

Research on the Synergistic Mechanism of Railway Passenger Service Quality Improvement from the Perspective of Brand Leadership

—A Case Study of the “Yuecai” EMU Service Brand

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the in-depth advancement of the “Transportation Power” strategy and the increasingly fierce competition in the comprehensive transportation system, railway passenger transportation is undergoing a critical transformation from “scale expansion” to “quality revolution”, and the coordinated development of service brands and service quality has become a core proposition for the high-quality development of the industry. Based on the brand positioning theory and service brand ecosystem theory, this paper takes the “Yuecai” EMU service brand of China Railway Guangzhou Bureau Group Co., Ltd. as a typical case, Integrates 5166 pieces of passenger survey data, complaint data fed back by the 12,306 background system, and authoritative third-party industry reports, constructs and empirically tests a synergistic analysis framework of “brand-driven-service quality improvement-value feedback”, and systematically deconstructs the internal mechanism of four core strategies: brand positioning, concept construction, touchpoint management, and capability reshaping. By adopting scientific methods such as setting control groups and stripping confounding variables, the study effectively avoids potential biases in commissioned research. The results show that the construction of the “Yuecai” brand not only increased the satisfaction rate of EMU crew services from 93.3% to 97.96% and the accuracy rate of passenger brand recognition from 67% to 83%, but also made a significant incremental contribution to the 7.9% growth rate of passenger traffic and 7.4% growth rate of passenger transport revenue of Guangzhou Railway Group in 2024 after excluding external interference factors. This study fills the theoretical gap in the synergistic

mechanism of “brand-service” in the field of railway passenger transportation and provides a replicable theoretical paradigm and practical path for the service quality upgrading of the industry.

Keywords

Railway Passenger Transportation, Service Brand, Service Quality Improvement, Synergistic Mechanism, “Yuecai” Brand

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

China’s railway operating mileage has exceeded 170,000 kilometers, with high-speed railway mileage ranking first in the world, becoming the core infrastructure supporting the “Transportation Power” strategy [1]. Driven by the superposition of multiple national strategies and market demands, railway passenger transportation services are facing comprehensive transformation demands, and the coordinated development of brand construction and service quality improvement has become an inevitable choice for high-quality development.

1.1.1. Requirements for High-Quality Development of Railway Passenger Services under the Transportation Power Strategy

Under the guidance of the Transportation Power strategy, railway passenger transportation needs to complete the transformation from traditional “transportation function supply” to “service brand creation”, break through the single attribute of “only displacement guarantee”, and extend to multiple value dimensions of “quality, intelligence, personalization, and culturalization”. As a transportation hub connecting Guangdong, Hunan, and Hainan provinces, China Railway Guangzhou Bureau Group Co., Ltd. (hereinafter referred to as “Guangzhou Railway Group”) sees the construction of its passenger service brand not only as an internal demand for its own quality and efficiency improvement, but also as a key practical carrier for the implementation of the Transportation Power strategy in South China. It is urgent to realize the leap from “scale leadership” to “quality benchmark” through the ecological construction and standardized operation of the brand.

1.1.2. Deployment of the Special Action for Improving Passenger Service Quality by China State Railway Group

China State Railway Group issued the *Special Action Plan for Improving Passenger Service Quality*, clearly putting forward the core deployment of “branding, standardization, and integration”, requiring the establishment of passenger service brands with “outstanding facility capacity, sound network coverage, efficient resource integration, standardized operation services, and smooth institutional mechanisms” across the railway network, and forming replicable and promotable experiences and practices [2]. The plan focuses on four major tasks: “strengthening passenger transportation foundations, filling service shortcomings, improving

work quality, and stimulating synergistic efforts”, emphasizes the construction of an “integrated railway passenger transportation service system” and puts forward rigid requirements for brand top-level design, unified service standards, and resource integration efficiency. The “Ucai” service brand, launched by Guangzhou Railway Group in the early stage, as the core carrier of regional passenger services, needs to strictly align with the deployment of the special action, solve problems such as fragmented brand construction and difficulty in implementing standardization, and build a benchmark passenger service brand across the railway network.

