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Citation

Place Branding and the Dynamics of Co-Creation: An Activity Theory Study of a Creative Marketplace in Chengdu

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This paper introduces the concepts of creative marketplaces, place branding, and co-creation. Focusing on Jiaozi Market in Chengdu, China, the authors use third-generation Activity Theory (Engeström, 2001) and Digital Ethnography (Pink et al., 2016), to map the roles of market organisers, vendors, and consumers. This reveals contradictions between place branding motives and outcomes across the activity system - tools, rules, community and division of labour - within the creative marketplace. The findings suggest that although creative marketplaces promote a perception of curated place branding, stakeholder participation often remains symbolic, resulting in disjointed and inauthentic experiences for all involved.

Keywords: co-creation, creative marketplaces, activity theory, place branding.

1   Introduction

Public marketplaces have traditionally served as important urban spaces for economic exchange, social interaction, and cultural expression (Ding et al., 2024). In recent years, the growth of cultural and creative industries has given rise to a new form of public marketplace, creative marketplaces (Chen & Chen, 2021). Creative marketplaces are hybrid spaces where commerce, lifestyle, and aesthetics converge (Concha, 2019). Often composed of small and micro-sized enterprises, creative marketplaces emphasise personal creativity and encourage direct engagement between vendors and consumers (Chen & Chen, 2021).

These creative marketplaces reflect broader shifts in urban consumption. As Pine and Gilmore (1999) argue, the growing emphasis on experiential value reshaped consumer expectations across various sectors. In the Chinese context, Liang and Wang (2020) observe that rising disposable income and increased interest in cultural experiences have contributed to the expansion of cultural and creative industries. Building on the phenomena, creative marketplaces have emerged as hybrid spaces that combine commerce with sensory and emotional engagement. According to Chen and Chen (2021), such marketplaces attract visitors by offering experiences of handmade goods, distinctive designs, and live

performances. As Concha (2019) notes, organisers in creative marketplaces act as a form of curator.   The visual strategies they adopt not only reflect organisers' visual preferences but also function as mechanisms of symbolic exclusion, marginalising those who do not conform to dominant aesthetics while constructing a curated place branding shaped by selective inclusion (Concha, 2019; Kotsi et al., 2018). Although these curatorial practices are intended to attract specific audiences, they are also closely linked to a sense of place and the production of local cultural development (Concha, 2019). In this way, the visual strategies in creative marketplaces are not merely part of a commercial operation but also contribute to the construction of a sense of place, constituting a significant aspect of contemporary place branding practices (Concha, 2019; Kotsi et al., 2018; Govers & Go, 2009). In this way, the visual strategies in creative marketplaces are not merely part of a commercial operation but also contribute to the construction of a sense of place, shaping how visitors emotionally experience the market and engage with its cultural identity, constituting a significant aspect of contemporary place branding practices (Concha, 2019; Kotsi et al., 2018; Govers & Go, 2009).

Existing research on place branding has primarily focused on visual communication strategies, such as the use of spatial (iconic landmarks and urban layout), graphic (logos, colours, and taglines), and material artefacts that carry cultural symbolism, such as textiles or traditional tools (Kotsi et al., 2018). In creative marketplaces, organisers often curate visual preferences to shape consumer experiences and construct a cohesive brand image (Concha, 2019; Chen & Chen, 2021). However, limited attention has been paid to how these strategies affect other stakeholders, particularly vendors and consumers, or how their roles interact in practice. Existing research rarely addresses the tensions that arise from these interactions, particularly when stakeholders operate with divergent motives and unequal power.

To examine these often-contradicting tensions, the authors have adopted Engeström's third-generation Activity Theory (2001) as its conceptual framework to explore the creative marketplace activity system. Building on Leontiev's (1978) distinction between motive, object, and goal, the analysis makes use of Engeströms Activity System Model (2001) to examine how stakeholder actions are shaped by underlying needs (motives) and mediated through other aspects of the activity system, including tools, rules, division of labour and community structures. Using the case of Jiaozi Market (see Figure 1) in Chengdu, China, we map the activity systems of organisers, vendors, and consumers to identify internal and cross-system contradictions. This approach helps reveal tensions between stakeholder motives and how the creative market activity system influences on place branding practices. To guide this inquiry, our research question was: How do the activity systems of organisers, vendors, and consumers align or contradict in shaping place branding in creative marketplaces?
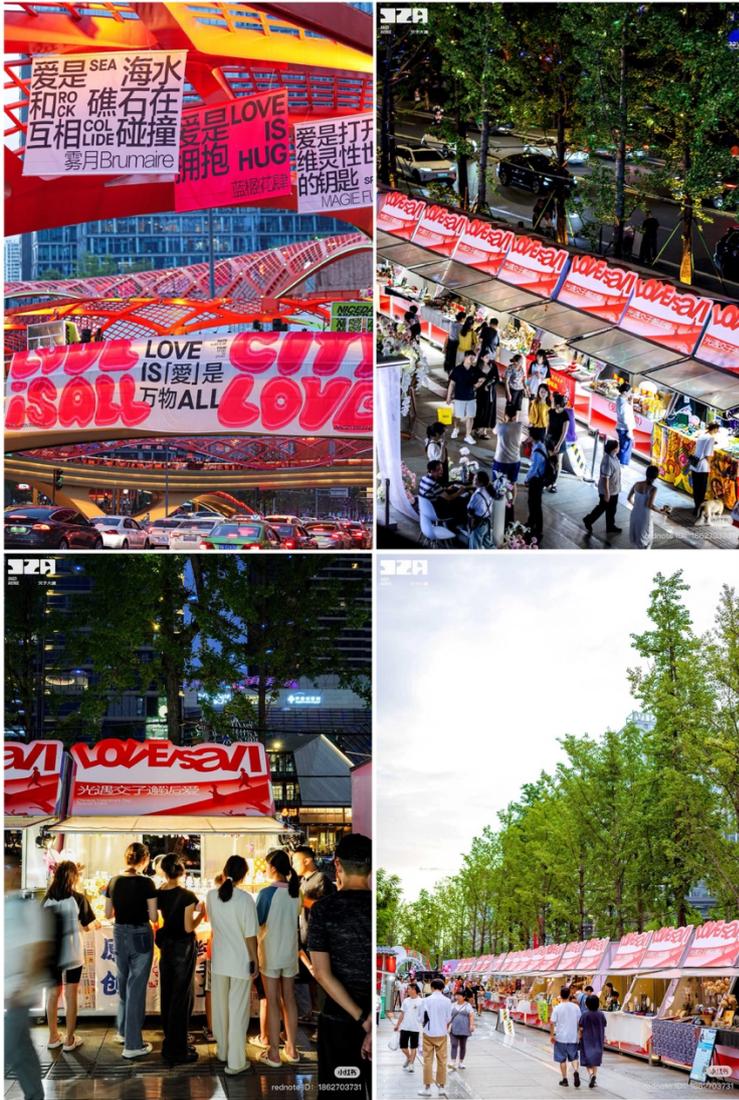
Figure 1. Market scene from Jiaozi Market, Chengdu. Source: RedNote Jiaozi Market (2024).

