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The Impact of Flexible Identity on Urban Brand Competitiveness

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Abstract

Based on empirical analysis, this study explores the influencing mechanism of flexible identity on urban brand competitiveness. Within the theoretical framework of urban branding, this research conceptualizes flexible identity into four core dimensions: subjectivity, diversity, adaptability, and expansibility. By introducing urban attractiveness as a mediating variable, it further constructs an analytical model of "flexible identity -urban attractiveness–urban brand competitiveness". Compared with existing studies that mostly focus on design experience and conceptual description, this paper expands the operationalization and theoretical development of flexible identity from the perspectives of structural composition and functional mechanism.

From structural equation modeling analysis of questionnaire data collected from Singapore, Sydney, and New York, this study yields the following findings. First, subjectivity and diversity exert a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness. Second, adaptability demonstrates a significant negative effect, indicating that its influence is not a simple linear relationship and may be constrained by homogenization effects stemming from excessive adaptation. Third, urban attractiveness plays a critical mediating role between flexible identity and urban brand competitiveness, with expansibility primarily affecting competitiveness indirectly through mediating pathways.

Theoretically, this study breaks away from the conventional assumption that adaptability functions solely as a positive linear variable. It proposes and verifies the potential nonlinear mechanism of adaptability, thereby revealing the structural tension between flexibility and distinctiveness. Furthermore, by introducing urban attractiveness as a pre-attitudinal perceptual mechanism, this research fills the theoretical gap in the causal pathway linking visual representation to urban brand

competitiveness. Practically, the findings suggest that urban branding should consolidate subjectivity and diversity while implementing controlled management of adaptability. Such strategies prevent expressive homogenization caused by phantomization and standardization, and strengthen brand competitive advantages by optimizing attraction-driven influence pathways.

Keywords: Flexible identity; urban brand competitiveness; urban attractiveness; structural equation modeling (SEM)

1. Introduction

In the context of increasing global competition, urban branding has evolved from being merely a symbolic identifier to an important strategic asset for enhancing a city's overall competitiveness and national image. Traditional integrated identity systems, which focus on a singular and fixed visual image, were effective in ensuring brand consistency in the past but are now struggling to fully meet the demands of contemporary cities in terms of their multi-layered, dynamic nature and multi-media communication environment. Within this context, "Flexible Identity," which allows for flexible adjustments based on different media, contexts, and audiences while maintaining core identity stability, has gradually attracted attention from both academia and practice. Practices such as Melbourne's "M" system demonstrate that, through modular design and visual variation, urban brands can present diversified expressions while maintaining identification consistency, thereby enhancing the city's image appeal and communicative influence.

Theoretically, existing research has generally operated under the rationale that "flexibility facilitates communication optimization" and conceptualizes adaptability as a key positive attribute of flexible identity. It is argued that such adaptability enhances brand visibility and communication efficiency within multi-media environments. However, such assertions are largely derived from normative inferences and case study summaries, lacking systematic empirical testing of its underlying mechanisms. Meanwhile, the majority of current literature focuses on the categorization of visual design styles and descriptions of success stories, emphasizing "how to design more creative and attractive identities." In contrast, there is relatively little analysis from the perspective of structural relationships regarding how various dimensions of flexible identity—such as subjectivity, diversity, adaptability, and expansibility—further impact urban brand competitiveness through urban attractiveness. In particular, the differential mechanisms of action and the pathways of influence among these attributes still

requires further discussion.

Furthermore, existing research implicitly suggests a linear assumption that "the higher the adaptability, the more beneficial," but this premise is worth reconsidering in the current context of digitalization and globalization. As urban brands increasingly rely on social media, digital interfaces, and platform-based communication channels, different cities are showing a clear trend of convergence in visual expression and communication methods. This phenomenon can be explained through institutional isomorphism and the standardizing mechanisms driven by platforms: under the combined influence of competitive pressure, imitation behavior, and technological constraints, urban brands gradually adopt similar design languages and communication paradigms, thereby weakening their differentiated expressions.

Accordingly, this study proposes a critical theoretical revision: the effect of adaptability on urban attractiveness may not follow a simple positive linear relationship but instead presents a threshold effect. Specifically, within a reasonable range, adaptability helps improve brand communication efficiency and experiential consistency across diverse media contexts. However, excessive enhancement of adaptability may trigger the homogenization of brand expression, erode urban uniqueness and recognizability, and consequently reduce urban attractiveness. This process can be summarized as the logical chain: excessive adaptation → expressive convergence → weakened distinctiveness → declined attractiveness. This reasoning indicates that flexible identity does not merely contain a unified collaborative relationship; rather, it entails an inherent structural tension between flexibility and distinctiveness.

Based on the aforementioned research concerns, this study constructs an analytical framework of "flexible identity–urban attractiveness–urban brand competitiveness" based on existing literature. It focuses on examining the action pathways of four dimensions—subjectivity, diversity, adaptability, and expansibility—and introduces urban attractiveness as a key mediating variable. This study defines urban attractiveness as a comprehensive perceptual structure composed of aesthetic appeal, novelty, and inherent distinctiveness, which correspond to visual experience, innovative experience, and distinctive recognition, respectively. Through this mediating mechanism, the research further explores how each dimension of flexible identity is transformed into urban brand competitiveness.

In terms of research design, this study selects three representative global cities—Singapore, Sydney, and New York—as research participants. Data were collected via

questionnaire surveys, and structural equation modeling was adopted to test the theoretical model. Through empirical analysis, this paper aims to reveal the differentiated influencing mechanisms of each dimension of flexible identity. In particular, it revises the conventional linear positive assumption regarding adaptability, thereby providing more explanatory and practical evidence for the theoretical refinement of flexible identity and the strategic practice of urban branding.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1Urban Brand Competitiveness

Urban branding derives from the general concept of branding and has evolved within territorial and place-based contexts. Its fundamental purpose is to foster positive perceptions among urban stakeholders by shaping an attractive city image. The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines a brand as a name, symbol, design, or combination thereof that identifies and differentiates the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers from those of competitors (Li & Lin, 2008), emphasizing branding's identification and differentiation functions. Related studies further conceptualize the urban brand as a unique combination of city names, designs, and symbols that distinguish one city from others. Scholars note that urban brands transcend mere visual signage and function as strategic tools for comprehensively expressing urban identity (Braun et al.,2014)). By enhancing city image and popularity, urban branding can improve urban asset value and accessibility, serving as a core instrument of urban marketing (Keller,2013)). Contemporary urban branding has evolved beyond traditional promotional activities into a holistic practice that integrates identity, culture, and core values (Pedeliento & Kavaratzis, 2019). Stakeholder engagement—including residents, enterprises, and tourists—lies at the core of brand construction, effectively strengthening brand recognition and external influence (Zenker & Braun, 2017). A strong urban brand constitutes a critical resource for attracting investment, talent, and tourism (Shirvani Dastgerdi & De Luca, 2019).

