

# A comparative study of brand design strategies for the Coachella and Strawberry Music Festivals from the perspective of the ritual view of communication

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**Abstract.** Grounded in James W. Carey's "ritual view of communication", this study conceptualizes music festivals as modern cultural rituals. By integrating brand semiotics with interaction ritual chain theory, it constructs an analytical framework encompassing four dimensions—symbols, space, interaction, and culture—to conduct a systematic comparison between the American Coachella Music Festival and China's Strawberry Music Festival. The findings indicate that Coachella, through the use of classic symbols, a fixed sacred venue, and decentralized interaction, constructs a "utopia of belief" characterized by spiritual transcendence. In contrast, the Strawberry Music Festival employs fluid symbols, urban touring spaces, and gamified interactions to create a "youth identity box" that caters to the identity performance and social needs of Generation Z. From the perspective of ritualized construction, this study distills a framework of brand design strategies aimed at balancing cultural depth with market reach, offering both theoretical reference and practical insights for local cultural brands seeking to reconcile cultural depth with effective market communication.

**Keywords:** ritual view of communication, music festivals, branding, comparative study

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary music festivals have evolved from single-format musical performances into multifaceted cultural phenomena that integrate visual art, fashion trends, and social interaction. They have thus become important cultural arenas in which young people construct identity and develop a sense of community belonging [1]. While China's music festival market has expanded rapidly in scale, a series of structural tensions has also emerged. According to industry reports, the domestic large-scale music festival market in 2024 experienced significant growth in both box-office revenue and number of events; however, issues such as homogenized lineups, increasingly standardized experiences, a lack of cultural depth, and weak brand loyalty have become increasingly prominent, posing challenges to the industry's long-term sustainability [2]. Although existing studies have attempted to analyze music festivals from the perspective of the "ritual view of communication" [3, 4], most focus primarily on descriptive accounts of phenomena or discussions from a

single analytical dimension. Comprehensive research that systematically deconstructs ritualized construction mechanisms and extracts structural models from the perspective of brand design systems remains limited. In light of this gap, this study adopts the ritual view of communication as its central theoretical lens and integrates insights from brand semiotics and interaction ritual chain theory. Taking the American Coachella Music Festival and China's Strawberry Music Festival as representative cases, the paper conducts an in-depth comparative analysis of their brand design systems. By examining the underlying mechanisms through which ritualization is constructed in these two festivals, the study moves beyond surface-level cultural comparisons to provide new analytical tools for understanding broader phenomena in cultural consumption and brand construction, while offering strategic insights for local cultural brands facing the dual pressures of cultural identity formation and commercial expansion.

## 2. Theoretical foundations

### 2.1. Communication as a cultural ritual

The "ritual view of communication", proposed by James W. Carey, represents a fundamental supplement to—and transcendence of—the "transmission view", which treats communication primarily as the transfer of information or the influence of attitudes. This perspective emphasizes the role of communication in maintaining, representing, and constructing social reality across time, with its core centered on the "creation, representation, and celebration of shared beliefs" [5]. From this standpoint, participation in events such as the FIFA World Cup, national ceremonies, or traditional festivals derives its value not mainly from acquiring new information, but from the periodic experience of collective presence and participation, through which individuals affirm and reinforce their identities as members of a particular cultural community [6]. As a form of modern cultural ritual, music festivals similarly organize collective participation within specific spatiotemporal settings and employ shared symbols alongside designed interactive experiences to generate emotional resonance, produce collective memory, and strengthen identity recognition [7].

### 2.2. A four-dimensional analytical framework for the ritualized construction of brands

To operationalize this macro-level theory within the analysis of brand design, this study further integrates insights from brand semiotics and Randall Collins's theory of *interaction ritual chains*, thereby constructing a four-dimensional analytical framework:

**Symbolic Dimension:** Through core visual symbols, brands construct a stable system of signification. These symbols function as *signifiers* that point to specific cultural *signifieds*, forming the shared foundation of meaning and identity markers for ritual participants [8].