2   Theoretical framing

2.1   Creative marketplaces and place branding

Traditional public marketplaces shape place identity by integrating economic activities, cultural traditions, and social interactions (Roever, 2014; Kikuchi & Ryan, 2007). These marketplaces serve as more than just spaces for trade; they embody unique cultural narratives and social dynamics that foster community cohesion and local identity (Bell & Beeston, 2011; Huang et al., 2018; Li, 2021).

In recent years, creative marketplaces have emerged as a new form, reflecting a shift away from these traditional functions toward more curated, aesthetic, and experiential formats (Chen & Chen, 2021; Concha, 2019). Two key forces drive this change: the rise of the creative class, which refers to professionals in knowledge, technology, and cultural industries whose preferences have reshaped urban consumption patterns (Naylor & Florida, 2002), and the expansion of experience-based consumption (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). These marketplaces reflect rising demand and experiential consumption and often serve dual functions as both economic spaces and platforms for public

cultural services (Liang & Wang, 2020). Chen and Chen (2021) describe them as marketplaces operated by small cultural entrepreneurs who value craftsmanship, flexibility, and direct interaction.

The creative marketplace is often designed to suit the expectations and preferences of its intended audience. As Concha (2019) notes that many organisers see themselves as curators, deliberately crafting the atmosphere to appeal to specific consumer groups. In this context, creative marketplaces integrate localised creative practices with spatial and experiential design elements that aim to foster consumer engagement and strengthen place identity (Chen & Chen, 2021; Lange et al., 2008).

As previously noted, place branding often focuses on visual strategies (Kotsi et al., 2018), which are particularly salient in the context of creative marketplaces. In the context of creative marketplaces, organisers often select visual and spatial elements to reflect the markets' values and appeal to specific target audiences (Concha, 2019). This visual strategy involves applying visual distinctions and carefully designing material layouts to establish a cohesive place branding (Concha, 2019). As an example, Chen and Chen (2021) state that the success of ISHANDS International Creative Market, in Taiwan, partly relies on how the exhibition space and market atmosphere are arranged, helping both vendors and visitors experience the creative marketplace's environment. While visual strategies shape a coherent visual identity, they are often tacitly embedded in organisational preferences or visual cues rather than codified in formal documents (Concha, 2019). As a result, although sometimes hinted at in recruitment texts or expressed through branding imagery, they are not always clearly communicated to vendors. This lack of transparency can lead to misunderstanding and may reinforce the curator's aesthetic taste hierarchies within the market (Concha, 2019). These issues of selective visibility and implicit control are further unpacked in the case study analysis that follows.

Although creative marketplaces are often shaped by top-down visual strategies (Concha, 2019), some documented interventions can be interpreted as integrating co-creation into marketplace design. For example, Lee (2019) presents a design intervention in a rural Korean marketplace where design students collaborated with vendors and residents to produce a series of visual outcomes using design thinking and sense-making methods. One student team created a new package design for Eonyang fruit jam, which included custom containers and labels designed in response to oddly shaped fruits observed during field visits (see Figure 2a). Another team curated a memorial photo exhibition of the market's current state, supported by video and magnifying tools to enhance audience engagement (see Figure 2b). These interventions demonstrated substantial collaboration; following Sanders and Stappers (2008), co-creation is understood as creativity undertaken collaboratively by at least two contributors. In Lee's project, vendors and residents provided input and took part in making, even though they were not professional designers, which is consistent with Sanders and Stappers' view that co-creation does not limit who may participate. In the Jiaozi case (Section 4), the organiser, vendors and customers jointly shape place branding; despite emerging tensions and the fact that most stakeholders are non-professional designers, the practice constitutes co-creation.

Figure 2. Visual and historical strategies at a rural Korean marketplace.

(a) New packaging design for Eonyang fruit jam. From Lee (2019, p. 10).
(b) Memorial table and photo exhibition documenting the market's history. From Lee (2019, p. 11).

2.2 Stakeholder roles and place branding

2.2.1 Marketplace organisers

Place branding has become a key tool in urban and cultural strategy, particularly in creative city development (UNESCO, 2011; Naylor & Florida, 2002; Landry, 2006). At the city level, it is often framed as a way to promote inclusion and connect diverse cultural expressions (Suet Leng & Badarulzaman, 2014). However, when applied at the micro level, such as in creative marketplaces, place branding reflects different priorities. Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015) argue that branding practices vary across contexts and actors. In creative marketplaces, organisers often pursue curatorial strategies aimed at creating a recognisable brand and sustaining public attention (Concha, 2019; Chen & Chen, 2021). While some value cultural engagement and community participation (Chen & Chen, 2021; Lange et al., 2008), others adopt more selective aesthetic standards that may restrict broader involvement (Concha, 2019).

Concha (2019) suggests that some organisers' place branding strategies are driven more by curatorial control than by participatory ideals. She argues that organisers act as tastemakers, actively shaping vendor identities and imposing aesthetic standards to craft a cohesive, commercially appealing atmosphere. These decisions, she notes, are less about democratic inclusion and more shaped by personal tastes, perceived consumer preferences, and unexamined class or cultural biases.

By exercising control over market aesthetics and vendor selection criteria, organisers hold symbolic gatekeeping power (Cross, 2000; Concha, 2019). In doing so, they influence who gains access, who is included, and who is ultimately recognised as belonging within the branded environment of the marketplace.

2.2.2 Vendors

Vendors join creative marketplaces for diverse reasons, including lifestyle flexibility, identity expression, and income generation. For some, the market offers a secondary income and a space to communicate personal or business values (Cross, 2000; Lawson et al., 2008), while others depend on it as their main livelihood (Lawson et al., 2018). However, trading conditions are often unstable; visitor numbers, spending habits, and market design all affect income levels, making it challenging to achieve consistent income (Chen & Chen, 2021; Roever, 2014).

Beyond economic needs, some vendors also use display strategies to attract attention and express brand identity. As Zacharias (1997) notes, vendors manipulate layout, colour, and form to enhance visual appeal, while Concha (2019) highlights how these efforts contribute to the overall atmosphere of the market. These practices, though shaped by organisers' expectations, also reflect vendors' attempts to gain visibility and communicate their values.

2.2.3 Consumers

Consumers engage with creative marketplaces not only to purchase goods but to seek meaningful, culturally resonant experiences. As Kikuchi and Ryan (2007) observe, motivation often includes the search for cultural mementoes, opportunities for social interaction, and a sense of novelty. These markets offer a site where everyday consumption intersects with local culture, allowing consumers to connect with place through experiential engagement.