Early urban branding efforts largely relied on traditional promotional activities, such as advertisements and brochures. However, amid advancing globalization and digitalization, urban brand communication has evolved into a multidimensional and participatory strategic process. Pedeliento and Kavaratzis (2019) argued that urban branding has shifted from one-way promotion to the integrated communication of identity, culture, and values, stressing that city brands must meet the expectations of both global and local audiences. Anholt (2010) proposed that the strategic utilization of

digital media, public relations campaigns, and cultural events can substantially enhance a city's global visibility and attractiveness. For instance, Melbourne successfully boosted its tourism industry and economic vitality through the brand repositioning of a "Creative City". Zenker and Braun (2017) highlighted the significance of stakeholder engagement, contending that residents, enterprises, and tourists should serve as core participants in brand co-creation. Participatory brand building further strengthens brand authenticity and external influence.

An urban brand is an integrated communication tool that systematizes the branding of a city's tangible and intangible assets, delivers a consistent and differentiated image to internal and external stakeholders, strengthens urban preference, and advances urban competitiveness. This study defines an urban brand as "a strategic asset that shapes positive urban perceptions and attitudes through the consistent expression and communication of a city's unique identity and values, thereby enhancing urban competitiveness". Within the research scope, this study focuses on the visual identity of urban brands and discusses their functions and effects from the perspective of improving urban brand competitiveness.

The ultimate goal of urban branding is to enhance urban brand competitiveness. The concept of brand competitiveness originated in the field of corporate management and has gradually expanded to urban and regional contexts in recent years. It has evolved into a comprehensive construct encompassing the differentiated advantages and sustainable competitiveness of a city that distinct from its counterparts. Cities must continuously strengthen their competitiveness to achieve sustainable survival and development. As a core medium that centrally conveys urban image, value, and resources, the urban brand has become a pivotal indicator for measuring overall urban competitiveness.

Urban branding is not merely an image-building project but also a strategic instrument for strengthening urban competitiveness. Shirvani Dastgerdi and De Luca (2019) indicated that a strong urban brand attracts investment, high-end talent, and tourists, consolidating a city's differentiated position within the global market. Wan and Li (2024) found that digital platforms, particularly social media, play a vital role in urban brand communication by broadening global reach and fostering interactive engagement. For example, Vilnius's "TechFusion" branding initiative has effectively solidified its international image as a technology hub.Zenker and Braun (2017) further emphasized that successful urban branding enhances residents' sense of pride and loyalty, thereby advancing overall urban competitiveness. Similarly, the "I Amsterdam"

campaign has driven substantial tourism and economic growth through a culturally inclusive brand strategy.

Existing literature on brand competitiveness has largely developed along four theoretical strands. First, from the brand value perspective, Aaker (1991) proposed that brand equity consists of brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and other proprietary brand assets. Aaker (2009) emphasized that brand value serves as a concrete manifestation of brand competitiveness, which can be measured by market share and the capacity to generate premium value.Second, from the competitive advantage perspective, Keller&Lehmann (2006) argued that the essence of brand competitiveness lies in customer-perceived competitive advantage, which emerges as organizations integrate resources, continuously meet consumer demands, and fulfill brand promises. Brand competitiveness itself is regarded as a critical organizational resource. Porter (1998) stressed that differentiated advantages unlock brand potential.Amid intensifying product homogenization, competition has become increasingly brand-centered.Third, from the perspective of competitiveness origins, Brodie et al. (2009) divided driving factors into internal and external dimensions. Internal sources cover market and product attributes, while external factors include industrial contexts, government policies, education, and strategic collaboration. This framework established a logical model of "brand assets ×brand environment × competitiveness process".Fourth, regarding constituent elements and measurement, Brodie et al. (2009)identified service brand competitiveness dimensions at the micro level, including market performance, brand satisfaction, and brand loyalty. Zhang (2011) constructed the China Enterprise Brand Competitiveness Index (CBI) evaluation system and developed the model of "(brand competitive assets× brand environment) ×competitiveness process" to systematically assess brand performance across large samples of enterprises.

Based on the above discussion, this study defines urban brand competitiveness specifically as the differentiated advantages and sustainable competitiveness of a city distinct from its counterparts. It is reflected in the combined effects of multi-dimensional factors, including consolidated uniqueness through consistent visual communication, enhanced recognition via brand identity, effective delivery of historical culture and core values, differentiated positioning enabled by cross-channel integrated communication, improved satisfaction through optimized public services and governance, strengthened innovation ecosystems and digital capabilities, enriched tourism and cultural resources, and sustainable development practices. To

systematically evaluate urban brand competitiveness, it is necessary to further clarify the constituent elements of urban brands, which will be elaborated in the following section.

2.2 Flexible Identity and Urban Brand Competitiveness

Against societal shifts and the evolution of media environments, urban brand identity systems have transitioned from fixed models to integrated frameworks, and further evolved toward flexible identity. Kim&Lee (2015) categorized the development of urban brand design into three historical stages. The first generation, spanning the 1990s to the early 2000s, referred to fixed identity centered on a single logo. The second generation, developed from the 2000s to 2010, represented integrated identity constructed based on systematic design guidelines. The third generation, emerging after 2010, is defined by flexible identity with core characteristics of flexibility, participation, and expansibility.In particular, the third-generation flexible identity marks a shift from institution-led governance to citizen participation. It emphasizes an open structure anchored by the urban name and allows flexible application for diverse purposes, such as cultural promotion and interactive engagement with residents and tourists (Kavaratzis,2017)). Brands are required to be "dynamic and flexible" to balance residents' aspirations and realistic urban conditions (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013).

"Dynamic and flexible branding enables modern brands to adapt to diverse digital media demands. Brands should achieve visual and narrative variability while maintaining recognizability" (Evamy, 2007). As Laurel (2003) proposed in *Design Research: Methods and Perspectives*, brand identity in the digital era ought to be interactive and extensible, support user participation and cross-context adaptation, and ultimately form a "living brand system".

Dynamic logo systems realize diverse brand expression while retaining recognizability through visual variation and contextual adaptation (Evamy, 2007). Systematic flexibility enables brands to develop rich visual narratives within standardized design frameworks, achieving the state of "freedom within order" (Scher, 2002).

A flexible identity system forms a mutually complementary structure among various components through diversified variations. Unlike traditional fixed identity systems, which emphasize continuous consistency in a unified direction and uniform form, flexible identity allows diverse visual variations while preserving recognizability. Enabled by advances in digital media technology, it also possesses adaptive qualities to respond to rapidly changing environments (Lelis et al. ,2022).Nevertheless, such

variations are not arbitrary. Instead, they require adherence to the essential attributes of the given entity amid transformation. Essence refers to the core constituent elements that define a thing's existence. The concept of flexible identity is established only when diverse presentations construct shared "object" through coherence and unity, thereby achieving internal consistency and external differentiation (Mollerup, 2013).

Flexible identity is characterized by regular variability, diversity-oriented flexibility grounded in essential attributes, media-specific adaptability, systemic expandability centered on core identity, and inherent selfhood. Accordingly, this study integrates place brand dynamics theory, systematic structuralism, and relevant design principles. Four core analytical dimensions—subjectivity, diversity, adaptability, and expansibility—are adopted to explain how distinct attributes of flexible identity exert differentiated effects on urban brand attractiveness and competitiveness. The connotations of each dimension are further defined and elaborated in the subsequent sections.

