occur offline, and this year's economic downturn has led to reduced local purchasing.

In summary, Baishuidong Village's agricultural products demonstrate a blend of tradition and innovation, with challenges related to market access and pricing. The collaboration with Hunan University has been instrumental in promoting these unique offerings, but further efforts are needed to stabilize income and explore online sales opportunities.

#### **4.3. Handicrafts and Cultural Creative Products**

Sister Fengtang is a representative heir of the national intangible cultural heritage project known as Huayao flower picking. Since the age of 11, she has apprenticed under her mother to learn the art of flower picking. With her exquisite skills and keen observation of natural elements, Fengtang draws inspiration from plants, insects, and fish in the natural world, incorporating these elements into her intricate flower-picking designs. Her works are not only beloved locally but have also gained recognition and been collected beyond the village. They have even been featured in exhibitions and photography. Fengtang's contribution extends beyond traditional craftsmanship; she actively engages in innovation and development. For instance, she collaborates with faculty and students from the School of Design and Arts at Hunan University, using copyright agreements and protective measures to promote the creative transformation and advancement of Huayao flower picking. Additionally, Fengtang participates in public welfare activities, partnering with Dream Culture Media Co., Ltd., and top anchors on the Huya platform to boost sales of local agricultural and cultural creative products. Through these efforts, she not only preserves traditional culture but also injects new vitality, enhancing the economic value and social impact of cultural heritage.

During my interview with Feng Tangmei, I learned that all the patterns in her flower-picking designs are personally conceived and created by her. She envisions and sketches each motif, translating her ideas into vibrant flower-picking patterns. Before becoming an heir to this craft, Feng Tangmei worked as a farmer. During the day, she toiled in the fields, and during rainy or nighttime hours, she practiced flower picking. Her official designation as an heir came in 2001 when she created a flower-picking piece for the local county government. The tradition of flower picking has been passed down through generations in Baishuidong Village. Even when daughters marry, they are expected to pick flowers—typically a minimum of ten pieces—to enhance the grandeur of their weddings. Feng Tangmei's sister, for instance, wore over 40 flower-picked skirts during her wedding. However, flower picking is no simple craft. When details are not executed perfectly, threads must be unraveled, and the process restarted—a time-consuming and labor-intensive task. Unfortunately, due to limited awareness of this craft,

insufficient promotion, and minimal customer traffic, sales channels remain restricted to local residents.

Shibori, a traditional Japanese tie-dye technique, holds a special place in Baishuidong Village. The color blue embodies fleeting emotions, dances between sea and sky, and whispers life's hidden meanings bestowed by nature. "Japan Blue," along with its associated shibori dyeing process, enjoys considerable fame in the fashion world. During Japan's Asuka and Nara periods, when Chinese Tang culture flourished, Japan underwent significant reforms and intensified exchanges with China, deeply influencing its textile patterns and craftsmanship. Shibori, an ancient craft, was described in the "Book of Songs" as "gathering blue all day, not filling a single basket." However, in contemporary China, knowledge of this art form is dwindling.

During my journey to Baishuidong Village in the Hu Xing Shan area, I had the privilege of interviewing Milan, a skilled shibori artisan. Milan initially worked outside the village but returned home due to her child's illness. In April 2017, she participated in field research on natural dyeing conducted by a Japanese university. Inspired by this experience, she delved into the intricacies of shibori techniques, even traveling to Guizhou to study different color-making methods and master the unique skills of dyeing in old vats. Her teacher emphasized that cultural heritage should be disseminated, leading Milan to break from the norm of merely showcasing finished works. Instead, she encourages every visitor to experience the shibori process firsthand. With assistance from Hunan University, Milan expanded her shibori workshop and designed numerous culturally inspired creative products for display and sale. Shibori creations possess a strong personal touch—each piece is one of a kind, and the longer the process, the richer the sediment of artistry. Having personally experienced shibori, I appreciate its dual value: practical (scarves, hats, clothing) and symbolic. The varying shades of blue evoke a quiet mystique, showcasing the village's intangible cultural heritage and exotic allure to a broader audience. However, shibori's sales channels remain limited to local acquaintances and a small number of tourists. Due to the scarcity of handmade items, they have yet to be marketed online.

#### **4.4. Folk tourism products**

The last thing that needs to be studied is the local folklore tourism industry. I had the honour to interview a folklore owner, who was one of the first villagers in the area to start the folklore industry. He introduced to me of the three main ways of promoting folklore, which are recommendations from others, repeat customers and online sales, and his folklore has been promoted on Tik-Tok app, Baidu Maps as well as on satellite TV. The owner has been running the B&B since 2015, and it stands out from the rest of the local folklore with its unique feature of free foot soaks with local herbs for guests to cure their illnesses. However, the owner also said that the process of opening the folklore was not a smooth one and that he had encountered many difficulties. The place where the herbs are picked is on a cliff face, which is very dangerous, and if you are not careful, you will roll down the hill. This B&B is located in the deepest part of the whole Hu-shaped mountain, the mountain road is rugged and independent, almost no recreational facilities, since the epidemic, the number of tourists has been extremely reduced. For the residents of Baishuidong Village in Hupeng Mountain, the problem of less publicity and lack of Internet sales is a problem for the development and sale of local agricultural products, handicrafts and folklore. The disadvantage of its geographical location makes the residents living in big cities seldom know and understand the products, and many commodities that should be of high quality and have good sales are facing the problem of not being able to sell even though they have countless stocks. At the same time, as farmers produce their own goods by hand, they are at a significant disadvantage in terms of production compared to mechanized production in the city. This is one of the major problems facing Baishuidong Village.

## 5. Summary and Discussion

Firstly, we observe that the concept of symbolic consumption significantly influences the design and marketing of products in the marketing process of rural cultural tourism products. Symbolic consumption emphasises the symbolic significance carried by the product, not just its practical value. In the context of rural cultural tourism products, it is usually expressed as a symbolic identification with rural culture, history and tradition. Products which effectively communicate these symbolic meanings boost consumers' willingness to buy increases significantly.

Specifically on the impact of marketing strategies, we find that those strategies that highlight the unique cultural symbols and values of rural cultural tourism products tend to trigger strong consumer empathy. For example, by telling stories about the countryside, demonstrating the craft production process, or organising experiential rural cultural activities, the symbolic value of the product can be effectively enhanced, which in turn strengthens consumers' motivation to buy.

In addition, offline interpersonal interactions play an important role in the marketing of rural cultural tourism products. Tourists interact with villagers in the village scene, and from the daily life field of clothing, food, housing and transport can be extended to the village characteristics of the product, as a result, the symbolic significance of the product can be disseminated, and the villagers and consumers to establish an emotional connection.

Although in recent days the development of e-commerce economy (e.g. the live show with goods) has reached a bottleneck, the merchants on the online platforms tend to "lose money to earn yell", but the online media is still one of the best publicity channels, through the Internet can attract more tourists to Hu Shuangshan Baishuidong Village, in-depth experience and communication, cognitively aware of the extended value of the products contained, prompting them to consume in the local area, and later enable publicity and maintenance in their daily lives, which accumulate more repeat customers for re-purchase, and bring the products out of the mountains, spread to the residents in the city, increase the overall marketing amount, and form a positive economic benefits closed loop.

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