This interaction contributes to the symbolic identity of the marketplace. As Govers and Go (2009) emphasise, place identity is shaped not only by official narratives but also by local knowledge and lived experience. Kerr and Oliver (2015) similarly argue that branding outcomes are co-produced through participation by residents, businesses, and visitors.

However, despite their experiential role, consumers are frequently excluded from formal branding processes. Kavaratzis (2012) points out that limited consumer involvement in market governance can result in a disconnect between top-down branding narratives and actual user experience. As Hankinson (2014) argues, local communities are often positioned as passive audiences rather than active contributors in branding strategies. In the context of creative marketplaces, this exclusion underscores wider tensions in representational power and participatory place-making.

2.3 Activity theory for mapping stakeholder contradictions

Activity Theory (see Figure 3) offers a systemic lens to analyse how human activities are mediated by tools (including technologies), and impacted by rules, community, and division of labour, shaped by social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Kaptelinin & Uden, 2012; Engeström, 2001). A key foundation of Activity Theory originates from Leontiev's (1978) theory, where the *object of activity* refers to the external target that gives meaning and orientation to action. While the *object* is the material or symbolic focus of activity, it serves as the outward expression of a *motive* (Ibid.), the deeper need or purpose that drives the subject to act. Importantly, object and motive are not interchangeable: the motive remains internally rooted and often implicit, whereas the object is what renders it actionable in the activity system. By contrast, *goals* are consciously set sub-tasks that operationalise the object through specific means (Ibid.). Engeström's third-generation model builds on this foundation by conceptualising multi-actor systems with partially shared objectives, where differing motives may produce internal contradictions (Engeström, 2001). Activity Theory is, therefore, well-suited for analysing creative marketplaces where organisers, vendors, and consumers interact under unequal conditions of power, access, and recognition.
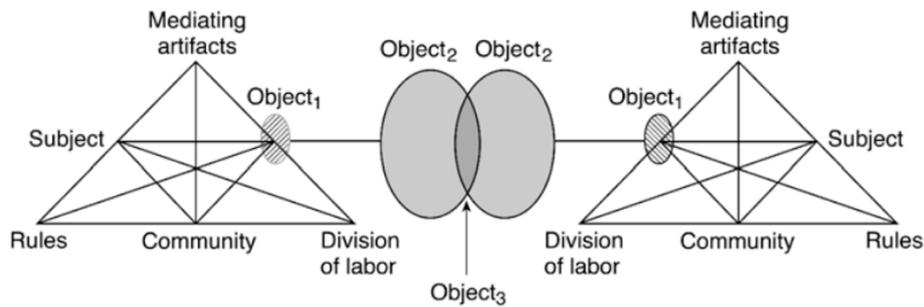
Figure 3. Third-generation Activity Theory Model – The interaction of multiple activity systems. Source: Adapted from Engeström (2001)

Recent design research has drawn on Activity Theory to investigate how collaborative structures shape participation and control in the design field. Menichinelli (2018) applies Activity Theory to co-design infrastructures, while Kaptelinin and Uden (2012) use it to examine how delegated actions are negotiated in service systems. Campbell (2021), in his study of lay design in Johannesburg, demonstrates how innovative urban farmers creatively respond to contradictions within Activity Theory systems to enhance their capabilities. These studies illustrate that Activity Theory enables not only the mapping of distributed action but also the diagnosis of structural imbalances in participation.

Activity Theory is used not to access actors' internal motivations directly, which are often subconscious and difficult to articulate, but to analyse how these motivations manifest through observable practices and systemic tensions (Campbell, 2021). By mapping each stakeholder group's activity system and its contradictions, the framework helps reveal how motives diverge or conflict. It also supports efforts to align these motives more effectively, thereby, in this case, enabling more inclusive and sustainable place-branding strategies beyond top-down or bottom-up models.

3 Methodology

This study is guided by the following research question: At Jiaozi Market in Chengdu, how do the activity systems of organisers, vendors, and consumers align or contradict in shaping place branding?

To answer this question, this study adopts a single-case study method (Yin, 2009), focusing on Jiaozi Market, a curated creative marketplace located in the central business district of Chengdu. Jiaozi Market was identified as the main case because it allows the researchers to critically explore the intersections of visual strategies, micro-entrepreneurial practices, and digital participation, given its curated structure and extensive use of social media. This research investigates how organiser-led visual strategies interact with the activity systems of vendors and consumers, enabling us to examine how stakeholder motives, expressed through their tools, rules, and practices, align or contradict within shared market spaces and how such dynamics shape place branding in creative marketplaces.

Data was collected from multiple publicly accessible sources. Key platforms included RedNote and WeChat Official Accounts (WeChat OA), which serve as major channels for vendor promotion and organiser communication. On RedNote, we employ a topic-tag and keyword-based retrieval strategy, querying "交子" ("*Jiaozi*"), and related terms "成都交子市集" and "交子市集" ("*Chengdu Jiaozi Market*" and "*Jiaozi Market*"), covering January 2024 to the present. Because the platform uses an algorithmically curated, infinite-scroll feed and topic pages overlap, a verifiable total number of results is not exposed; therefore, we report only the size of the corpus included in the present analysis. On WeChat OA, we

directly queried the organiser account "锐理文化" ("*Ruili Culture*") to retrieve recruitment notices, participation guidelines, and curatorial briefings. These official communications were treated as primary documents and subjected to document analysis.

The final corpus comprises 7 items: 6 RedNote posts and 1 WeChat OA article. By role: organiser 2 (WeChat OA 1 + organiser-affiliated influencer 1, RedNote); vendor, 2 (RedNote); consumer, 3 (RedNote). The corpus is purposively assembled and role-stratified to cover organiser, vendor, and consumer perspectives. Inclusion is based on account authenticity and traceability, role, relevance, and content.

This study adopts a digital ethnography approach (Pink et al., 2016) to examine how stakeholder roles, participation norms, and visual strategies are expressed and negotiated through digital media. Digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016) is a flexible and adaptive methodology suited to environments where digital platforms are deeply embedded in everyday practices. This approach enables engagement with stakeholder perspectives as they unfold in situ across social media content, commentaries, and promotional materials. This study uses screenshots, image analysis, and text-based documentation as methods to analyse digital content. These materials were collected over the past year from social media platforms and public online sources.

The analytical framework is based on the third-generation Activity Theory model (Engeström, 2001), which enables the mapping of multi-actor systems with partially shared objectives. The analysis includes three components: (1) Activity system modelling: identify basic elements like tools, rules, community, and division of labour, and see how the object is shaped through these components. (2) Stakeholder role comparison: map who is involved, what roles they play, and who holds decision-making power over visual and material aspects. (3) Contradiction analysis: examine tensions within and between systems, and infer deeper motives by analysing practices, especially around visual control, unequal visibility, and conflicting goals. This Activity Theory framework helps structure the use of methods like stakeholder role comparison and contradiction analysis. It supports understanding of how different stakeholders shape place branding and how their tensions can be identified and interpreted.

