

# The Value of Core Competence in the Library: A Comparative Analysis Based on Reading Promotion Activities

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**Abstract:** *As Chinese libraries continue to explore and innovate in the provision of public cultural services, gamified and entertainment-oriented reading promotion activities are increasingly appearing in the public sphere. This study employs a comparative analysis between gamified "alienated" activities and "benchmark" activities based on elements of IFLA Marketing Award-winning cases, aiming to investigate whether gamification or substantive content is more effective in reading promotion initiatives within Chinese libraries. Drawing on public goods theory, New Public Service theory, cultural rights theory, and Service-Dominant Logic, the study examines six critical dimensions: degree of gamification, entertainment elements, relevance of content, social media engagement, expert participation, and community co-creation. The findings demonstrate that successful reading promotion is not attributable to any single factor but results from the synergy of multiple conditions. The principle that "content is king" is reaffirmed, while the contextual utility of gamification is also validated when properly configured. The concept of library "alienation" is productively reframed as a specific dysfunctional configuration rather than an inherent property of innovation itself.*

**Keywords:** *Core Competency of Libraries; Reading Promotion; Gamification; Public Cultural Services; IFLA Marketing Award*

## 1. Introduction

Public libraries, as cultural institutions open to the general public, bear the fundamental responsibility of collecting, organizing, preserving, and disseminating documentary information resources. These institutions provide free or low-cost reading, learning, research, and cultural leisure services, playing an irreplaceable role in social and cultural construction. In the context of accelerating globalization and marketization, however, libraries face unprecedented challenges. The diversification of information access channels—driven by the proliferation of digital media platforms such as social networks, e-books, and streaming services—has rendered traditional, singular library service models increasingly inadequate in meeting the demands of contemporary readers [1]. The emergence of artificial intelligence technologies, from ChatGPT to DeepSeek, has further disrupted the library ecosystem, compelling institutions to reconsider not only how they deliver services but what services they should fundamentally be delivering.

In response to these pressures, libraries have been actively exploring and updating their public cultural service models. Policy documents such as China's "14th Five-Year Plan for Public Cultural Service System Construction" (2021) and the "Digital China Construction Overall Layout Plan" (2023) have explicitly called for the development of user-centered, digitally empowered library services. Against this backdrop, libraries have introduced a wide range of innovative reading promotion activities, incorporating augmented reality, virtual reality, immersive gaming experiences, escape rooms, and role-playing games. While these initiatives aim to attract broader audiences—particularly younger readers—and adapt to the demands of the digital era, they have simultaneously given rise to a set of troubling "alienation" phenomena that challenge the library's core identity and mission.

Scholars have noted that some activities deviate significantly from the library's core function of cultivating reading habits. Jiang Yongfu and colleagues observed that the reconstruction of library public spaces has drifted away from the value goal of satisfying people's reading needs, resulting in what they termed "public space abuse," where books become mere props and bookshelves serve as photographic backdrops rather than functional resources [2]. Others have pointed to institutional alienation, whereby outsourcing arrangements originally intended to reduce costs and improve efficiency have led to the loss

of professional talent and the erosion of sustainable development capacity [3]. Technical alienation has also been identified, manifesting in librarians' over-reliance on automated systems to the point where they lose comprehensive understanding of core business processes [4]. These phenomena collectively raise a fundamental question that motivates the present study: in the process of library transformation, how should the core business competencies of libraries be defined and upheld, and what kinds of reading promotion activities are genuinely effective?

This study seeks to address these questions through a systematic comparative analysis of IFLA Marketing Award-winning cases from 2002 to 2024 and domestic gamified reading promotion cases in China. By examining the structural differences between these two categories of activity and tracing the theoretical underpinnings of their respective approaches, the study aims to identify the key dimensions that distinguish effective from ineffective reading promotion, to clarify the appropriate role of gamification within a library's service portfolio, and to provide practical guidance for library managers seeking to balance innovation with fidelity to core mission. The analysis proceeds through a review of relevant theoretical frameworks, an examination of the IFLA benchmark cases, a critical assessment of domestic gamification practices, a comparative discussion of the two approaches, and a set of conclusions and recommendations for library policy and practice.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations

Understanding the core competencies of libraries and the dynamics of reading promotion requires engagement with several intersecting bodies of theory. This study draws on public goods theory, New Public Service theory, cultural rights theory, and Service-Dominant Logic as its principal theoretical foundations, each of which illuminates a different dimension of the research problem.