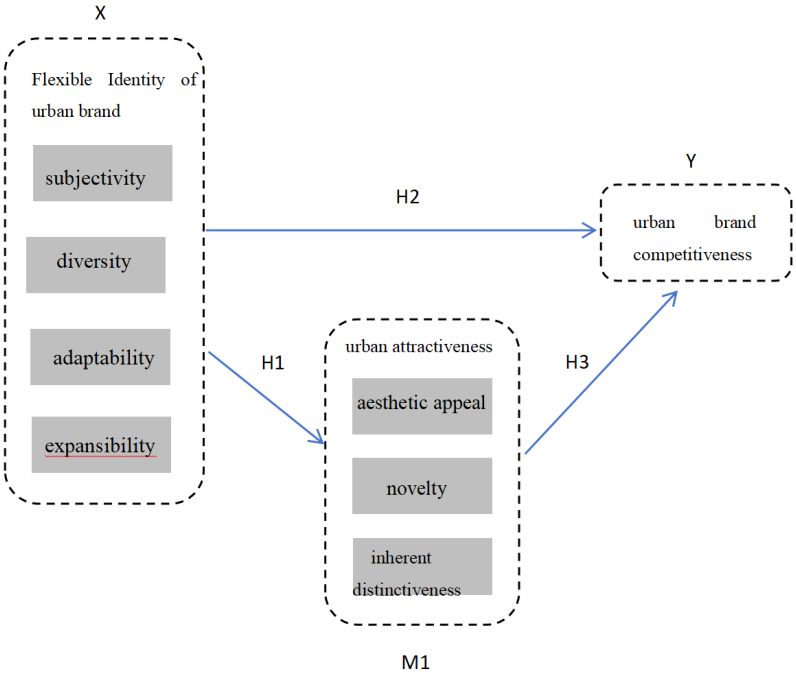
With the accelerated evolution of contemporary society and media environments, flexible identity maintains core recognizable elements while achieving systematic variation across form, color, narrative, and thematic dimensions. It can also derive differentiated sub-symbols to expand applicable scenarios. As this variable system better adapts to continuous shifts in the media and design ecology and meets rising audience expectations, flexible identity is regarded as a practically necessary and pivotal strategy for establishing distinctive urban brand identity.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Model

This study aims to analyze the influence of urban brand flexible identity on urban attractiveness and brand competitiveness. First, it examines the direct effects of flexible identity on urban attractiveness and compares the differences in effects across distinct dimensions. Second, grounded in relevant literature and Kavaratzis and Hatch's (2013) identity-based approach to place branding theory, this study investigates the impacts of four constituent dimensions—subjectivity, diversity, adaptability, and expansibility—on urban brand competitiveness. Third, considering existing evidence demonstrating a close correlation between flexible identity and brand competitiveness, the present research further tests the indirect effect (mediating role) of urban attractiveness within this relationship. Finally, based on a systematic literature review, the research model illustrated in Figure 3-1 is constructed, from which research questions and hypotheses

are proposed.



Figure(3-1).Research Model of the Impact of Flexible Identity on Urban Brand Competitiveness

Source:original by the author

3.2Research Questions and Hypotheses

Within the theoretical background section, this study reviews existing literature and proposes causal relationships between the characteristics of urban brand flexible identity and relevant variables. Starting from the strategic perspective of urban brand flexible identity, this research aims to examine whether the four core dimensions of urban brand identity—subjectivity, diversity, adaptability, and expansibility—influence urban attractiveness and brand competitiveness. It further investigates whether urban attractiveness, as a mediating variable, exerts a significant effect on urban brand competitiveness. Accordingly, the following research questions are formulated:

1)Do the characteristics of urban brand flexible identity affect urban attractiveness?

2)Do the characteristics of urban brand flexible identity affect urban brand competitiveness?

3)Does urban attractiveness play a mediating effect in the relationship between flexible identity characteristics and urban brand competitiveness?

Based on the above research questions, this study further proposes the following hypotheses regarding the relationships among the variables:

H1. The characteristics of urban brand flexible identity will have a significant

effect on urban attractiveness.

H2. The characteristics of urban brand flexible identity will have a significant effect on brand competitiveness.

H3. Urban attractiveness will play a mediating role in the relationship between the flexible identity characteristics of city brand and brand competitiveness.

3.3 Selection of Research Contexts

Based on a comprehensive literature review, this study constructs a structural model framed as "flexible identity of urban brands–urban attractiveness–brand competitiveness" and develops corresponding research questions and hypotheses. Data were collected through questionnaire surveys distributed via online channels, including web links and email. To enhance questionnaire reliability and validity, brief explanations of core concepts and professional terminology were provided at the beginning of the survey, ensuring that respondents could fully understand the items and provide accurate answers.

Given the large number of cities worldwide, the selection of sample cities in this study was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, drawing on the 2024 Global Liveability Index released by *The Economist and Global Finance*, as well as the 2024 Digital City Index (DCI) published by *The Economist Impact*, the top 10 cities from each ranking were reviewed. In the second stage, cases adopting flexible identity systems among these shortlisted cities were further verified and summarized. Ultimately, Singapore, Sydney, and New York were selected as the research sites in accordance with the criteria outlined in the introduction.The empirical participants consisted of adult residents in the targeted cities, yielding a total of 565 collected questionnaires. Prior to the formal survey, a pilot test was conducted online with 50 Chinese university students (including graduate students) from June 13 to June 20, 2025. Based on pilot feedback, item content and wording were revised to finalize the official questionnaire. The formal data collection took place from August 3 to August 10, 2025. After eliminating 42 invalid and careless responses, a final valid sample of 523 responses was retained for subsequent empirical analysis.

3.4 Measurement Items and Questionnaire Structure

To examine the effects of urban brand flexible identity characteristics on brand competitiveness, this study developed a questionnaire scale based on existing literature and Kavaratzis and Hatch's (2013) identity-based approach to place branding theory. The scale was designed around four dimensions—subjectivity, diversity, adaptability, and expansibility—together with the latent variables of urban attractiveness and brand

competitiveness. To guarantee measurement validity, all variables were operationalized in accordance with their operational definitions. The formal measurement items were primarily adopted and adapted from previous empirical studies.

Table 3-1. Dimension of Flexible Identity Characteristics (A1–A4: Subjectivity; A5–A8: Diversity; A9–A12: Adaptability; A13–A16: Expansibility)

Indicator	Item	Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Dimension of Brand Identity Characteristic	A1	Variations of the urban brand logo follow specific rules.							
	A2	I can clearly recognize the common logic behind logo variations, which enhances my perception of professional and logical brand design.							
	A3	The urban logo maintains visual unity.							
	A4	The urban brand logo retains consistency across diverse visual variations and strengthens brand credibility.							
	A5	The visual images presented through logo variations are rich and diverse.							
	A6	Diverse logo designs with multiple shapes and colors effectively enhance urban brand attractiveness.							
	A7	Logo variations are reflected in multiple dimensions rather than merely in color and shape.							
	A8	Diversified logo designs bring a vivid and engaging brand experience.							
	A9	The urban logo can be disseminated through a variety of media channels.							
	A10	The brand logo easily adapts to changing media environments, and such flexibility improves brand communication effectiveness.							