4 Case analysis: Stakeholder contradictions in place branding practices

4.1 Organiser Activity System

The organiser activity system (see Figure 4), led by Ruili Culture, a Chengdu-based curatorial organisation, focuses on creating a photogenic, aesthetically unified, and branded market space. In the Activity Theory system (Engeström, 2001), this is the object of the activity: a curated form of place branding aimed at increasing public visibility and shaping a recognisable market presence.

This object reflects a deeper motive: to attract attention, draw high-profile vendors and visitors, and position the market as a cultural and commercial landmark in Chengdu. To achieve this, organisers use tools such as uniform booths, seasonal festivals, influencer collaborations, and promotional slogans like "guaranteed photogenic rate" (a term commonly used to describe high visual appeal optimised for social media sharing). These are supported by aesthetic screening, product limits, and participation rules, including booth requirements and non-refundable deposits, which create barriers for vendors without design experience or financial flexibility.
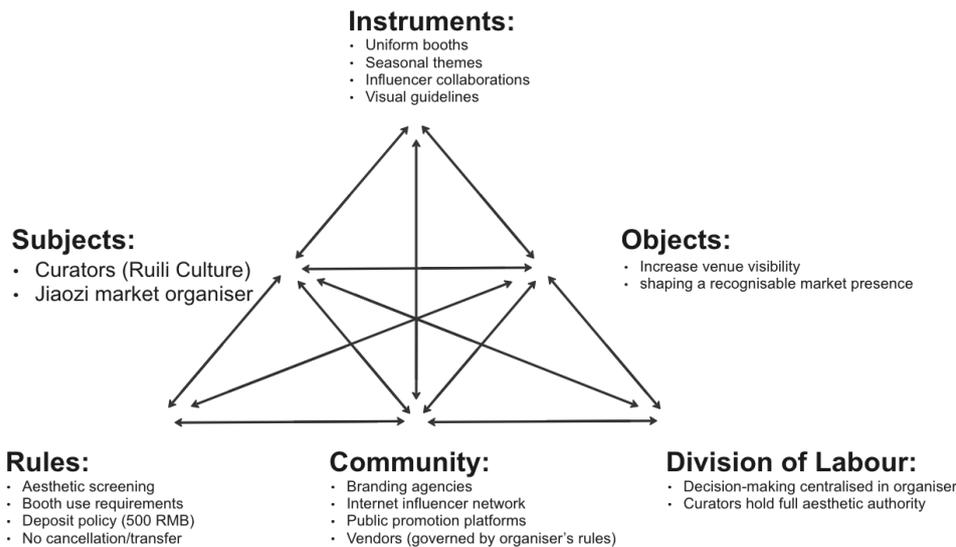
Instruments:
- Uniform booths
- Seasonal themes
- Influencer collaborations
- Visual guidelines

Subjects:
- Curators (Ruili Culture)
- Jiaozi market organiser

Objects:
- Increase venue visibility
- shaping a recognisable market presence

Rules:
- Aesthetic screening
- Booth use requirements
- Deposit policy (500 RMB)
- No cancellation/transfer

Community:
- Branding agencies
- Internet influencer network
- Public promotion platforms
- Vendors (governed by organiser's rules)

Division of Labour:
- Decision-making centralised in organiser
- Curators hold full aesthetic authority

Figure 4. Activity System of Organisers at Jiaozi Market. Adapted from Engeström's Activity Theory Model (2001).

To illustrate how visual strategies shape selective participation, this section analyses a WeChat recruitment post by Ruili Culture (see Figure 5a). The post outlines accepted vendor categories, such as "文创手工，酒食咖啡，传统非遗" (*cultural and creative products, food and drink, traditional crafts*), but the accompanying images visually communicate the organizers' expectations for participation. These visuals consistently present booths with minimalist layouts, muted colour tones, and evenly spaced arrangements. Such imagery aligns with the organizers' written preference for "产品原创，美陈简约美观有调性的优先考虑" (*original products and booths with a minimalist, aesthetically tasteful display will be prioritised*), reflecting a coherent visual strategy. Participation is further regulated by operational rules: vendors must use standardised enclosed booths (盒子摊位) (see Figure 5b), may not sell more than two product types per booth, and are subject to a 15% sales commission and a 500 RMB refundable deposit, which is forfeited upon cancellation. These combined requirements, visual, procedural, and financial, create a participation environment that privileges vendors with prior design experience or institutional familiarity.

Beyond formal rules, influencers on RedNote (see Figure 5c) visually amplify the market's curated aesthetics by showcasing photographed scenes and tagging the official account, reinforcing the organizers' branding strategy in the digital realm. Highlighting attractive installations, branded giveaways, and stylised backdrops, through hashtags like #交子大道 and #成都市集 (*Jiaozi Avenue and Chengdu Marketplaces*), extend the organizers' visual strategy into digital space, reinforcing a public image of the market as a lifestyle destination. This semi-commercial alignment between organisers and digital creators extends aesthetic control beyond the physical market space into online visibility, further shaping public perceptions of participation. This online identity not only brings more attention to the market but also shapes ideas about what kind of vendors and booths are considered suitable. In this way, the organizers' visual style influences who gets accepted and what is seen as good participation.

Figure 5. Visual communication strategies used to shape Jiaozi Market's public image.
(a) Vendor recruitment post published by Ruili Culture on its WeChat official account (2024).
(b) Vendor recruitment post published by Ruili Culture on its WeChat official account (2024).
(c) Screenshot of a RedNote post by the influencer 吾月山, featuring Jiaozi Market as a photogenic and lively city walk destination (2024).

As illustrated in the contradictions in the organiser's Activity System (see Figure 6), tensions arise when the instruments and rules designed to shape a cohesive visual space simultaneously restrict broader vendor inclusion. Although the organiser does not explicitly prohibit specific visual formats, the recruitment post clearly states that "产品原创，美陈简约美观有调性的优先考虑" (*original products and booths with a minimalist, aesthetically tasteful display will be prioritised*). This preference privileges vendors with prior branding experience or access to professional design assets, inadvertently excluding grassroots entrepreneurs who may not meet these visual standards.