Public goods theory provides a foundational understanding of the library's nature as a quasi-public good characterized by non-rivalry and non-excludability. Library services, in large measure, conform to these characteristics: a reader's access to a digital resource does not diminish another reader's ability to access the same resource, and public libraries are open to all citizens regardless of economic status or social background. This public goods character explains why libraries must be publicly funded and why their services should be organized around principles of universal access rather than market demand. Crucially, public goods theory also helps identify which library activities most warrant public investment. Services that are most genuinely non-rival and non-excludable—such as digital resource provision, information literacy education, and community reading programs—represent the library's core public mission. When libraries invest disproportionate resources in activities that could be provided by the market, they risk misallocating public funds and undermining the distinctive social value that justifies their existence.

New Public Service theory challenges the market-oriented logic of New Public Management and reasserts the primacy of citizen rights over consumer preferences in public service delivery [4]. Where New Public Management treats citizens as customers to be satisfied and public services as products to be efficiently delivered, New Public Service theory insists that citizens are rights-bearing subjects whose relationship with public institutions is grounded in democratic accountability rather than commercial transaction. This distinction has profound implications for how libraries conceptualize their reading promotion work. When libraries treat users as customers, they are drawn toward activities that maximize short-term satisfaction and attendance figures—hence the proliferation of entertainment-oriented events that generate impressive participation statistics while contributing little to sustained reading habit formation. When libraries treat users as citizens with cultural rights, they are oriented instead toward activities that genuinely develop users' capacities, deepen their engagement with knowledge, and strengthen their participation in cultural life.

Cultural rights theory, grounded in international human rights instruments including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), establishes that every person has the right to participate in cultural life, to enjoy the arts, and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits. Libraries are among the most important institutional guarantors of these rights, providing the infrastructure through which citizens can access cultural resources, develop their intellectual capacities, and participate in the production and transmission of knowledge. From this perspective, the library's core mission is not simply to provide enjoyable experiences or to attract large audiences, but to ensure that every citizen—regardless of economic means, educational background, or geographic location—has meaningful access to the cultural resources necessary for full participation in social and intellectual life. This mission imposes specific obligations

on reading promotion practice: activities should be designed not only to attract participants but to genuinely develop their reading capacities and deepen their engagement with substantive content.

Service-Dominant Logic (SDL), proposed by Vargo and Lusch (2004), offers a complementary perspective by shifting the analytical focus from resource possession to value co-creation [5]. SDL argues that value is not embedded in products or services by their providers but is co-created through interaction between providers and users. Applied to the library context, this means that the value of a reading promotion activity is not determined by the sophistication of its design or the scale of its production, but by the quality of the interaction it generates between participants and reading content. An elaborate gamified event that fails to produce genuine engagement with books creates less value than a simple discussion circle that generates deep and sustained reader involvement. SDL also highlights the importance of user participation in service design and delivery: when users are positioned as co-creators rather than passive recipients, they invest more deeply in the service, contribute their own knowledge and experience, and develop stronger connections to the library as an institution. This insight points toward community co-creation as a particularly valuable dimension of reading promotion design.

Together, these theoretical frameworks establish a coherent set of evaluative criteria for reading promotion activities. Effective activities should serve citizens' cultural rights by providing genuine access to substantive content; they should treat users as rights-bearing participants rather than entertainment consumers; they should generate value through meaningful interaction rather than superficial engagement; and they should leverage community co-creation to deepen participation and build sustained relationships between readers and the library. These criteria inform the comparative analysis of IFLA benchmark cases and domestic gamification practices in the sections that follow.

### **3. IFLA Marketing Award Cases as Benchmarks of Effective Reading Promotion**

The IFLA Marketing Award, established in 2002, recognizes outstanding library marketing and promotion projects globally. Gupta and colleagues examined the award's historical development, geographic distribution, project types, and awardee feedback, revealing significant trends in global library marketing practice [6]. Koontz reviewed the award's history from 2002 to 2012, analyzing selection criteria, application processes, and common characteristics of winners, identifying content quality, community engagement, and sustainability as recurring features of successful projects [7]. These cases represent a valuable empirical resource for understanding what effective reading promotion looks like in practice, having been subjected to rigorous international peer evaluation and recognized as exemplars of best practice.