1.1.3. Travel Service Demands of Passengers in Regional Coordinated Development

As a region where three major national strategies overlap, namely the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, the Yangtze River Economic Belt, and the Hainan Free Trade Port, the accelerated regional coordinated development in Guangdong, Hunan, and Hainan provinces has promoted the expansion of the passenger service field and the deepening of market segmentation [3]. Passengers’ travel demands have upgraded from basic displacement of “just being able to travel” to comprehensive experience demands of “traveling comfortably, conveniently, and with quality”. However, the current railway passenger transportation services still have a structural contradiction of “being dominated by universal supply and lacking differentiated services”, making it difficult to accurately match the personalized needs of diverse passenger groups. In 2023, Guangzhou Railway Group commissioned Guangzhou Railway Polytechnic to lead the full-process design and operation management of the “Yuecai” EMU service sub-brand, forming a coupled model of brand construction and service quality improvement through school-enterprise collaboration.

It should be specially noted that this study has the potential for a correlation between the entrusting subject and the project implementation subject. To ensure the academic objectivity of the research, the research team has adopted multiple means, such as introducing independent third-party data, supplementing the real difficulties in the project implementation stage, and setting up external control groups to minimize confirmation bias.

1.2. Research Status and Deficiencies

In existing research, relevant achievements in railway passenger transportation services mostly focus on single dimensions such as process optimization and intelligent technology application [4], while studies in the field of service brands are mostly concentrated in the catering and retail industries, with insufficient adaptability analysis for quasi-public service fields such as railways [5]. At the same time, existing research has not deeply explored the brand construction path under the dual drive of policy orientation and regional demand, and has failed to fully reveal the internal logic of “strategic requirements-brand construction-service quality improvement-value transformation”. Based on this, this paper takes the “Yuecai”

brand as a case to systematically analyze the synergistic path of brand leadership and service quality improvement, fill the gap in the research on “brand-service” synergy in the field of railway passenger transportation, and provide practical reference for the high-quality development of the industry.

1.3. Theoretical Support

This paper selects the brand positioning theory and service brand ecosystem theory as the core theoretical supports, and the subsequent analysis of brand construction strategies and synergistic paths will echo the core of the two theories to achieve deep coupling between theoretical logic and practical paths.

The brand positioning theory, proposed by Al Ries and Jack Trout in 1969, whose core lies in establishing a unique, clear, and irreplaceable position for the brand in the fiercely competitive market environment by accurately insighting into the mental needs of the target audience, helping the brand quickly occupy user cognition by simplifying information transmission and focusing on core value differences [6]. This theory provides key logic for the “Yuecai” brand to solve the problems of vague positioning and insufficient differentiation of traditional passenger transport brands, guiding the brand to build its core positioning around “passenger experience orientation”, which is different from the traditional cognitive label of “function priority” in the industry.

The service brand ecosystem theory, developed by scholars such as Zhou Zhimin on the basis of ecosystem theory, holds that a service brand is not an isolated individual, but a dynamic balance system composed of multiple stakeholders such as brand subjects, consumers, employees, partners, and institutional environments. The generation and appreciation of brand value depend on the synergistic interaction and resource integration of various elements in the system [7]. This theory provides an important basis for the “Yuecai” brand to build a brand co-branding operation model, construct a “1 + 7” training system, and form a “brand-service-value” closed loop, promoting the brand from a single image shaping to a full-chain ecological operation and realizing value co-creation among all participating subjects.

2. Existing Problems in Railway Passenger Service Brand Construction—Based on the Practical Observation of Guangzhou Railway Group

2.1. Vague Brand Positioning and Lack of Differentiated Advantages

The “Guangtie Ucai” passenger service brand, launched by Guangzhou Railway Group in 2019, failed to clearly convey its core value due to the lack of systematic market research and passenger demand analysis. The brand construction of each passenger station section shows the characteristics of “short-termization” and “fragmentation”, with inconsistent service standards and similar forms. For example, the difference between the business class service process and the economy

class service process in some stations is insufficient, failing to form a differentiated positioning matching passenger needs, which restricts the improvement of brand awareness.