However, this contradiction can lead to potential benefits. The same visual rules help create a stylish and photogenic marketplace, which increases visibility and supports the organizers' goal of making Jiaozi Market a cultural landmark in Chengdu's place branding efforts. The consistent style, through booth design, influencer posts, and curated visuals, builds a clear public image that draws media and consumer attention. In this way, selective participation is not only a limit but also a strategy to make the market stand out.
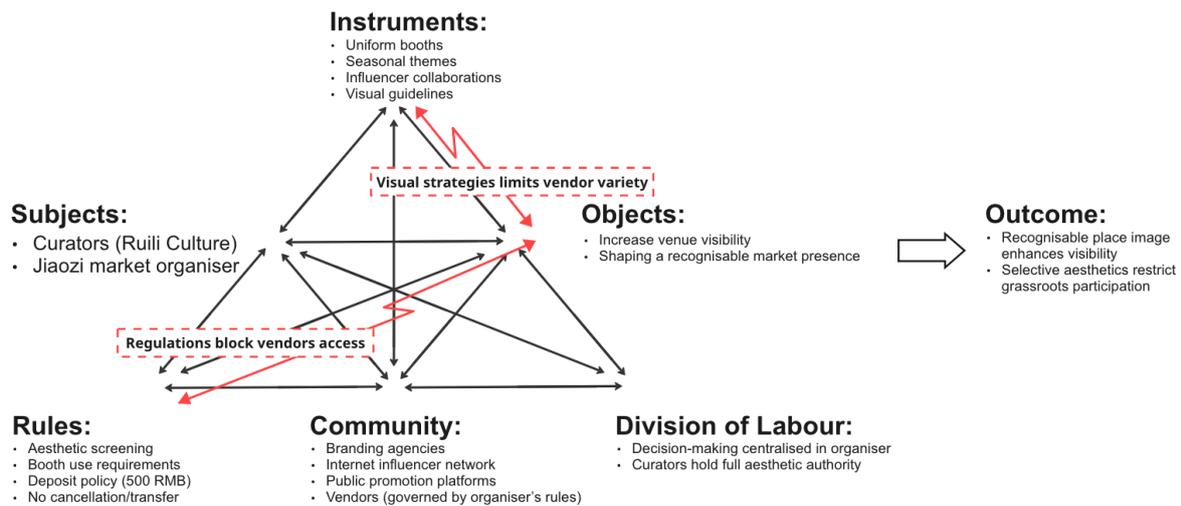
Figure 6. Contradictions in the Organiser Activity System at Jiaozi Market. Adapted from Engeström's Activity Theory Model (2001).

4.2 Vendor Activity System

The vendor Activity System at Jiaozi Market (see Figure 7) is focused on objects such as showcasing products, attracting customers, and gaining social media attention. These objects are pursued through instruments like handmade signage, DIY packaging, booth decoration, and RedNote posts. However, vendors work under constraints such as booth standardisation, aesthetic screening, and platform visibility rules. These may contradict the vendors' deeper motives, such as the need to generate income, build brand recognition, or express individual identity. Yet these motives are not always fully realised, especially for grassroots participants with limited resources or online reach.
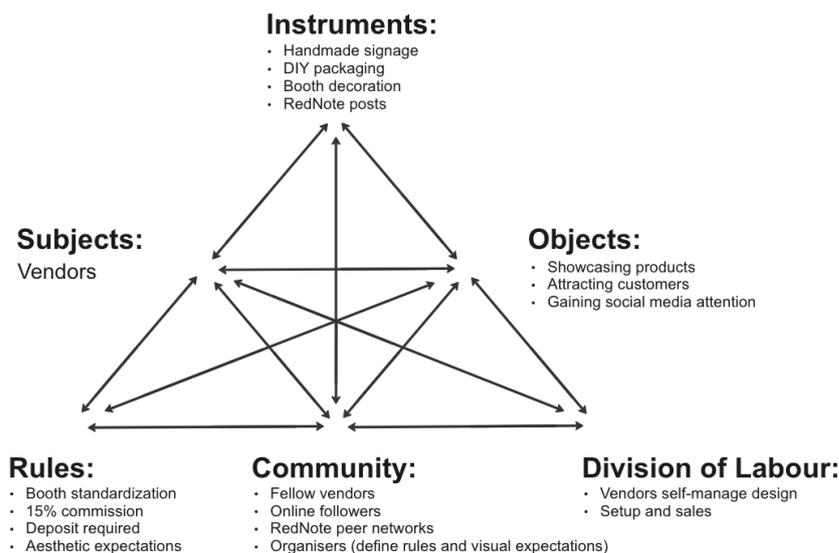

Figure 7. Activity System of Vendors at Jiaozi Market. Adapted from Engeström's Activity Theory Model (2001).

One representative RedNote vendor is MUSHROOM (see Figure 8a), a bakery with a strong visual identity, over 3,000 followers, and a permanent storefront in Chengdu. MUSHROOM frequently releases seasonal branded merchandise, such as candles, stickers, and cups. (see Figure 8b) and was invited to Jiaozi Market's "Bread Festival." Its visually curated booth received 224 likes and 74 saves, reflecting high audience engagement. This suggests that vendors with aesthetic coherence and existing social capital are more likely to succeed within the market's visual strategy, translating the object, such as a booth presentation, into both symbolic visibility and economic benefit.

While most RedNote content about Jiaozi Market is created by influencers, a few vendor-authored posts, such as a ten-day diary by 麒麟 (*Kirin*), faced significant difficulties in achieving visibility and sales. On day four, Kirin (see Figure 8c) wrote: "摆摊第四天，周围的摊都开张了，就差我们还在即将开张状态。虽然还没有人购买，但坚持就是胜利" (*All the neighbouring stalls are already trading; we're still setting up. No sales yet, but persistence pays off*). On day eight, Kirin (see Figure 8d) wrote "摆摊第八天，昨天开张啦！第一位也是唯一一位客户，买走了两串手串" (*We finally made a sale yesterday! Our first big customer, and only customer, in seven days bought two bracelets*). This indicates that it was not until the seventh day of trading that any transaction occurred. Kirin's booth used handwritten signage and tablecloths to create a welcoming atmosphere (see Figure 8c), but the overall visual presentation lacked consistency and strong brand identity seen in cases like MUSHROOM (see Figure 8a). There were no clearly defined logos, custom packaging, or coordinated visual elements that could reinforce a distinctive brand presence. Compared to vendors with established visual strategies and social media capital, Kirin's case highlights the structural barriers faced by grassroots participants. In a market environment shaped by visual curation and social media visibility, such vendors often experience symbolic participation, being physically present but remaining economically or socially marginalised.