Analysis of IFLA award-winning cases reveals several consistent structural features that distinguish them from less effective approaches. The most prominent of these is a strong emphasis on content relevance—the degree to which activity design is anchored in substantive engagement with reading materials and ideas. Successful cases do not treat books as props or pretexts for entertainment but as the genuine focus of participant engagement. The Xiamen Library's "Take Reading Home" project, for example, used specially designed borrowing bags as promotional carriers to convey reading concepts, creating a tangible connection between the promotional activity and the act of reading itself. This approach exemplifies what might be termed "content-forward" design: the activity's appeal derives from the quality and relevance of its reading content rather than from supplementary entertainment features.

A second consistent feature of IFLA benchmark cases is the centrality of community co-creation. Rather than positioning the library as a unilateral service provider and users as passive recipients, successful cases actively involve community members in the design, organization, and delivery of reading promotion activities. This participatory orientation reflects the insights of both New Public Service theory and Service-Dominant Logic: when users are co-creators rather than consumers, they invest more deeply in the activity, contribute their own knowledge and social networks, and develop stronger identification with the library as a community institution. Collins described the Button Activity at Waterloo Public Library in Ontario, Canada, which invited community members to interact with a simple but ingeniously designed installation that connected physical engagement with library service discovery [8]. The activity's success derived not from technological sophistication but from its capacity to generate genuine curiosity and community conversation about library resources.

Expert and author participation represents a third distinguishing feature of IFLA benchmark cases. Many award-winning projects incorporate the involvement of writers, scholars, or subject specialists whose presence lends intellectual authority and depth to reading promotion activities. This feature serves multiple functions: it signals to participants that the activity is oriented toward substantive engagement

with ideas rather than mere entertainment; it provides access to knowledge and perspectives that participants cannot easily obtain elsewhere; and it creates memorable experiences that deepen participants' connection to the reading materials being promoted. The involvement of experts also tends to attract participants who are already motivated readers, creating communities of practice around shared intellectual interests that can sustain engagement beyond individual events.

Ma Jun and colleagues, in their analysis of representative IFLA award-winning cases, identified spatial innovation, service content differentiation, and user experience enhancement as key dimensions of successful library marketing [9]. Their analysis highlights the importance of designing activities that create distinctive and memorable experiences while remaining firmly anchored in the library's core mission of promoting reading and learning. The most successful cases achieve a productive synthesis: they are innovative enough to attract attention and generate enthusiasm, but substantive enough to deliver genuine value to participants and contribute to the library's long-term mission.

The sustainability of IFLA benchmark cases is also noteworthy. Unlike one-off spectacle events that generate brief spikes of attention before fading from memory, the most successful award-winning projects are designed with long-term impact in mind. They build institutional relationships, develop community capacities, and create ongoing platforms for reading engagement that persist beyond individual activity instances. This sustainability orientation reflects a deep understanding of what reading promotion is ultimately for: not to generate impressive statistics in any given year, but to cultivate a culture of reading that enriches community life over time. Sun Yat-sen Memorial Library's "1+N Service for Children with Special Needs" project exemplifies this approach, using picture books and developmentally appropriate materials as the medium for an inclusive reading promotion model that conducted approximately 70 activities in a single year, attracting nearly 140,000 online and offline participants with continuously expanding influence.

These features of IFLA benchmark cases—content relevance, community co-creation, expert participation, and sustainability orientation—collectively define what might be called the "substantive pathway" to reading promotion effectiveness. This pathway is grounded in a clear understanding of the library's core mission and a commitment to activities that genuinely serve that mission, even when they are less immediately spectacular than entertainment-oriented alternatives.

#### **4. Gamification in Chinese Library Reading Promotion: Promise and Pitfall**

Gamification is defined as "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts" [10]. The concept's core lies in borrowing mechanisms from games—such as points, badges, leaderboards, and challenge tasks—and applying them to non-game settings to enhance user engagement and investment. In the library domain, gamification has attracted considerable attention as a potential solution to declining participation and the challenge of engaging younger audiences who have grown up with digital entertainment. Deterding and colleagues systematically articulated the conceptual framework of gamification, distinguishing it from serious games and playful design, and noting that effective gamification involves the selective application of game elements to enhance user experience rather than the wholesale transformation of services into games [10].