	A11	Logo adjustments enable better adaptation to diverse communication channels.							
	A12	The logo can flexibly adjust its form in response to changes in communication methods.							
	A13	The logo system can incorporate new symbolic connotations.							
	A14	It is necessary for the logo to embrace updated and expanded symbolic meanings.							
	A15	I am impressed by the flexible and innovative changes in the logo's visual elements and regard such adjustments as necessary and meaningful.							
	A16	The stable core elements and newly added visual components of the brand logo complement each other and strengthen brand recognition.							

The independent variable of this study consists of four core characteristics of urban brand flexible identity: subjectivity, diversity, adaptability, and expansibility. This research aims to examine how these characteristics influence the mediating variable and compare the differences in their predictive effects. The measurement scale adopted in this study is developed based on *Research on the Construction Methodology of Flexible Identity Systems* (Shen,2012), with appropriate restructuring and revision by referencing validated scales from existing empirical studies.

Table3-2. Dimension of Urban Attractiveness

Indicator	Item	Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Dimension of Urban Attractiveness	C1	The overall visual and environmental design of the city is aesthetic and harmonious.							
	C2	Visual							

		elements such as urban logos, color systems, and typefaces demonstrate a high level of aesthetic refinement.							
	C3	Public spaces including street landscapes, landmarks, and green spaces deliver a pleasant and unified aesthetic experience.							
	C4	The city regularly presents innovative, surprising, and refreshing events and experiences .							
	C5	Urban narratives and content design are highly creative and stimulate the desire for exploration.							
	C6	Compared with other cities, the sampled cities better provide a sense of novelty and surprise.							
	C7	The city possesses							

		distinctive representative features that clearly differentiate it from others.							
	C8	Unique symbols and cultural stories of the city come to mind easily when the city is mentioned.							
	C9	The city's core image and experiences reflect sustainable and consistent local characteristics that are irreplaceable.							

Table3-3. Dimension of Urban Competitiveness

Indicator	Item	Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Dimension of Urban Brand Competitiveness	D1	The city enhances its brand competitiveness through consistent visual							

		imagery, communication, and narrative.							
	D 2	Urban brand identity (BI) and communication significantly raise awareness among visitors and residents, thereby strengthening brand competitiveness.							
	D 3	The urban brand effectively conveys local history, culture, and core values, forms differentiated recognition, and improves brand competitiveness.							
	D 4	Through cross-							

		channel integrated communication and localized content, the city expands external visibility and distinctiveness to consolidate brand competitiveness.							
	D5	The abundance and commercialization of tourism and cultural resources (landmarks, museums, festivals, MICE, etc.) facilitate visitor inflows and consumption conversion, and further enhance urban brand competitiveness.							

3.5 Statistical Analysis Methods

To verify the research hypotheses proposed in this study, empirical data were collected via questionnaire surveys. SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0 were utilized to conduct descriptive statistical analysis and structural equation modeling (SEM). First, frequency analysis was adopted to examine respondents' demographic characteristics and relevant experiential attributes. Second, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed, and Cronbach's α coefficients were reported to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the measurement scale. Third, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was implemented to evaluate scale validity based on standard errors and correlation coefficients. Finally, AMOS was employed for structural equation modeling and multi-group analysis to test the moderating effects of gender, age, and income level.

4. Research Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

In terms of gender, there were 301 male respondents, accounting for 57.55%, and 222 female respondents, accounting for 42.45%.Regarding age distribution, the 25–34 age group was the largest (208 participants, 39.77%), followed by the 35–44 age group (146 participants, 27.92%) and the 18–24 age group (77 participants, 14.72%). The 45–54 age group (59 participants, 11.28%) and respondents aged 55 and above (33 participants, 6.31%) constituted relatively small proportions.

In terms of educational background, three-year vocational college (183 participants, 34.99%) and bachelor's degree holders (181 participants, 34.61%) dominated the sample, followed by high school education and below (83 participants, 15.87%), master's degree holders (48 participants, 9.18%), and doctoral degree holders and above (28 participants, 5.35%).

For occupation, Occupation Option 2 had the highest number of respondents (210 participants, 40.15%), while the remaining occupation categories ranged from 9.75% to 15.30% of the total sample. In terms of monthly income, most participants reported an income of 3,000–5,999 RMB (171 participants, 32.70%) or below 3,000 RMB (160 participants, 30.59%). Regarding attitudes toward the statement that "urban brand logo design can enhance overall urban competitiveness", the neutral stance was the most prevalent (148 participants, 28.30%), followed by slightly agree (126 participants, 24.09%) and strongly disagree / slightly disagree (104 participants, 19.89%).

Table 4-1. Descriptive Statistical Results

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Subjectivity	1.000	7.000	5.385	1.488
Diversity	1.000	7.000	5.383	1.517

Adaptability	1.000	6.750	2.651	1.553
Expansibility	1.000	7.000	4.719	1.827
Aesthetic Appeal	1.000	7.000	5.412	1.562
Novelty	1.000	7.000	5.463	1.567
Uniqueness	1.000	7.000	5.482	1.530
Urban Brand Identity Characteristics	2.000	6.375	4.535	0.814
Urban Attractiveness	1.889	6.889	5.453	1.144
Urban Brand Competitiveness	1.333	7.000	5.372	1.387

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 4-1. Among the four dimensions of flexible identity characteristics, subjectivity *(M=5.385, SD=1.488*) and diversity (*M=5.383, SD=1.517*) scored relatively high, while expansibility reached a moderately high level (*M=4.719, SD =1.827*). In contrast, adaptability demonstrated a distinctly lower score (*M =2.651, SD=1.553*).

The three dimensions of urban attractiveness yielded generally high scores, with aesthetic appeal (*M=5.412, SD=1.562*), novelty (*M=5.463, SD=1.567*), and uniqueness (M=5.482, SD=1.530) all exceeding 5.00. In terms of composite variables, urban brand identity characteristics remained at a moderate level (*M =4.535, SD* =0.814). Both urban attractiveness (*M=5.453, SD=1.144*) and urban brand competitiveness (*M=5.372, SD=1.387*) were relatively high. Overall, the value ranges of all variables broadly covered the full scale spectrum, with minimum values near 1 and maximum values close to 7.

4.2 Reliability Analysis

Cronbach's alpha is a widely used index for assessing the reliability of questionnaires in empirical data analysis. Generally, a Cronbach's alpha coefficient below 0.70 indicates poor internal consistency among the items of the scale, suggesting revision or re-development of the scale. A Cronbach's alpha value higher than 0.70 suggests good internal consistency for the constructed variables. If the Cronbach's alpha exceeds 0.90, this indicates excellent internal consistency of the items.