2.2. Weak Brand Communication and Room for Improvement in Recognition

The traditional brand communication of railway enterprises is mainly based on offline scene display, lacking an integrated online and offline communication system. According to the internal survey data of Guangzhou Railway Group, only 67% of passengers can accurately identify the brand affiliation of the EMU crew they take; the communication content mostly focuses on hardware facility upgrading, with insufficient transmission of service concepts and cultural connotations, making it difficult to form deep brand memory.

2.3. Disconnection between Brand and Service and Lack of Synergistic Mechanism

Traditional brand construction is limited to “image shaping” and lacks systematic linkage with service quality improvement. For example, during the promotion of the “Guangtie Ucai” brand, although a unified visual identity was designed, the synchronous upgrading of service standards and personnel training were not supported, resulting in a gap between “brand slogans” and “actual services”, and failing to form a positive cycle of “brand leading service and service feeding back brand”.

3. Core Construction Strategies of the “Yuecai” EMU Service Brand

3.1. Constructing the “Golden Triangle” Model to Anchor the Underlying Logic of the Brand

To address the problem of “fragmentation” in traditional passenger transport brand construction, relying on the brand positioning theory, the university and enterprise have jointly constructed a “Golden Triangle” model for EMU service brand construction, forming a closed-loop analysis framework with “passenger experience as the orientation, continuous improvement as the path, and benefit enhancement as the goal”. The theoretical connotation and practical boundary of its core elements are defined as follows:

3.1.1. Theoretical Origin and Practical Interpretation of the Core Elements of the Model

1) Passenger experience as the orientation: This element is deeply in line with the core logic of “mind occupation” in the brand positioning theory, covering the full journey service touchpoints of ticketing, waiting, riding, and alighting, and providing differentiated services for segmented passenger groups such as business travel, cross-border travel, and elderly travel. For example, the exclusive butler service of “Yuexiang Jingganghu” was created for cross-border sleeper EMU pas-

sengers and the convenient assistance service for elderly passengers.

2) Continuous improvement as the path: This path follows the core principle of “systematic synergistic value increment” in the service brand ecosystem theory, establishing a dynamic closed-loop mechanism of “training iteration-complaint rectification-standard upgrading”. For instance, based on the pain point of using business class charging interfaces reflected by passengers in 2024, a regular inspection process for charging facilities was added to realize the dynamic optimization of service capabilities.

3) Benefit enhancement as the goal: This goal takes into account both passenger experience benefits and enterprise economic benefits. The former is measured by perceptual indicators such as passenger satisfaction and service response speed, while the latter is referenced by operational indicators such as passenger traffic and passenger transport revenue. The two form a value linkage chain of “experience optimization → reputation accumulation → benefit growth → resource feedback → experience re-upgrading”.

3.1.2. Synergistic Mechanism of the Closed-Loop Operation of the Model

Through the closed-loop design of “goal guidance-path support-result feedback”, the “Golden Triangle” model realizes the organic linkage of the three core elements: on the passenger side, it forms a cognitive closed loop of “experience optimization → brand cognition strengthening → brand loyalty improvement”; on the employee side, it constructs a capability closed loop of “training empowerment → service capability improvement → service quality stability”; on the enterprise side, it achieves a value closed loop of “brand value increment → market benefit growth → service resource feedback”, effectively solving the industry problem of weak synergy in traditional railway brand construction.

3.2. Building a “Four-in-One” Concept System to Convey Brand Value

3.2.1. Role Reconstruction: From “Service Provider” to “Experience Designer”

Relying on the brand positioning theory, reconstruct the role cognition of EMU crew members, positioning them as “designers and guarantors of passengers’ pleasant travel experience”, focusing on three dimensions: emotional connection, personalized customization, and cultural integration. For example, aiming at the needs of cross-border sleeper EMU passengers, design the “Yuexiang Jingganghu” carriage butler service, providing value-added services such as bedding customization and catering reservation, and promoting the upgrading of railway passenger transportation services from “functional supply” to “emotional value creation”.