The theoretical case for gamification in reading promotion rests on several well-established psychological mechanisms. Hamari and colleagues found through a literature review that gamification produces significant effects in educational and learning contexts, particularly in enhancing motivation and engagement [11]. When game elements are well-designed and genuinely connected to the core activity—in this case, reading—they can lower participation barriers, sustain engagement over time, and create positive associations with reading that persist beyond individual activity instances. Zhejiang Library's "Research with Buke" project illustrates this potential effectively: by combining interactive mini-games, cumulative points, reading check-ins, and achievement badges, the project cultivated collective reading habits and generated enthusiastic community participation that translated into measurable increases in reading activity.

However, the application of gamification in Chinese library reading promotion has also generated significant concerns. Nicholson argued that many library gamification implementations overemphasize extrinsic rewards and competitive mechanisms, potentially undermining intrinsic reading motivation and creating a "chocolate-covered broccoli" experience—where game elements superficially wrap educational content without meaningful integration [12]. This concern aligns with research demonstrating the "overjustification effect," whereby extrinsic rewards reduce intrinsic motivation for inherently interesting activities. Furthermore, Koivisto and Hamari, in a meta-analysis of 32 empirical

gamification studies, found significant heterogeneity in outcomes depending on implementation quality, user characteristics, and contextual factors [13]. Gamification was found to be most effective when game elements aligned with activity objectives rather than being arbitrarily added, when social elements facilitated meaningful interaction rather than superficial competition, and when extrinsic rewards complemented rather than replaced intrinsic motivation.

In the Chinese library context, the most problematic manifestations of gamification involve activities that are essentially entertainment events with minimal connection to reading content. Escape rooms, script-killing games, and immersive role-playing experiences may generate impressive participation statistics and social media coverage, but when they are designed primarily as entertainment experiences rather than reading promotion vehicles, they fail to serve the library's core mission. Participants may enjoy the activity without engaging meaningfully with any reading materials, and the library's investment in such activities may crowd out resources that could be directed toward more substantive programming. This pattern represents what the present study terms "alienation"—not gamification per se, but a specific configuration in which entertainment orientation is high, content relevance is low, and the activity's connection to reading is superficial or absent.

The distinction between productive and problematic gamification is therefore not a matter of whether game elements are present but of how they are configured in relation to reading content and community engagement. Changsha Library's Script Game Experience Camp illustrates the productive end of this spectrum: while the activity featured immersive role-playing and deductive reasoning game mechanics, the quality of the game design itself generated sufficient participant engagement and experiential richness to produce effective reading promotion outcomes. The game mechanics were intrinsically engaging rather than merely rewarding, and the activity created positive associations with the library as a space for creative and intellectual engagement. This case demonstrates that gamification can be a legitimate pathway to reading promotion effectiveness when the game design is of sufficient quality and the activity creates genuine value for participants—even without deep content alignment.

The critical variable, then, is not the presence or absence of gamification but the quality of its implementation and its relationship to the library's core mission. Gamification that is designed to attract participants and create positive library associations, while maintaining a clear connection—however indirect—to reading and learning, can serve as a valuable complement to more substantive programming. Gamification that is designed primarily to generate attendance figures and social media coverage, with no meaningful connection to reading content or library values, represents a genuine form of alienation that undermines the library's mission and misallocates public resources.

## **5. Comparative Analysis: Content-Driven versus Gamified Approaches**

The comparative analysis of IFLA benchmark cases and domestic gamification practices reveals a more nuanced picture than the simple dichotomy between "good" content-driven approaches and "bad" gamified approaches that sometimes characterizes public debate. Both approaches can be effective when properly configured, and both can fail when poorly designed. The key question is not which approach is inherently superior but under what conditions each approach is most appropriate and how the two can be productively combined.