Table 4-2. Reliability Analysis

	Item	Cronbach's α
Subjectivity	A1	0.895
	A2	

	A3	
	A4	
Diversity	A5	0.890
	A6	
	A7	
	A8	
Adaptability	A9	0.915
	A10	
	A11	
	A12	
Expansibility	A13	0.895
	A14	
	A15	
	A16	
Aesthetic Appeal	B1	0.860
	B2	
	B3	
Novelty	B4	0.873
	B5	
	B6	
Inherent distinctiveness	B7	0.879
	B8	
	B9	
Urban Brand Competitiveness	C1	0.896
	C2	
	C3	
	C4	
	C5	

The results indicated that the Cronbach's α coefficients were 0.895 for subjectivity, 0.890 for diversity, 0.915 for adaptability, and 0.895 for expansibility. The coefficients were 0.860 for aesthetic appeal, 0.873 for novelty, 0.879 for inherent distinctiveness, and 0.896 for urban brand competitiveness. All Cronbach's α values for each variable exceeded 0.70, demonstrating high stability and satisfactory reliability of the questionnaire. The overall reliability of the measurement scale was confirmed, and the data were appropriate for subsequent statistical analysis. Additionally, the research data

were suitable for conducting factor analysis.

4.3 Mediation Effect Analysis (Model 4)

Table 4-3. Summary of Mediation Effect Models

Variables	Model 1: Aesthetic Appeal		Model 2: Urban Brand Competitiveness		Model 3: Urban Brand Competitiveness	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
Constant	3.452***	15.583	3.956***	17.227	3.317***	12.114
Subjectivity	0.370***	9.241	0.255***	6.135	0.186***	4.222
Aesthetic Appeal					0.185***	4.135
R2	0.141		0.067		0.097	
Adjusted *R2*	0.139		0.066		0.094	
F Value	85.389***		37.637***		27.950***	

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Table 4-4.Analysis of Indirect Effect

Mediation Type	Effect	Boot SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Total Effect	0.255	0.042	0.173	0.337
Direct Effect	0.186	0.044	0.100	0.273
Indirect Effect	0.069	0.020	0.034	0.115

In this study, subjectivity is treated as the independent variable, while aesthetic appeal is analyzed as the mediating variable. As shown in Table 4-3, the analysis proceeds in three steps. First, the direct effect of the independent variable (subjectivity) on the mediating variable (aesthetic appeal) is examined. The results indicate that subjectivity (*β= 0.370***, t= 9.241*) has a significant positive effect on aesthetic appeal. Second, the direct effect of the independent variable (subjectivity) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) is tested. As shown in Table 4-3, subjectivity (*β=0.255***, t=6.135*) significantly and positively affects urban brand competitiveness.Finally, the effects of both the independent variable (subjectivity) and the mediating variable (aesthetic appeal) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) are simultaneously examined. The results show that subjectivity *(β =*

*0.186***, t=4.222*) continues to have a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness, while aesthetic appeal (*β=0.185***, t=4.135*) also exerts a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness.

These findings indicate that aesthetic appeal plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between subjectivity and urban brand competitiveness. Specifically, the total effect is 0.255, the direct effect is 0.186, and the indirect effect is 0.069. Regarding the mediation path of subjectivity → aesthetic appeal → urban brand competitiveness, the indirect effect value is 0.069, and the 95% confidence interval does not include zero, indicating that this mediating effect is statistically significant.

Table 4-5. Summary of Mediation Effect Models

Variable	Model 1: Novelty		Model 2: Urban Brand Competitiveness		Model 3: Urban Brand Competitiveness	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
Constant	3.584***	14.771	3.956***	17.227	3.267***	12.186
Subjectivity	0.324***	7.379	0.255***	6.135	0.193***	4.501
Novelty					0.192***	4.731
R2	0.095		0.067		0.106	
Adjusted R2	0.093		0.066		0.102	
F Value	54.444***		37.637***		30.781***	

** p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001*

Table 4-6. Analysis of Indirect Effect

Mediation Type	Effect	Boot SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Total Effect	0.255	0.042	0.173	0.337
Direct Effect	0.193	0.043	0.109	0.277
Indirect Effect	0.062	0.018	0.032	0.103

In this study, subjectivity is treated as the independent variable, while novelty is analyzed as the mediating variable. As shown in Table 4-5, the analysis proceeds in

three steps. First, the direct effect of the independent variable (subjectivity) on the mediating variable (novelty) is examined. The results indicate that subjectivity (*β=0.324***, t =7.379*) has a significant positive effect on novelty.Second, the direct effect of the independent variable (subjectivity) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) is tested. As shown in Table 4-6, subjectivity (β=0.255***, t = 6.135) significantly and positively affects urban brand competitiveness.Finally, the effects of both the independent variable (subjectivity) and the mediating variable (novelty) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) are simultaneously examined. The results show that subjectivity (β=0.193***, t=4.501) continues to have a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness, while novelty (β = 0.192***, t = 4.731) also exerts a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness.

These findings indicate that novelty plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between subjectivity and urban brand competitiveness. Specifically, the total effect is 0.255, the direct effect is 0.193, and the indirect effect is 0.062. Regarding the mediation path of subjectivity → novelty → urban brand competitiveness, the indirect effect value is 0.062, and the 95% confidence interval does not include zero, indicating that this mediating effect is statistically significant.

Table 4-7. Summary of Mediation Effect Models

Variable	Model 1: Inherent Distinctiveness		Model 2: Urban Brand Competitiveness		Model 3: Urban Brand Competitiveness	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
Constant	3.548***	14.765	3.956***	17.227	3.352***	12.442
Subjectivity	0.325***	7.483	0.255***	6.135	0.200***	4.632
Inherent Distinctiveness					0.170***	4.129
R2	0.097		0.067		0.097	
Adjusted *R2*	0.095		0.066		0.094	
F Value	55.997***		37.637***		27.924***	

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Table 4-8. Analysis of Indirect Effect

Mediation Type	Effect	Boot SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Total Effect	0.255	0.042	0.173	0.337
Direct Effect	0.200	0.043	0.115	0.284
Indirect Effect	0.055	0.018	0.026	0.098

In this study, subjectivity is treated as the independent variable, while inherent distinctiveness is analyzed as the mediating variable. As shown in Table 4-7, the analysis proceeds in three steps. First, the direct effect of the independent variable (subjectivity) on the mediating variable (inherent distinctiveness) is examined. The results indicate that subjectivity (*β= 0.325***, t=7.483*) has a significant positive effect on inherent distinctiveness.Second, the direct effect of the independent variable (subjectivity) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) is tested. As shown in Table 4-8, subjectivity (β=0.255***, t=6.135) significantly and positively affects urban brand competitiveness.Finally, the effects of both the independent variable (subjectivity) and the mediating variable (inherent distinctiveness) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) are simultaneously examined. The results show that subjectivity (β = 0.200***, t=4.632) continues to have a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness, while inherent distinctiveness (β= 0.170***, t=4.129) also exerts a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness.

These findings indicate that inherent distinctiveness plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between subjectivity and urban brand competitiveness. Specifically, the total effect is 0.255, the direct effect is 0.200, and the indirect effect is 0.055. Regarding the mediation path of subjectivity → inherent distinctiveness → urban brand competitiveness, the indirect effect value is 0.055, and the 95% confidence interval does not include zero, indicating that this mediating effect is statistically significant.