**Spatial Dimension:** Physical space is transformed into a ritual field characterized by particular atmospheres and rules. The distinctiveness of the site, the planning of stages and installations, and the design of movement pathways collectively create a sense of *genius loci* (spirit of place), guiding and shaping participants' behavioral patterns and the depth of their experiential engagement [9].

**Interactive Dimension:** Randall Collins argues that successful interaction rituals require group assembly, clearly defined boundaries, a shared focus of attention, and a common emotional state [10]. Within music festivals, practices such as audience dress styles, photo-taking and check-in behaviors, on-site interactions, and social media sharing constitute crucial processes through which emotional energy is generated and circulated, directly influencing the cohesion of the community.

**Cultural Dimension:** This dimension represents the outcome of the combined operation of the previous three. It concerns the overarching "story" told by the brand and the ultimate value it offers. In essence, it

defines the core meaning of the ritual: whether it provides a transcendent "utopian" space beyond everyday life or functions as a "toolbox" through which individuals construct and perform identities within real social contexts.

### 2.3. Research methods and case selection

This study adopts a qualitative research orientation and employs a comparative case study method. Case selection follows the principles of representativeness and theoretical relevance. The American Coachella Music Festival is widely recognized as a global benchmark for music festivals, renowned for its deep cultural accumulation and strong ritualistic character. In contrast, China's Strawberry Music Festival, the most influential large-scale touring music festival IP in the domestic market, is characterized by rapid iteration and close alignment with youth culture, making it a representative case for analyzing the "youth identity box" model. By conducting a systematic comparison of these two festivals within the four-dimensional framework, this study seeks to reveal the differentiated pathways and underlying logics through which brand ritualization is constructed within distinct socio-cultural contexts.

## 3. Similarities and differences in the ritualized brand communication of Coachella and the Strawberry Music Festival

Drawing on the ritual view of communication, this section constructs an analytical index system for brand communication encompassing four dimensions: symbolic ritual, spatial field, interactive behavior, and cultural ritual. Through an in-depth examination of the two festivals in terms of brand visual symbol systems, immersive scene construction, audience participation modes, media dissemination, and cultural narratives, this study reveals that under different social contexts, the brand design and communication of Coachella and the Strawberry Music Festival exhibit distinct mechanisms and outcomes.

### 3.1. Comparison of symbolic rituals: from "eternal sacred symbols" to "fluid props"

Brand visual symbols constitute the primary carriers of ritual meaning. In this dimension, Coachella and the Strawberry Music Festival demonstrate a clear divergence between "permanent stabilization" and "annual fluidity" (Table 1), corresponding respectively to the timelessness of the "utopia" and the temporality of the "identity box".

The visual system of Coachella can be regarded as a set of "eternal sacred symbols". Its iconic handwritten logo, desert landscape imagery, and Bohemian aesthetic style have remained highly consistent since the festival's inception (Figures 1 and 2). This consistency does not indicate a lack of creativity; rather, it represents a strategic process of "classical consolidation". The aim is to tightly bind specific visual elements to the "Coachella" brand so that they evolve into "super symbols" representing freedom, dreamlike experiences, and an upscale, trend-oriented lifestyle [8]. Repetition year after year reduces cognitive recognition costs while reinforcing a sense of sacredness and tradition, thereby providing participants with a stable focal point for identification.