These examples highlight a contradiction between the object of participation (achieving visibility and sales) and the available tools and rules, resulting in what we have termed *symbolic participation*: being physically present but remaining economically or socially marginalised (see Figure 9). Yet contradictions may also lead vendors to adapt. Some shift their object away from commercial goals toward creative expression, using the curation of their booth as a means of personal storytelling or identity performance. While these actions do not remove deeper barriers, they offer practical ways for vendors to keep participating on their own terms.
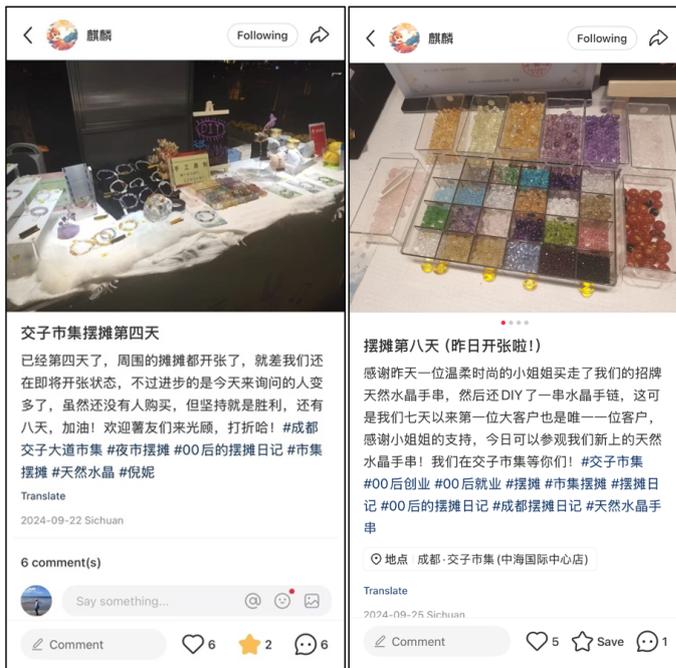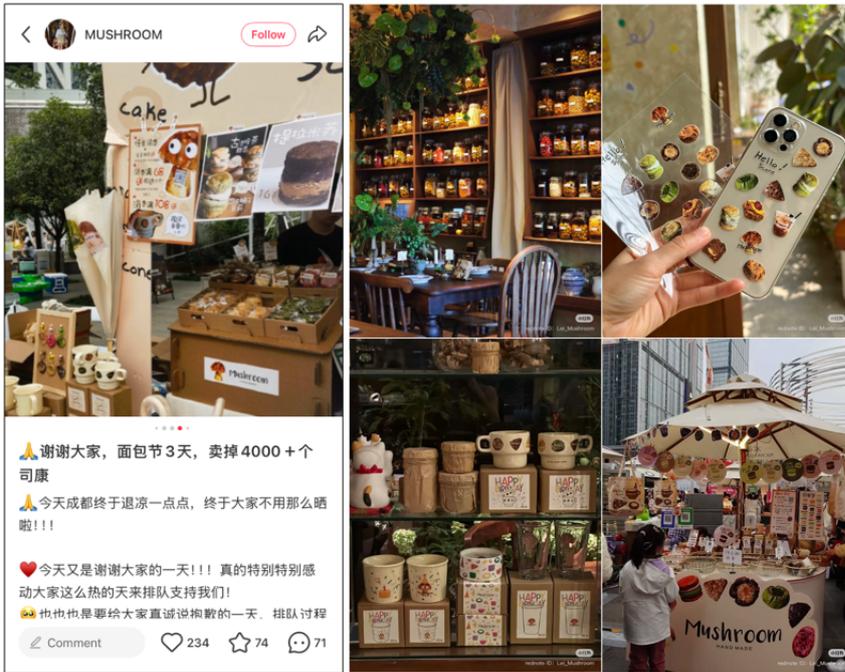
Figure 8. Consumer-generated RedNote content related to Jiaozi Market.
(a) Source: Collected by the author, from RedNote post by @MUSHROOM, 2024.
(b) Source: Screenshot by the author, from RedNote post by @MUSHROOM, 2024.
(c) Source: Screenshot by the author, from RedNote post by @麒麟, 2024.
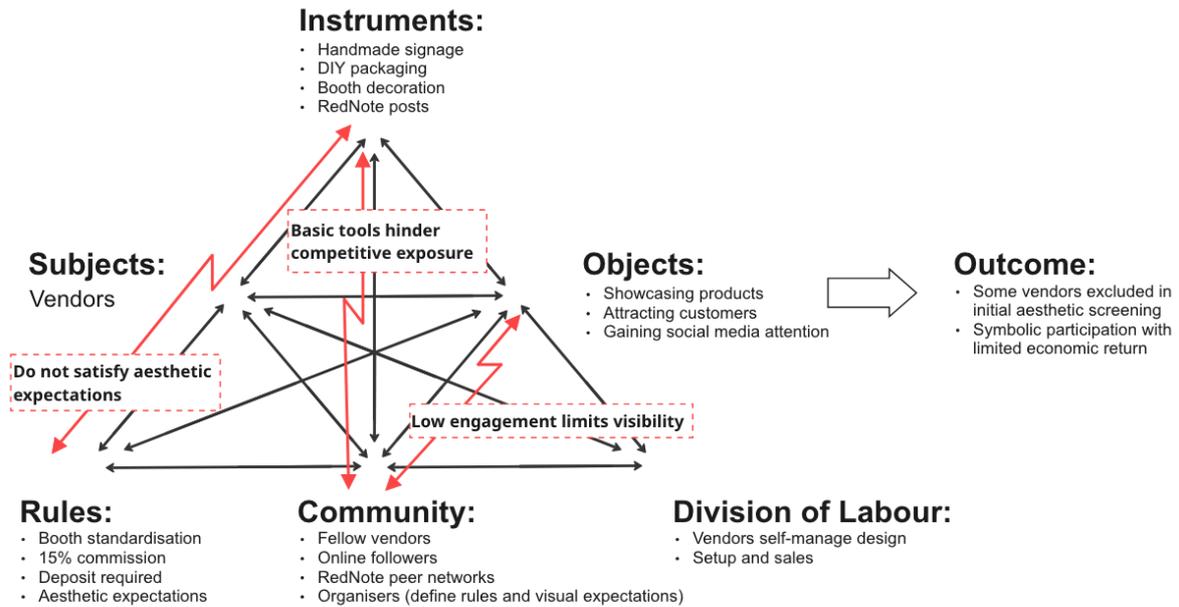*(d) Source: Screenshot by the author, from RedNote post by @麒麟, 2024.*

Instruments:
- Handmade signage
- DIY packaging
- Booth decoration
- RedNote posts

Basic tools hinder competitive exposure

Subjects:
Vendors

Objects:
- Showcasing products
- Attracting customers
- Gaining social media attention

Outcome:
- Some vendors excluded in initial aesthetic screening
- Symbolic participation with limited economic return

Do not satisfy aesthetic expectations

Low engagement limits visibility

Rules:
- Booth standardisation
- 15% commission
- Deposit required
- Aesthetic expectations

Community:
- Fellow vendors
- Online followers
- RedNote peer networks
- Organisers (define rules and visual expectations)

Division of Labour:
- Vendors self-manage design
- Setup and sales

Figure 9. Contradictions in the Vendor Activity System at Jiaozi Market. Adapted from Engeström's Activity Theory Model (2001).