3.2.2. Cultivating Value: Conveying Brand Concepts Through the Whole Chain

To realize the full-chain penetration of brand concepts, relying on the core element of “employee value recognition” in the service brand ecosystem theory, this study constructs a “four-in-one” cultivation mechanism of “internalizing in the

mind-solidifying in the system-externalizing in behavior-materializing in the environment”, clarifies the “four joys” core value proposition of “joy of travel experience, joy of efficient collaboration, joy of pursuing quality, and joy of pioneering innovation” and refines its practical carriers. Specifically, the “joy of travel experience” includes measures such as “one-stop” station entry guidance for business class passengers, convenient assistance for elderly passengers, and exclusive butler service for cross-border sleeper EMU passengers to accurately implement the travel experience value; the “joy of efficient collaboration” includes mechanisms such as real-time information linkage between crew teams and stations, cross-post rapid response to emergencies, and regular school-enterprise collaborative training to practice the efficient collaboration value; the “joy of pursuing quality” takes 118 EMU crew etiquette norms, 95% professional training coverage of crew members, and 1.5-minute service response time as quantitative indicators to consolidate the quality foundation; the “joy of pioneering innovation” strengthens the brand’s internationalization and differentiated recognition by creating a “mobile star hotel” co-branded sleeper EMU service and building a Chinese-English bilingual service system (brand slogan: Better Service Better Trip). At the same time, the four value dimensions are incorporated into the staff star rating system to ensure that the brand concept is effectively transformed into service effectiveness. To ensure the internal penetration of the brand concept, the research team constructed a systematic brand special training system during the penetration stage. In 2023, a total of 126 special training sessions were completed, covering 12,000 crew members with brand concepts and service skills, providing a sound organizational guarantee for value cultivation.

3.3. Full-Scenario Touchpoint Management to Strengthen Brand Visual Recognition

Based on the logic of “touchpoint value co-creation” in the service brand ecosystem theory, the core visual element is extracted from China Railway’s “CR” logo, integrating the regional cultural connotation of “Yunshan Zhushui, Guangtie Warmth”, and designing a brand visual symbol with high recognition and memory points. The logo has been fully applied to the service supplies of 1050 EMU trains operated by Guangzhou Railway Group and the business class service supplies of 11 stations under its jurisdiction, realizing the penetration of brand symbols in the full journey service touchpoints of “ticketing-waiting-riding-alighting”, constructing an integrated brand cognition system of “visual perception-service experience”, and effectively solving the industry pain point of low recognition of traditional railway brands.

3.4. Establishing the “1 + 7” Training System to Consolidate the Foundation of Service Capabilities

Following the core principle of “partner resource integration” in the service brand ecosystem theory, a matrix training system of “1 core training plan + 7 special course modules” for passenger transport positions is built. The exclusive training

textbook “*Yuecai*” *EMU Train Service Etiquette* has been compiled. 10 standard course packages, such as “service etiquette” and “emergency response,” are developed, 58 micro-course videos are recorded and embedded in the textbook through QR codes, creating an online and offline three-dimensional learning space. From 2023 to 2024, the professional training coverage rate of EMU crew members of the whole group reached 95%, and the service standard compliance rate increased by 30% compared with that before brand construction, providing a solid talent capability support for the sustainable operation of the brand.

4. Synergistic Implementation Path of Brand Leadership and Service Quality Improvement

4.1. Brand Leadership: Promoting the Standardized Upgrading of Service Standards

Guided by the core concept of the “Yuecai” brand, the *Code of Practice for EMU Train Service Etiquette of Guangzhou Railway Group* was issued for the first time across the railway network. The standard covers 7 major categories and 118 quantifiable service norms, including appearance and bearing, makeup and hairstyle, uniforms and accessories, and health management, transforming abstract brand concepts into specific and assessable service behavior criteria. After the implementation of this standard, the complaint rate of EMU crew services decreased by 4.7%, and this data has been cross-verified by the public complaint data of the official 12306 platform, with objective authenticity.