Table 4-9. Summary of Mediation Effect Models

Variable	Model 1: Aesthetic Appeal		Model 2: Urban Brand Competitiveness		Model 3: Urban Brand Competitiveness	
	β	t	β	t	β	t

Constant	3.507***	16.291	3.820***	17.292	3.225***	12.037
Diversity	0.365***	9.264	0.284***	7.034	0.222***	5.165
Aesthetic Appeal					0.170***	3.822
R2	0.141		0.087		0.112	
Adjusted R2	0.140		0.085		0.108	
F Value	85.824***		49.479***		32.690***	

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Table 4-10.Analysis of Indirect Effect

Mediation Type	Effect	Boot SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Total Effect	0.284	0.040	0.205	0.364
Direct Effect	0.222	0.043	0.138	0.307
Indirect Effect	0.062	0.020	0.028	0.107

In this study, diversity is treated as the independent variable, while aesthetic appeal is analyzed as the mediating variable. As shown in Table 4-9, the analysis proceeds in three steps. First, the direct effect of the independent variable (diversity) on the mediating variable (aesthetic appeal) is examined. The results indicate that diversity (β=0.365***, t =9.264) has a significant positive effect on aesthetic appeal.Second, the direct effect of the independent variable (diversity) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) is tested. As shown in Table 4-10, diversity (β = 0.284***, t=7.034) significantly and positively affects urban brand competitiveness.Finally, the effects of both the independent variable (diversity) and the mediating variable (aesthetic appeal) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) are simultaneously examined. The results show that diversity (β =0.222***, t=5.165) continues to have a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness, while aesthetic appeal (β=0.170***, t=3.822) also exerts a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness.

These findings indicate that aesthetic appeal plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between diversity and urban brand competitiveness. Specifically, the total

effect is 0.284, the direct effect is 0.222, and the indirect effect is 0.062. Regarding the mediation path of diversity → aesthetic appeal → urban brand competitiveness, the indirect effect value is 0.062, and the 95% confidence interval does not include zero, indicating that this mediating effect is statistically significant.

Table 4-11. Summary of Mediation Effect Models

Summary	Model 1: Novelty		Model 2: Urban Brand Competitiveness		Model 3: Urban Brand Competitiveness	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
Constant	3.672***	15.532***	3.820***	17.292***	3.150***	12.010
Diversity	0.312***	7.203	0.284***	7.034	0.228***	5.467
Novelty					0.182***	4.538
R2	0.091		0.087		0.122	
Adjusted R2	0.089		0.085		0.118	
F Value	51.890***		49.479***		35.966***	

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Table 4-12. Analysis of Indirect Effect

Mediation Type	Effect	Boot SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Total Effect	0.284	0.040	0.205	0.364
Direct Effect	0.228	0.042	0.146	0.309
Indirect Effect	0.057	0.017	0.027	0.096

In this study, diversity is treated as the independent variable, while novelty is analyzed as the mediating variable. As shown in Table 4-11, the analysis proceeds in three steps. First, the direct effect of the independent variable (diversity) on the mediating variable (novelty) is examined. The results indicate that diversity (β=0.312***, t =7.203) has a significant positive effect on novelty.Second, the direct effect of the independent variable (diversity) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) is tested. As shown in Table 4-12, diversity (β=0.284***, t =7.034) significantly and positively affects urban brand competitiveness.Finally, the effects of both the independent variable (diversity) and the mediating variable (novelty) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) are simultaneously examined. The

results show that diversity (β=0.228***, t=5.467) continues to have a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness, while novelty (β=0.182***, t=4.538) also exerts a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness.

These findings indicate that novelty plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between diversity and urban competitiveness. Specifically, the total effect is 0.284, the direct effect is 0.228, and the indirect effect is 0.057. Regarding the mediation path of diversity → novelty → urban brand competitiveness, the indirect effect value is 0.057, and the 95% confidence interval does not include zero, indicating that this mediating effect is statistically significant.

Table 4-13. Summary of Mediation Effect Models

Variable	Model 1: Inherent Distinctiveness		Model 2: Urban Brand Competitiveness		Model 3: Urban Brand Competitiveness	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
Constant	3.176***	14.033	3.820***	17.292	3.364***	13.103
Diversity	0.401***	9.679	0.284***	7.034	0.227***	5.217
Inherent Distinctiveness					0.144***	3.391
R2	0.152		0.087		0.106	
Adjusted R2	0.151		0.085		0.103	
F Value	93.692***		49.479***		30.987***	

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Table 4-14. Analysis of Indirect Effect

Mediation Type	Effect	Boot SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Total Effect	0.284	0.040	0.205	0.364
Direct Effect	0.227	0.043	0.141	0.312
Indirect Effect	0.058	0.021	0.020	0.103

In this study, diversity is treated as the independent variable, while inherent distinctiveness is analyzed as the mediating variable. As shown in Table 4-13, the

analysis proceeds in three steps. First, the direct effect of the independent variable (diversity) on the mediating variable (inherent distinctiveness) is examined. The results indicate that diversity (β=0.401***, t=9.679) has a significant positive effect on inherent distinctiveness.Second, the direct effect of the independent variable (diversity) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) is tested. As shown in Table 4-14, diversity (β=0.284***, t=7.034) significantly and positively affects urban brand competitiveness.Finally, the effects of both the independent variable (diversity) and the mediating variable (inherent distinctiveness) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) are simultaneously examined. The results show that diversity (β=0.227***, t=5.217) continues to have a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness, while inherent distinctiveness (β=0.144***, t=3.391) also exerts a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness.

These findings indicate that inherent distinctiveness plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between diversity and urban brand competitiveness. Specifically, the total effect is 0.284, the direct effect is 0.227, and the indirect effect is 0.058. Regarding the mediation path of diversity → inherent distinctiveness → urban brand competitiveness, the indirect effect value is 0.058, and the 95% confidence interval does not include zero, indicating that this mediating effect is statistically significant.

Table 4-15.Summary of Mediation Effect Models

Variable	Model 1: Aesthetic Appeal		Model 2: Urban Brand Competitiveness		Model 3: Urban Brand Competitiveness	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
Constant	3.621***	15.684	3.908***	16.612	3.219***	11.470
Expansibility	0.338***	8.085	0.264***	6.190	0.199***	4.488
Aesthetic Appeal					0.190***	4.331
R2	0.111		0.069		0.101	
Adjusted R2	0.110		0.067		0.097	
F Value	65.371***		38.320***		29.190***	

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Table 4-16. Analysis of Indirect Effect

Mediation Type	Effect	Boot SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI

Total Effect	0.264	0.043	0.180	0.347
Direct Effect	0.199	0.044	0.112	0.287
Indirect Effect	0.064	0.019	0.033	0.110

In this study, expansibility is treated as the independent variable, while aesthetic appeal is analyzed as the mediating variable. As shown in Table 4-15, the analysis proceeds in three steps. First, the direct effect of the independent variable (expansibility) on the mediating variable (aesthetic appeal) is examined. The results indicate that expansibility(β =0.338***, t=8.085) has a significant positive effect on aesthetic appeal.Second, the direct effect of the independent variable (expansibility) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) is tested. As shown in Table 4-16, extensibility (β=0.264***, t=6.190) significantly and positively affects urban brand competitiveness.Finally, the effects of both the independent variable (expansibility) and the mediating variable (aesthetic appeal) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) are simultaneously examined. The results show that expansibility (β =0.199***, t=4.488) continues to have a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness, while aesthetic appeal (β=0.190***, t=4.331) also exerts a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness.