4.3   Consumer Activity System

The consumer Activity System at Jiaozi Market (see Figure 10) is shaped by social engagement, interest in trying food, and visual attraction. Consumers interact through tools such as influencer posts, platform functions like likes and comments, and booth visuals. In this system, the object of activity refers to what consumers seem to do, visiting stalls, taking photos, trying food, and enjoying the market. However, their deeper motives are different. Many are motivated by a desire to be seen, to connect with others, or to share enjoyable experiences online.
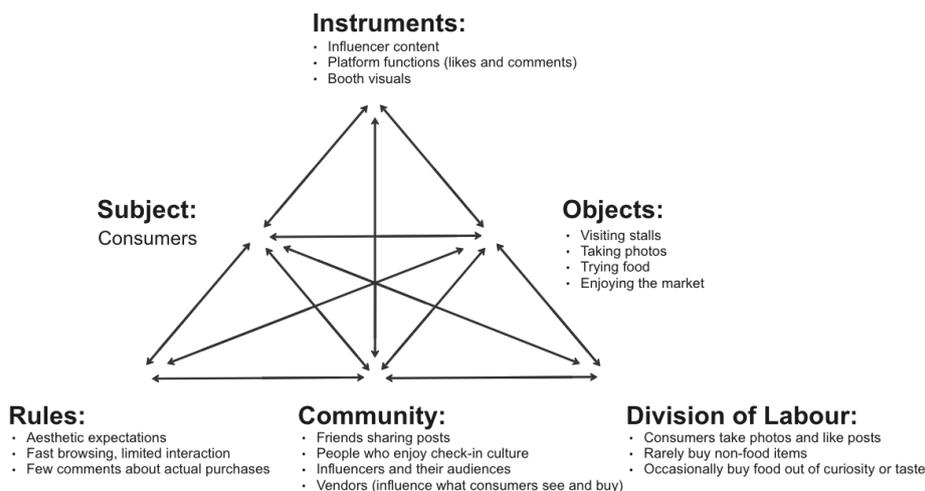

Instruments:
- Influencer content
- Platform functions (likes and comments)
- Booth visuals

Subject:
Consumers

Objects:
- Visiting stalls
- Taking photos
- Trying food
- Enjoying the market

Rules:
- Aesthetic expectations
- Fast browsing, limited interaction
- Few comments about actual purchases

Community:
- Friends sharing posts
- People who enjoy check-in culture
- Influencers and their audiences
- Vendors (influence what consumers see and buy)

Division of Labour:
- Consumers take photos and like posts
- Rarely buy non-food items
- Occasionally buy food out of curiosity or taste

Figure 10. Activity System of Consumer at Jiaozi Market. Adapted from Engeström's Activity Theory Model (2001).

This gap between motive and object appears in superficial consumer engagement. Many RedNote users post comments like "几点开始营业" (*What time does it open?*) or "看起来很好玩" (*It looks fantastic*) without referring to specific purchases (see Figure 11a). A keyword search shows that most content is created by influencers, with few contributions from everyday visitors. This points to a structural contradiction: users are present digitally but appear to rarely engage materially with vendors or products. Participation remains symbolically focused on capturing attractive visuals rather than supporting local entrepreneurship.

Some exceptions exist. A RedNote post by 云云学法律 (Yunyun Studies Law) (2024) (see Figure 11b), which provides detailed feedback on food items such as "土耳其咖啡" (*Turkish coffee*) and "烟熏鸡烤土豆" (*smoked chicken stuffed potatoes*). The post comments on pricing, flavour, and vendor interaction, noting, for instance, that the coffee was bitter and that "重在体验" (*It's more about the experience*). The same post also observes that "晚上很热闹，氛围很足" (*It's lively at night with great atmosphere*), reinforcing the image of Jiaozi Market as a space of leisure and atmosphere rather than commerce. This suggests alignment between motive and object through meaningful cultural and experiential engagement, but such examples are rare within the largely visually driven environment.

Organiser-led aesthetics further reinforce this symbolic pattern. A RedNote post by 青城 (Qingcheng) (2024) (see Figure 11c) shows booths unified by red canopies and traditional banners referencing local distilleries. These elements are designed by organisers, creating a strong cultural theme but limiting vendors' visual autonomy. While this enhances market branding and attracts consumer attention, it restricts individual expression and may weaken consumer–vendor interactions.

Figure 11. Consumer perspectives on the atmosphere and aesthetics of Jiaozi Market.
(a) Source: Screenshot by the author, from RedNote post by @Danoak, 2024.
(b) Source: Screenshot by the author, from RedNote post by @云云学法律, 2024.
(c) Source: Screenshot by the author, from RedNote post by @青城, 2024.

As shown in the contradictions in the organiser's Activity System (see Figure 12), the consumer activity system reveals a structural tension: while vendors rely on transactions, consumer participation is increasingly shaped by platform dynamics, visual orientation, and symbolic engagement. Influencer content and aesthetic expectations guide users toward surface-level actions such as taking photos or browsing, rather than purchasing. As a result, consumers may generate traffic without meaningful economic interaction. Although such cases are rare, reflective posts like the one by "云云学法律" (2024) (see Figure 11b), which comments on pricing, flavour, and interaction, suggest a potential shift toward deeper engagement. If organisers support this through storytelling, interactive booths, or feedback mechanisms, symbolic engagement could gradually evolve into more substantial forms of participation. This tension highlights both the limits of visually driven consumption and opportunities to enhance the market experience through more reciprocal consumer–vendor interaction.
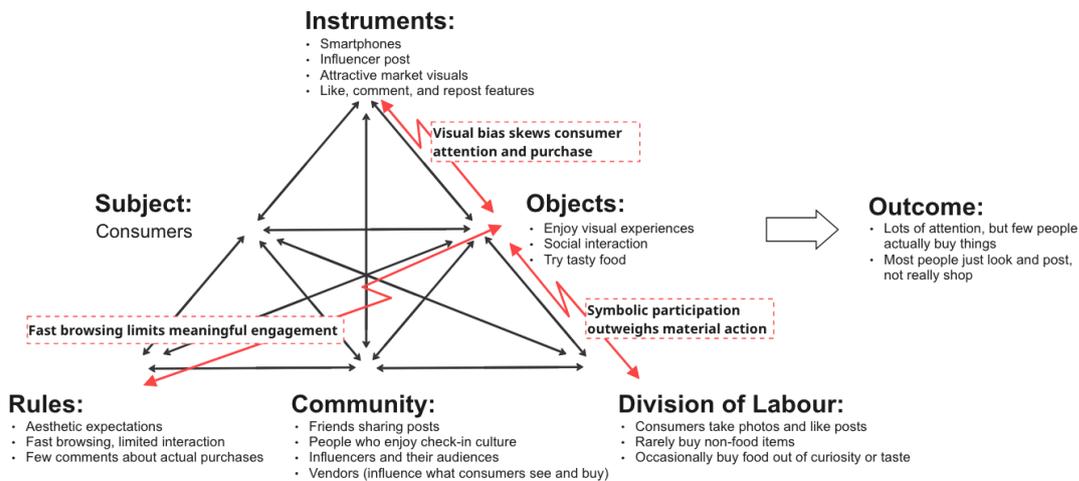

Figure 12. Contradictions in the Consumer Activity System at Jiaozi Market. Adapted from Engeström's Activity Theory Model (2001).