**Table 1.** Comparison of symbolic rituals between the Coachella and Strawberry Music Festivals

Dimension	Coachella Music Festival	Strawberry Music Festival
Core Strategy	Classical consolidation	Thematic fluidity
Symbolic Function	Constructs a timeless meta-language that becomes the core of brand assets	Constructs annual and regional cultural themes, maintaining dialogue with contemporary trends
Visual Elements	Customized handwritten logo, desert imagery, Bohemian aesthetics; stable visual elements	Annual themes, "Strawberry Planet" IP, cartoonization and flat design; flexible and frequently updated elements
System Logic	Principle of consistency: through repetition, symbols become tightly bound to the brand, reducing recognition costs	Principle of novelty: through variation, annual expectations are created and combined with regional culture and cross-brand collaborations to attract repeat participation and avoid aesthetic fatigue



**Figure 1.** Coachella Poster



**Figure 2.** Coachella Poster

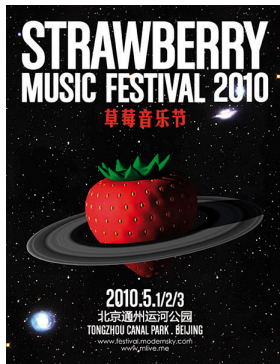


**Figure 3.** Strawberry Music Festival Flat-Style Poster



**Figure 4.** Strawberry Music Festival Year of the Dragon Poster

In contrast, the symbolic system of the Strawberry Music Festival reflects the characteristics of "fluid props". Its core structure consists of the flexible combination of the "Strawberry Planet IP" and annually updated thematic visuals. The visual style has evolved from the bright and lively aesthetic of the early years (Figure 5), to a brief phase of artistic minimalism (Figure 6), and eventually toward a more intuitive, cartoon-like, and flat visual language that aligns with the aesthetic preferences of Generation Z (Figures 3, 4 and 7). The standard typeface often adopts a clear sans-serif style, while color schemes tend to be bold and vibrant. This strategy aims to accurately capture and reflect the collective emotional climate of contemporary Chinese youth. Themes such as "RE", symbolizing reflection and reboot, or "Still", implying that the present moment itself is eternal, serve as examples. Annual themes function like continually updated "cultural props" or "social skins", providing participants with fresh visual materials that can be used for identity expression and social media dissemination, thereby maintaining the brand's ability to engage in ongoing dialogue with current youth culture.



**Figure 5.** 2010 Strawberry Music Festival Poster



**Figure 6.** 2016–2017 Strawberry Music Festival Posters



**Figure 7.** 2023 "Still" Poster

### 3.2. Comparison of ritual spaces: desert sanctuary and urban carnival

Ritual space functions as the physical stage on which meaning is generated. Coachella and the Strawberry Music Festival have respectively constructed two fundamentally different spatial paradigms—the "desert sanctuary" and the "urban carnival" (Table 2)—which profoundly shape participants' experiential modes.

Coachella permanently situates itself in the desert hinterland of the Empire Polo Club in California. The geographical isolation and uniqueness of this location naturally confer a sense of sacredness characterized by a detachment from everyday life. Its spatial production follows the logic of a "fixed sacred site + landmark installations + exploratory spatial layout". Each year, large-scale commissioned art installations (such as *Taffy* in 2025; Figure 8) serve not merely as decorative elements but as ritualistic spiritual totems. Functional zones are organized into a "miniature city" comprising boutique stores (Figure 9), art studios (Figure 10), high-end dining spaces, and tranquil lawn areas. The stage layout is decentralized, and pathways are winding rather than linear, encouraging exploration, lingering, and spontaneous social interaction (Figure 11). Through this design, the space itself becomes a destination of pilgrimage—a self-contained utopian world worthy of repeated and immersive engagement.



**Figure 8.** Art Installation "Taffy"



**Figure 9.** Coachella Boutique Store



**Figure 10.** Coachella Art Studio



**Figure 11.** Coachella 2025 Site Map

In contrast, the Strawberry Music Festival adopts a touring, "nomadic" model across multiple cities nationwide, typically selecting highly accessible public venues such as urban parks and exhibition centers. Its spatial logic can be summarized as a "touring carnival + check-in network + efficient circulation". Stage designs are relatively centralized, and the overall visual environment is strongly unified under the annual theme. Art installations tend to emphasize playfulness, interactivity, and photogenic qualities that encourage social media sharing as "check-in" spots. Circulation routes are designed to be clear and efficient, allowing audiences to move quickly and conveniently between different stages and functional zones. In this context, the space primarily functions as a "super-container" and "efficient engine" for music, social interaction, and consumption activities—a standardized, multi-day carnival of pleasure that temporarily "descends" upon the city.