4.2. Brand Empowerment: Constructing a Dual System of Staff Capability and Incentives

4.2.1. Star Rating Linked with Salary to Stimulate Service Motivation

The *Measures for the Star Rating Management of EMU Service Quality of Guangzhou Railway Group* was formulated and issued, establishing a “1-5 star” and “Yuecai Star” evaluation system around 8 dimensions, such as political quality, professional skills, and service quality. Quarterly evaluations are conducted through an information system, badges are awarded, and graded rewards are given according to the star level, and the evaluation results are directly linked to staff regularization, promotion, and appointment to cadres. In 2024, 4982 staff of the whole group participated in the evaluation, with a total of 360 five-star train conductors and 735 five-star train attendants. The service enthusiasm of front-line staff has been significantly improved, and the active service rate has increased by 25% compared with that before brand construction, realizing the deep binding of brand concepts and staff personal interests.

4.2.2. Integrating Vocational Skills Competitions with Career Development to Broaden Growth Channels

Jointly with industry competent departments, the Guangdong Provincial Railway Industry Train Attendant Vocational Skills Competition was held, innovatively adding brand-adaptive assessment modules such as “service etiquette literacy”

and “on-site emergency response”, and linking competition results with career promotion channels. In the 2024 competition, 50% of the 12 award winners were dispatched workers, and 41.11% of the merit award winners were dispatched workers, providing a career growth platform for grass-roots staff and promoting the deep integration of brand service standards and rules and regulations.

4.3. Service Feedback: Realizing the In-depth Expansion of Brand Value

4.3.1. Materializing Brand Commitments Through Service Quality Improvement

Service quality monitoring data shows that after the construction of the “Yuecai” brand, the satisfaction rate of EMU crew services increased from 93.3% to 97.96%, and the satisfaction rate of business class services reached 99%, among which the satisfaction rate of crew image was 99.69% and the satisfaction rate of service response speed was 99.59%; the average service response time was shortened from 3 minutes to 1.5 minutes, and the efficiency of handling passenger affairs was increased by 40%, realizing the effective transformation of the brand’s commitment of “customer-centric”.

4.3.2. Building Brand Competitive Advantages through Differentiated Services

Based on the core logic of “cross-subject value co-creation” in the service brand ecosystem theory, an innovative “brand co-branding operation” model is explored to build a “mobile star hotel” service standard system for “Fuxinghao” intelligent sleeper EMU trains. Since October 2024, cross-border sleeper EMU trains have operated 330 trips, carrying 221,000 passengers, significantly higher than the industry average, successfully establishing a differentiated brand competitive advantage.

5. Implementation Effectiveness and Industry Enlightenment of the Synergistic Mechanism

5.1. Verification of Implementation Effectiveness

5.1.1. Dual Improvement of Service Quality and Brand Influence

Core monitoring indicators show that key indicators such as EMU service satisfaction rate, active service rate of front-line staff, and passenger affairs handling efficiency of Guangzhou Railway Group are among the top in the railway network [8]. The accuracy rate of passengers’ recognition of the “Yuecai” brand increased from 67% to 83%. The above data have been cross-verified by the passenger service quality survey report of Guangzhou Railway Group issued by a third-party organization, effectively excluding the singularity bias of internal survey data.

5.1.2. Verification of the Causal Relationship of Market Benefits

In 2024, the passenger traffic of Guangzhou Railway Group reached 606 million person-times (a year-on-year increase of 7.9%), and the passenger transport revenue reached 83.23 billion yuan (a year-on-year increase of 7.4%), with operating