These findings indicate that aesthetic appeal plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between expansibility and urban brand competitiveness. Specifically, the total effect is 0.264, the direct effect is 0.199, and the indirect effect is 0.064. Regarding the mediation path of expansibility → aesthetic appeal → urban expansibility competitiveness, the indirect effect value is 0.064, and the 95% confidence interval does not include zero, indicating that this mediating effect is statistically significant.

Table 4-17. Summary of Mediation Effect Models

Variable	Model 1: Novelty		Model 2: Urban Brand Competitiveness		Model 3: Urban Brand Competitiveness	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
Constant	3.372***	13.699	3.908***	16.612	3.275***	12.163
Expansibility	0.364***	8.157	0.264***	6.190	0.196***	4.403
Novelty					0.188***	4.565
R2	0.113		0.069		0.104	
Adjusted	0.112		0.067		0.101	

R2			
F Value	66.532***	38.320***	30.312***

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Table 4-18. Analysis of Indirect Effect

Mediation Type	Effect	Boot SE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Total Effect	0.264	0.043	0.180	0.347
Direct Effect	0.196	0.044	0.108	0.283
Indirect Effect	0.068	0.019	0.035	0.111

In this study, expansibility is treated as the independent variable, while novelty is analyzed as the mediating variable. As shown in Table 4-17, the analysis proceeds in three steps. First, the direct effect of the independent variable (expansibility) on the mediating variable (novelty) is examined. The results indicate that expansibility (β=0.364***, t= 8.157) has a significant positive effect on novelty.Second, the direct effect of the independent variable (expansibility) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) is tested. As shown in Table 4-18, expansibility (β=0.264***, t=6.190) significantly and positively affects urban brand competitiveness.Finally, the effects of both the independent variable (expansibility) and the mediating variable (novelty) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) are simultaneously examined. The results show that expansibility (β=0.196***, t=4.403) continues to have a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness, while novelty (β=0.188***, t=4.565) also exerts a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness.

These findings indicate that novelty plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between expansibility and urban competitiveness. Specifically, the total effect is 0.264, the direct effect is 0.196, and the indirect effect is 0.068. Regarding the mediation path of expansibility→ novelty → urban brand competitiveness, the indirect effect value is 0.068, and the 95% confidence interval does not include zero, indicating that this mediating effect is statistically significant.

Table 4-19.Summary of Mediation Effect Model

Variable	Model 1: Inherent Distinctiveness		Model 2: Urban Brand Competitiveness		Model 3: Urban Competitiveness
	β	t	β	t	β
Constant	3.285***	13.528	3.908***	16.612	3.370***
Expansibility	0.374***	8.513	0.264***	6.190	0.202***
Inherent					0.164***

Distinctiveness			
R2	0.122	0.069	0.095
Adjusted R2	0.120	0.067	0.092
F Value	72.477***	38.320***	27.339***

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Table 4-20. Analysis of Indirect Effect

Mediation Type	Effect	Boot SE	BootLLCI	BootU
Total Effect	0.264	0.043	0.180	0.3
Direct Effect	0.202	0.045	0.114	0.2
Direct Effect	0.061	0.020	0.027	0.1

In this study, expansibility is treated as the independent variable, while inherent distinctiveness is analyzed as the mediating variable. As shown in Table 4-19, the analysis proceeds in three steps. First, the direct effect of the independent variable (expansibility) on the mediating variable (inherent distinctiveness) is examined. The results indicate that expansibility (β=0.374***, t=8.513) has a significant positive effect on inherent distinctiveness.Second, the direct effect of the independent variable (expansibility) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) is tested. As shown in Table 4-20, expansibility (β=0.264***, t= 6.190) significantly and positively affects urban brand competitiveness.Finally, the effects of both the independent variable (expansibility) and the mediating variable (inherent distinctiveness) on the dependent variable (urban brand competitiveness) are simultaneously examined. The results show that expansibility (β =0.202***, t=4.512) continues to have a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness, while inherent distinctiveness (β=0.164***, t=3.912) also exerts a significant positive effect on urban brand competitiveness.

These findings indicate that inherent distinctiveness plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between expansibility and urban competitiveness. Specifically, the total effect is 0.264, the direct effect is 0.202, and the indirect effect is 0.061. Regarding the mediation path of expansibility → inherent distinctiveness → urban brand competitiveness, the indirect effect value is 0.061, and the 95% confidence interval does not include zero, indicating that this mediating effect is statistically significant.

4.4 Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

This study utilized AMOS 26.0 software to conduct confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) on the core variables, including subjectivity, diversity, adaptability, expansibility, aesthetic appeal, novelty, inherent distinctiveness, and urban brand competitiveness. Composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) were adopted to

evaluate the convergent validity of each variable dimension.

First, the model fit of the measurement scale was examined. The questionnaire data were imported into AMOS 26.0, and the maximum likelihood method was applied to obtain the model fit indices, as presented in Table 4-21.

Table 4-21. Model Fit of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Model Fit of Confirmatory Factor Analysis										
Model Fit Indices	CMIN	DF	CMIN/DF	NFI	RFI	IFI	TLI	CFI	GFI	RMSEA
Fitting Results	389.830	377.000	1.034	0.961	0.955	0.999	0.998	0.999	0.953	0.008
Threshold			<3	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	>0.9	<0.08

As shown in Table 4-21, the value of CMIN/DF is 1.034 (< 3), while NFI, RFI, IFI, TLI, CFI, and GFI are all greater than 0.90. In addition, RMSEA is 0.008 (< 0.08). These results indicate that the model demonstrates a good fit in the confirmatory factor analysis. Overall, the measurement model for subjectivity, diversity, adaptability, expansibility, aesthetic appeal, novelty, inherent distinctiveness, and urban brand competitiveness exhibits satisfactory model fit.

4.5 Pearson Correlation Coefficients and Square Roots of AVE

Table 4-21.Pearson Correlation Coefficients and Square Roots of AVE

	Subjectivity	Diversity	Adaptability	Expansibility	Aesthetic Appeal	Novelty	Inherent Distinctiveness	Urban Brand Competitiveness
Subjectivity	0.826							
Diversity	0.324***	0.820						
Adaptabilit	0.	0.	0.8					

y	201***	057	56							
Expansibility	0.362***	0.446***	0.208***	0.829						
Aesthetic Appeal	0.431***	0.422***	0.092	0.383***	0.821					
Novelty	0.350***	0.336***	0.110*	0.379***	0.410***	(.836				
Inherent Distinctiveness	0.358***	0.445***	0.039	0.395***	0.438***	(.377***	0.842			
Urban Brand Competitiveness	0.292***	0.322***	0.054	0.299***	0.297***	(.302***	0.270***	0.795		

Note:* refers to p<0.05； ** refers to p<0.01； *** refers to p<0.001。

4.6 Research Results

The test results of Hypothesis 1 indicated that the effects of flexible identity on the three dimensions of urban attractiveness (aesthetic appeal, novelty, and inherent distinctiveness) generally presented a structural pattern: subjectivity, diversity, and expansibility exerted positive effects, whereas adaptability exerted a negative effect. In terms of dimensional differences, aesthetic appeal and inherent distinctiveness were significantly driven primarily by diversity; novelty was significantly promoted by both subjectivity and diversity, with comparable effect sizes and a slight predominance of diversity. In contrast, adaptability showed a negative tendency across all three dimensions, suggesting that excessive environmental adaptation may weaken cities' differentiated attraction signals and dilute distinctive charm elements.