**Table 2.** Comparison of spatial rituals between Coachella and the Strawberry Music Festival

Dimension	Coachella Music Festival	Strawberry Music Festival
Core Strategy	Eternal sacred site	Urban nomadism
Macro Location	Fixed and distinctive: desert hinterland creating a sense of detachment from everyday life	Mobile and standardized: touring multiple cities, typically located in highly accessible public venues such as urban parks and exhibition centers
Installations	Ritualistic spiritual totems—monumental, unique, and iconic	Social interactive nodes—playful, replicable, and designed to encourage photo "check-ins"
Circulation Design	Encourages exploration and "getting lost"; non-linear pathways emphasize experiential processes	Prioritizes fluency and efficiency; clear main routes connect functional zones and emphasize goal-oriented movement
Core Logic	Pilgrimage through returning year after year to the same "sacred site", conveying a distinctive lifestyle ethos	The recurring urban event of "Strawberry has arrived" constitutes the ritual, offering a temporary urban escape into a festive playground

### 3.3. Comparison of interactive rituals: devotional participation and gamified engagement

Interaction constitutes the dynamic process through which ritual energy is generated and diffused. In this dimension, Coachella and the Strawberry Music Festival have evolved into two distinct models: "decentralized emotional solidarity" and "centralized task-oriented guidance".

Coachella constructs an interactive environment resembling a "devotional carnival". The brand provides a stable aesthetic framework and several iconic ritual elements, yet largely relinquishes the power of meaning reproduction to participants themselves. Music fans and celebrities spontaneously appear in flowing dresses, fringes, and cowboy boots associated with Bohemian fashion, producing and sharing images in front of landmark installations. Such behavior is not the completion of brand-directed tasks but rather an outward performance of identity as practitioners of "Coachella culture". Consequently, every April, the wave of Coachella-related content circulating across social media forms a recurring, spontaneous digital ritual carnival. This phenomenon continuously injects emotional energy and cultural prestige into the brand, creating an organic, network-based chain of communication.

The interactive model of the Strawberry Music Festival more closely resembles a carefully designed "player game". Here, the brand acts as a "game designer", orchestrating a series of H5 interactions, thematic voting activities, check-in challenges, and community tasks through its official social media matrix. For example, participants may be encouraged to post on-site vlogs with designated hashtags or complete interactive activities to obtain virtual rewards or physical merchandise. Through clearly defined objectives, rules, and immediate feedback mechanisms, this model efficiently guides user behavior and establishes a participatory order based on "task-driven engagement". Annual themes and multi-city tours function like "version updates" and "new server launches" in a game environment, producing novelty at a controllable rhythm. At the same time, extensive cross-industry collaborations and commercial integrations transform the festival site into an experiential marketplace combining music and consumption.

As a result, the two festivals accumulate fundamentally different forms of brand capital. Coachella cultivates a "community of believers" characterized by strong loyalty and a deep sense of belonging, where ritual meaning arises from the stability of tradition and the spontaneity of participation. The Strawberry Music Festival, by contrast, fosters a highly active "player community", whose attraction lies in the entertainment value of curated activities and the iterative nature of the experience.

### 3.4. Comparison of cultural rituals: a faith-based utopia and a youth identity box

The differentiated configurations across the previous three dimensions ultimately crystallize into two distinct cultural narratives and brand models: the "faith-based utopia" and the "youth identity box".