indicators ranking among the top in the railway network. To strip off the interference of confounding variables such as post-pandemic travel recovery and regional economic growth, this study adopts a multi-dimensional verification method: by selecting an inland railway bureau that has not implemented similar brand quality improvement strategies as a control group for horizontal comparison, its year-on-year growth rates of passenger traffic and passenger transport revenue in 2024 were 4.2% and 3.8% respectively, significantly lower than those of Guangzhou Railway Group, highlighting the incremental contribution of brand initiatives; by retrieving data from 2019 to 2023 for vertical stripping in the time dimension, it was found that the growth rate of passenger traffic in the post-pandemic recovery period in 2023 reached 12.1%, and fell back to 7.9% in 2024, excluding the leading influence of recovery dividends; at the same time, it was verified that Guangzhou Railway Group did not adjust the fares of core lines and no large-scale infrastructure was completed and put into use in 2024, further weakening other interference factors. Based on the comprehensive verification results, the construction of the “Yuecai” brand contributed about 55% to the growth of passenger traffic and revenue of Guangzhou Railway Group in 2024, realizing the effective transformation of brand value into market economic benefits.

5.2. Industry Enlightenment

5.2.1. Accurate Brand Positioning is the Logical Basis for Synergistic Development

Railway passenger transport enterprises need to clarify the core brand value based on systematic market research and passenger group demand analysis, and at the same time, integrate brand positioning into the whole process of service standard formulation and personnel training implementation to achieve a high degree of unity between “brand cognition” and “service practice”; for inland railway enterprises, they can weaken the cross-border high-end service module and strengthen the universal brand service for county passenger flow to adapt to the core needs of regional passenger groups.

5.2.2. Mechanism Innovation Is the Key Support for Synergistic Development

It is necessary to establish a deep linkage mechanism between brand construction and service quality improvement, such as the “star rating-salary incentive” linkage mechanism and the “skills competition-career development” empowerment mechanism, to stimulate staff participation enthusiasm through system design and avoid the disconnection between “brand and service”.

5.2.3. Differentiation Is the Core of Synergy

It is necessary to design unique service products combined with regional culture and passenger segmentation needs, such as the cross-border sleeper butler service of Guangzhou Railway Group, to build competitive advantages through experience differentiation and realize the continuous expansion and precipitation of brand value [9].

6. Conclusion and Prospect

6.1. Research Conclusion

Based on the brand positioning theory and service brand ecosystem theory, this paper takes the “Yuecai” EMU service brand as a research case and systematically verifies the effectiveness of the “brand-driven-service quality improvement-value feedback” synergistic mechanism in the field of railway passenger transportation. The research shows that by anchoring the underlying logic of brand construction through the “Golden Triangle” model, conveying the core brand value through the “four-in-one” mechanism, strengthening brand cognition through full-scenario touchpoint management, and ensuring service implementation through the dual empowerment of capability and incentive systems, the deep synergy between brand construction and service quality improvement can be realized, which can not only significantly improve passengers’ travel experience and brand influence, but also be effectively transformed into the enterprise’s market operation benefits.

6.2. Research Limitations

This study has three limitations: first, the limitation of the case samples. The research is based on a single case of a state-owned railway group, and its government-enterprise collaborative brand construction model relies on policy resources and the organizational structure of state-owned enterprises, which cannot be directly adapted to the market-oriented operation logic of local railways; second, the limitation of regional scenarios. The Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area has significant characteristics of cross-border passenger flow and high-end business passenger flow, and the adaptability of the high-end customized service strategy of the “Yuecai” brand in inland areas dominated by universal passenger transport needs still needs to be further verified; third, the limitation of the time cycle. The effect of brand construction only covers short-term monitoring data from 2023 to 2024, and the long-term brand loyalty cultivation effect and brand strategy iteration and optimization path still need to be continuously tracked and studied.

6.3. Future Prospect

Future research can further expand the scope of case samples and compare the synergistic models of service brands of different railway bureaus; at the same time, combined with the trend of digital transformation, explore the application paths of artificial intelligence, big data and other technologies in brand communication and personalized service customization, and promote the construction of railway passenger transport service brands towards the direction of “intelligence, precision and ecology”.

Data Source

- 1) 2024 Annual Work Report of the Passenger Transport Department of China

Railway Guangzhou Bureau Group Co., Ltd.

2) 2024 Training Summary Report of EMU Train Conductors for Wuhan-Guangzhou Speed-up of the Passenger Transport Department of China Railway Guangzhou Bureau Group Co., Ltd.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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