4.4 Cross-system interaction

In addition to internal tensions within each Activity System, cross-system contradictions emerge across organisers, vendors, and consumers at Jiaozi Market (see Figure 13). Although all three groups converge around the shared object of visibility via visual strategy, influencer content, and photogenic engagement, their motives and objects differ, creating structural misalignments that undermine sustainable interaction.
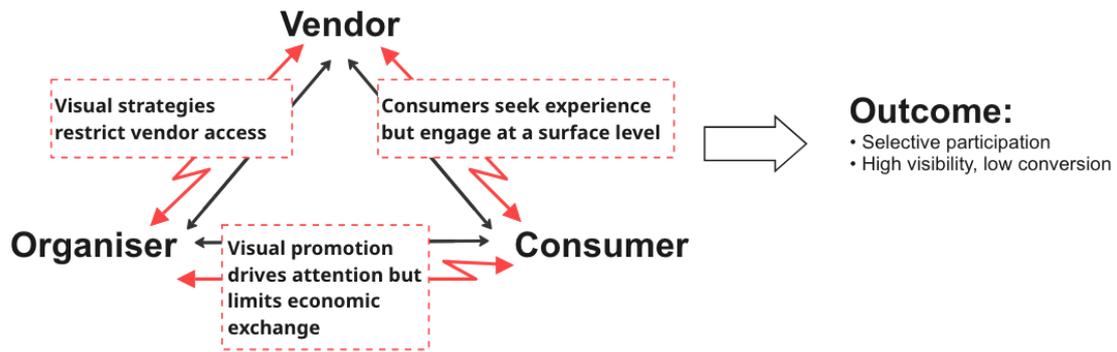
Figure 13. Cross-System Contradictions among Organisers, Vendors, and Consumers at Jiaozi Market. Adapted from Engeström's third-generation Activity Theory model (2001).

For organisers, visibility is the object of activity. It is pursued through aesthetically curated booth design, aesthetic selection criteria, and influencer collaboration. Their deeper motive is to establish Jiaozi Market as a recognisable cultural landmark and to attract sustained public attention. This visual branding strategy privileges vendors who meet predefined aesthetic standards, which often excludes grassroots participants without design experience or branding resources.

For vendors, the object is also visibility, including showcasing products, attracting customers, and gaining online attention. However, their motives often focus on income generation, brand development, or the expression of personal identity. The curated aesthetic space, shaped by the organisers' rules and platform dynamics, frequently limits their ability to achieve these goals. Vendors with minimal design resources or social capital may struggle to convert visibility into meaningful outcomes, resulting in symbolic participation without economic return.

Consumers also centre their activities around visual elements by taking photos, browsing booths, and engaging with the market atmosphere. Their motives are usually not economic but rather social or experiential. They seek to be seen, to connect, or to record a lifestyle moment. As a result, their engagement remains surface-level and seldom aligns with the commercial needs of vendors or the branding intentions of organisers.

These cross-system contradictions result in a paradox: while the object of visibility is pursued by all actors, mismatched motives prevent meaningful alignment. The market becomes a space of high symbolic engagement but low material exchange, where curated participation is rewarded over inclusive or sustainable interaction. This highlights a deeper issue in place branding: when visibility dominates, structural inequalities may be reinforced rather than reduced. Yet such contradictions also offer a chance to rethink the system. Recognising the gaps between motives and objects could lead to more inclusive practices, where grassroots vendors gain visibility without strict aesthetic limits, and consumers engage in more meaningful ways. In this sense, contradictions not only expose problems but also point to possibilities for more balanced and equitable place branding.

5   Conclusion and future development

This study applied Activity System Modelling (Engeström, 2001) to analyse the stakeholder dynamics at Jiaozi Market in Chengdu, making use of digital ethnographic data from RedNote and WeChat Official Accounts. By mapping the intersecting activity systems of organisers, vendors, and consumers, the study revealed how visual strategies, central to the market's place branding efforts, produce both alignment and contradiction.

Organisers, particularly Ruili Culture, pursue visibility as the object of activity through photogenic booth design, aesthetic selection criteria, and influencer collaborations. While this strategy constructs a recognisable and branded cultural atmosphere, it often excludes grassroots vendors who lack design experience or branding resources. Vendors also seek visibility through product display and online attention, but their underlying motives focus on income generation, brand development, and self-expression. Organiser-led aesthetic rules and platform dynamics limit their ability to fulfil these goals, resulting in symbolic participation rather than meaningful returns. Consumers structure their engagement around visibility as well, centring on photography, ambience, and social sharing rather than purchase. Although some visitors interact with food vendors, such behaviours tend to be secondary. As a result, consumers help amplify market visibility but rarely contribute to economic sustainability.

These findings reveal a structural misalignment across stakeholder systems. Organisers prioritise brand consistency; vendors pursue livelihood and creative recognition, and consumers seek experiential and symbolic engagement. The marketplace privileges surface-level aesthetics over inclusive participation or entrepreneurial viability. While visual branding has helped attract attention, the deeper experiential value and cultural richness that define authentic marketplace participation remain underdeveloped. Addressing this gap will be essential for building more inclusive co-creation strategies in the future.

This study contributes to co-creation theory and practice by showing how branding-led visual strategies and digital engagement mechanisms can restrict agency and reinforce unequal participation. Using Activity System Modelling, it also demonstrates how designers can identify hidden contradictions within multi-stakeholder systems. This method shifts the view of co-design from simply inviting participation to actively examining how tools, rules, and roles shape what participation means in practice. It helps designers act as facilitators who balance institutional structures with local voices, and supports more inclusive, flexible, and system-aware co-creation practices.

In the next phase of this research, we will work with organisers, vendors, and consumers to co-design a shared identity and place branding strategy that bridges their diverse motivations. This will involve revisiting aesthetic and operational rules, strengthening support for small-scale vendors, and fostering more reciprocal and substantial consumer engagement. These contradictions not only reveal underlying tensions but also offer opportunities to transform creative marketplaces into more inclusive, participatory, and sustainable co-creation environments.

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