Coachella's cultural narrative points toward a transcendent spiritual ethos. Rooted in the frontier spirit of the American West and the traditions of hippie culture, the festival constructs a temporary paradise in the desert, offering global participants a "spiritual sanctuary" where they may escape reality and pursue free self-expression. Its fixed sacred site, enduring symbols, and spontaneous emotional solidarity together form a stable set of "ritual conventions". Within this model, commercial success is subtly distanced and reframed as a natural by-product of the festival's cultural magnetism rather than its primary objective. This persistent commitment to cultural authenticity and artistic primacy has strengthened Coachella's irreplaceable cultural authority, elevating it into a highly aspirational "utopian belief system".

The cultural narrative of the Strawberry Music Festival, by contrast, is deeply embedded in the everyday life and consumer context of China's Generation Z. It functions as a "youth identity box", providing young people with a cultural marker and a platform for social aggregation through which they can define themselves and stage their identities. Participants not only enjoy music but also shape personal styles and affirm group

affiliations by purchasing co-branded products, engaging in topical discussions, and sharing check-in photos. In this sense, the festival offers a temporary "spiritual refuge" that helps alleviate the pressures of daily life [4]. At the same time, the brand actively collaborates with urban cultural tourism initiatives and commercial partners, positioning itself as a bridge connecting youth culture with the consumer market. Consequently, the cultural expression of the Strawberry Music Festival places greater emphasis on emotional release, trend-oriented social interaction, and consumption experiences. Its narrative aligns closely with mainstream commercial logic, functioning as an efficient and secularized "cultural toolbox", while rarely engaging with grand narratives of social critique.

## 4. Mechanisms of ritualized brand construction in Music Festivals

The comparative analysis of Coachella and the Strawberry Music Festival indicates that a successful music festival brand operates as a systematic mechanism for the production of ritual meaning. The two festivals exemplify the models of the "faith-based utopia" and the "youth identity box", respectively. Their fundamental differences stem from distinct design logics across four ritual dimensions: symbol, space, interaction, and culture. For local practice, brand strategy should not consist of simply transplanting isolated elements; rather, it should involve a creative transformation of the underlying principles through which rituals are generated. On this basis, this study proposes the following integrative framework and strategic pathways.

### 4.1. Symbol system strategy: constructing a diachronic brand semantic structure

A brand's visual symbol system should move beyond the static function of identity recognition and instead become a dynamic process of semantic generation, establishing a hierarchically structured symbolic system with diachronic depth.

First, the brand must distill one or several highly abstract and culturally inclusive core meta-symbols to serve as enduring "sacred symbols". Examples include Coachella's handwritten logotype and the Strawberry Planet image associated with the Strawberry Music Festival. These elements are intended to carry the brand's "foundational myth", functioning as the stable origin from which all derivative meanings emerge. As such, their visual style should remain consistent in order to accumulate brand equity and reduce cognitive costs for audiences. However, consistency does not imply rigidity. While maintaining unified core identity elements, variations in representational form can be moderately enriched to sustain novelty and maintain audience engagement [6]. Second, around these sacred symbols, the brand should establish a set of periodically renewable thematic symbols that dialogue with contemporary social and cultural contexts. Their design may actively incorporate prevailing aesthetic trends of the moment. Through processes of symbolic encoding and re-encoding, external social texts are translated into new narrative chapters within the brand's evolving story.

### 4.2. Spatial production strategy: planning a differentiated ritual geography

Space functions as the physical carrier of ritual activity. In order to elevate an ordinary "place" into a sacred "ritual site", while also responding to the demands of brand expansion, the concept of a "differentiated relational order" may be employed to construct a multi-layered spatial experience matrix.

#### 4.2.1. Central domain: establishing a reverential "ritual sanctuary"

A geographically distinctive site should be selected and consistently associated with the brand as its original stage, such as a unique natural landscape or a repurposed industrial heritage location. Through monumental landscape design, dispersed stage layouts, unique artistic installations, and exploratory circulation paths, the space can create a liminal experience that separates participants from everyday life [11]. The objective is to

produce an irreplicable, pilgrimage-like peak ritual experience, serving as the geographical core of the brand myth and the ultimate emotional destination for participants.