In the direct effect analysis for Hypothesis 2, subjectivity and diversity exerted significant positive influences on urban brand competitiveness, while adaptability exerted a significant negative influence. After controlling for other variables, the direct effect of expansibility became non-significant. Among these predictors, diversity demonstrated the strongest positive effect. Subjectivity enhanced residents' and visitors'

willingness of selection, revisit, and recommendation by strengthening identity clarity and distinctiveness. expansibility tended to consolidate demand bases by expanding experiential touchpoints and audience coverage; nevertheless, its influence was mainly transmitted through indirect mediating pathways rather than direct improvements in competitiveness.

The mediation test for Hypothesis 3 revealed that urban attractiveness (aesthetic appeal, novelty, and inherent distinctiveness) generated significant indirect effects across most pathways. Both subjectivity and diversity produced significant positive indirect effects through the three attractiveness dimensions, while their direct effects remained statistically significant, indicating partial mediation. Adaptability yielded significant negative indirect effects via the three dimensions, with inconsistent coefficient signs observed, further reflecting partial mediation characteristics. All indirect effects of expansibility through urban attractiveness were significant, whereas its direct effect was non-significant, demonstrating a clear pattern of full mediation. This finding implied that the expansion of experiential touchpoints and engagement scope cannot directly enhance competitiveness; instead, such effects were transmitted indirectly by elevating urban attractiveness.

Overall, diversity consistently exerted the strongest influence, or an effect equivalent to subjectivity, throughout the "attractiveness–competitiveness" pathway. By strengthening subjective perception and recognition of novelty and uniqueness, subjectivity contributed to stable improvements in urban brand competitiveness. expansibility functioned mainly through the mediating mechanism of urban attractiveness, indirectly boosting competitiveness by enhancing aesthetic appeal, novelty and inherent distinctiveness. On the contrary, adaptability maintained persistent negative predictive effects in relevant pathways, indicating that excessive homogenization and standardization may erode urban cultural uniqueness and overall charm.

Accordingly, centering urban development strategies on diversity and subjectivity, maximizing the indirect benefits of expansibility within the mediating framework of urban attractiveness, and implementing bounded, refined governance of excessive adaptability can serve as core strategic directions for improving urban brand competitiveness.

5. Conclusion

Through empirical analysis, this study systematically reveals the influencing mechanism of urban brand flexible identity on brand competitiveness, thereby theoretically expanding the traditional urban brand research framework centered on integrated identity. Compared with existing studies that mostly focus on conceptual description and design experience, this research adopts a structural perspective and operationalizes flexible identity into four core dimensions: subjectivity, diversity,

adaptability, and expansibility. Furthermore, it constructs a functional pathway of "flexible identity –urban attractiveness–brand competitiveness", realizing the transformation from descriptive concepts to a testable theoretical model. In addition, this study empirically verifies the identity-based theory proposed by Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013). By introducing mediating mechanisms and nonlinear relationships, this paper also deepens and revises the original theoretical framework.

In terms of empirical findings, this study demonstrates that the distinct dimensions of flexible identity exert significantly differentiated effects on urban brand competitiveness. Among these dimensions, diversity and subjectivity exert stable positive effects on brand competitiveness. This indicates that enhancing urban pluralistic values through diverse visual and narrative expressions, while maintaining the clarity of core identity recognition, constitutes a critical pathway for strengthening brand competitiveness.More importantly, the results reveal that adaptability is not a uniformly positive factor as assumed in prior literature; instead, it presents a significant negative influence. This finding suggests that, within a highly digital and platform-based communication environment, excessive emphasis on media adaptation and formal adjustment may lead to the homogenization of urban brand expressions and consequently weaken urban uniqueness and recognizability. Drawing on institutional isomorphism and platform standardization mechanisms, this study further proposes an explanatory chain: excessive adaptation → expressive homogenization → weakened distinctiveness → reduced attractiveness. This framework substantially revises the conventional linear positive hypothesis regarding adaptability in existing research.

In addition, the empirical results validate the critical mediating role of urban attractiveness between flexible identity and brand competitiveness. Unlike prior studies that directly adopted outcome variables such as trust or place attachment, this study defines urban attractiveness as a pre-attitudinal perceptual mechanism and operationalizes it across three dimensions: aesthetic appeal, novelty, and inherent distinctiveness. This approach reveals how visual and symbolic systems are transformed into competitive advantages through perceptual evaluation.This finding not only strengthens the theoretical explanation of the mechanism underlying flexible identity but also bridges the research divide between visual design studies and brand cognition research.

At the practical level, this study offers actionable strategic guidelines for urban brand development. First, cities should prioritize the reinforcement of subjectivity and diversity. While maintaining stable core brand identity, systematically diversified visual expression should be adopted to enhance communicative richness and overall attractiveness. Second, regarding adaptability, development strategies should shift from unlimited adaptation to controlled adaptation. Clear boundaries for contextual and media-based adjustments should be established to prevent overreliance on platform templates and standardized formats, thereby avoiding brand homogenization.

Specifically, urban brands can adopt a two-tier structural framework consisting of an unchanging core layer and a controlled flexible layer, which balances consistent brand recognition with appropriate contextual adaptability. Third, resource allocation should prioritize key touchpoints that effectively enhance urban attractiveness, including visual experience, content innovation, and differentiated communication, so as to strengthen the pathway linking public perception to comprehensive brand competitiveness.

Although this study has made certain progress in both theoretical and empirical aspects, several limitations remain. First, based on cross-sectional data, this research cannot capture the dynamic evolutionary process of flexible identity. Longitudinal designs are recommended for future studies to examine its long-term effects. Second, the research sample primarily consists of Chinese respondents. Although urban brand perception can be shaped through media exposure, the results may still be influenced by cultural distance and cognitive bias, restricting the cross-cultural generalizability of the findings. Future research should validate these conclusions within diverse cultural contexts. Third, this study focuses on global cities; accordingly, the applicability of its findings to small- and medium-sized cities or resource-constrained contexts requires further examination. Finally, variables such as brand trust and place attachment were not incorporated into the research model beyond urban attractiveness. In particular, the psychological mechanisms underlying the negative effect of adaptability remain underexplored and could be further investigated through experimental methods and mixed-methods research in future work.

In summary, by introducing structured dimensions, nonlinear mechanisms, and perceptual mediating pathways, this study advances the understanding of how flexible identityexerts its effects. Future research may be further extended in directions such as cross-cultural comtrast, dynamic evolutionary processes, and the integration of multiple mechanisms, so as to comprehensively clarify the boundary conditions and optimal configuration patterns of flexible identity in urban brand development.

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