#### 4.2.2. *Radiating domains: constructing standardized ritual replicas*

Around the central "sacred site", modular and standardized spatial replication strategies can be implemented for touring cities [12]. In essence, this approach translates the ritual spirit of the central domain into a simplified and efficient format capable of reaching wider audiences. Under controlled costs, it ensures the consistency of the basic ritual experience while meeting the participation needs of a broader public.

### 4.3. Interactive rituals: a dual-layer motivational model

Interaction constitutes the process through which ritual emotional energy is produced. According to Randall Collins' theory of the "interaction ritual chain", a successful ritual must contain four elements: group assembly, boundary maintenance, mutual focus of attention, and shared emotional states [10]. On this basis, brands should design a dual-layer motivational system that integrates emotional activation and behavioral guidance.

#### 4.3.1. *Motivational layer*

The brand should first provide a culturally compelling symbolic framework and value narrative. Examples include the Bohemian aesthetic cultivated by Coachella or the youthful romantic atmosphere conveyed through the annual themes of the Strawberry Music Festival. At this level, specific behaviors are not prescribed. Instead, the brand stimulates participants' spontaneous creative practices grounded in identity identification by creating a strong aesthetic and emotional environment.

#### 4.3.2. *Guidance layer*

To ensure broad accessibility and participation in ritual activities, the brand must design structured pathways for participation together with feedback mechanisms. For instance, the Strawberry Music Festival translates abstract emotional belonging into concrete, low-threshold gamified tasks, supplemented by mechanisms such as social recognition and virtual badges that provide immediate feedback. This layer does not suppress creativity; rather, by offering clear behavioral templates and interaction nodes, it lowers the psychological and technical barriers to participation and organizes dispersed individual actions into observable and widely diffused collective rituals.

### 4.4. Cultural narrative: connecting ideals and reality

A successful brand narrative functions as a form of "suspended anchoring", maintaining a dynamic balance between the gravitational pull of an eternal utopia and the embedded practicality of a cultural toolbox. In doing so, the brand preserves spiritual elevation while remaining rooted in contemporary social contexts. Ultimately, competition among brands is competition among cultural narratives. The core challenge lies in managing the enduring tension between transcendent ideals and embedded realities, allowing the brand to maintain critical cultural depth while sustaining a viable commercial ecosystem.

On the one hand, the brand must establish a utopian ultimate cultural ideal, such as the pursuit of artistic purity, individual freedom, or community spirit. This ideal functions as a "sublime object", providing the brand with a value orientation that transcends commercial calculation and maintaining a critical distance from purely market-driven logic. It gives deeper meaning to all brand practices and serves as the foundation for building brand loyalty and cultural authority.

On the other hand, the brand should develop "toolbox-style" cultural products as practical interfaces. The lofty value core should be translated into a series of experiential, consumable, and communicable cultural mediators—such as collaborative merchandise or themed communities. These interfaces must be deeply

embedded within the everyday life and consumption patterns of the target audience, allowing abstract values to be perceived, practiced, and circulated.

## 5. Conclusion

This study finds that Coachella constructs a cultural pilgrimage system oriented toward permanence and transcendence through its use of classic symbols, a fixed sacred site, and decentralized interaction. In contrast, the Strawberry Music Festival employs evolving symbols, mobile spatial arrangements, and centrally organized programming to create a fashionable cultural apparatus serving contemporary identity performance and social interaction. These two models are rooted in their respective socio-cultural contexts and do not represent hierarchical alternatives; rather, they reveal differentiated strategic pathways available to cultural brands within processes of globalization and localization. The construction of a music festival brand can thus be redefined as a project of designing and orchestrating social rituals. Future cultural brands may ultimately take the form of "ritual complexes" capable of finding distinctive balances between stability and change in symbols, sacredness and accessibility in space, spontaneity and organization in interaction, and transcendence and embeddedness in culture.

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