The substantive pathway, exemplified by IFLA benchmark cases, demonstrates consistently high effectiveness across a range of library types, target audiences, and cultural contexts. Its strength lies in its alignment with the library's core mission: activities designed around substantive content engagement, community co-creation, and expert participation directly serve the library's fundamental purpose of cultivating reading habits and deepening cultural participation. These activities tend to attract participants who are already motivated readers or who are genuinely interested in the intellectual content being offered, creating communities of practice that sustain engagement over time. The weakness of the substantive pathway is its limited reach: activities that require significant intellectual investment may be inaccessible or unappealing to potential readers who have not yet developed reading habits or who associate libraries with obligation rather than pleasure.

The gamification pathway addresses precisely this weakness by lowering participation barriers and creating positive associations with library engagement. When gamification is well-designed—featuring intrinsically engaging game mechanics, social interaction, and at least an indirect connection to reading content—it can attract participants who would not otherwise engage with library programming and create entry points into a broader culture of reading. The social-gamification variant, which combines engaging game mechanics with strong community participation and effective social media dissemination, is

particularly effective at generating visibility and attracting diverse audiences. The weakness of the gamification pathway is its risk of substituting game engagement for reading engagement, particularly when entertainment elements are high and content relevance is low. When this substitution occurs, gamification ceases to be a pathway to reading promotion and becomes instead a form of institutional alienation.

The comparative analysis suggests that the most effective reading promotion strategies are not those that choose between gamification and substantive content but those that integrate both approaches in a coherent and purposeful way. A sequential, goal-differentiated framework is proposed: an initial attraction stage employing gamification to lower participation barriers, generate visibility, and recruit diverse audiences, followed by a cultivation stage that transitions participants toward substantive programming emphasizing content depth and community co-creation. This sequential approach addresses what might be termed the "funnel problem" in library participation: gamification widens the top of the funnel by attracting larger and more diverse audiences, while substantive methods deepen the funnel by converting casual participants into committed readers.

The appropriate balance between gamification and substantive content depends significantly on the characteristics of the target audience. For audiences with established reading habits, substantive programming should predominate. For audiences with limited reading experience or negative associations with reading, gamification may play a more prominent role in initial engagement, with substantive content introduced gradually as participants develop confidence and interest. This audience-differentiated approach requires library managers to develop a clear understanding of their community's reading culture and to design programming portfolios that address the full spectrum of reader development, from initial attraction through deep engagement to sustained habit formation.

The role of community co-creation emerges from the comparative analysis as a critical variable that cuts across both pathways. Whether an activity is primarily gamified or primarily content-driven, the presence of strong community co-creation consistently enhances its effectiveness. This finding aligns with the theoretical insights of both New Public Service theory and Service-Dominant Logic: when users are positioned as co-creators rather than passive recipients, they invest more deeply in the activity, contribute their own knowledge and social networks, and develop stronger identification with the library as a community institution. The implication for practice is clear: regardless of the specific approach adopted, library reading promotion activities should be designed to maximize opportunities for meaningful user participation in both the design and delivery of programming.

The analysis also reveals important differences in the sustainability profiles of the two pathways. Substantive activities, by virtue of their deeper content engagement and community orientation, tend to generate more durable impacts on reading habits and library relationships. Gamified activities, particularly those relying heavily on extrinsic rewards and competitive mechanisms, may generate strong initial engagement that declines as novelty fades and rewards lose their motivational power. This sustainability differential reinforces the case for treating gamification as a complement to rather than a substitute for substantive programming: gamification can generate the initial engagement that brings participants into contact with the library, but substantive content and community relationships are what keep them there.

## 6. Conclusion

This study has conducted a systematic comparative analysis of IFLA Marketing Award-winning cases and domestic gamified reading promotion cases in China, drawing on public goods theory, New Public Service theory, cultural rights theory, and Service-Dominant Logic to evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches to reading promotion. The analysis reveals that both substantive content-driven approaches and gamified approaches can be effective when properly configured, and that the most effective reading promotion strategies integrate both in a coherent and purposeful way.

The principle that "content is king" is reaffirmed by the consistent effectiveness of activities that maintain strong content relevance and community co-creation. At the same time, the analysis validates the contextual utility of gamification as a pathway to initial engagement, particularly for audiences who have not yet developed reading habits or who associate libraries with obligation rather than pleasure. The concept of library "alienation" is productively reframed as a specific dysfunctional configuration—characterized by high entertainment orientation, shallow content relevance, and absent meaningful engagement—rather than as an inherent property of innovation or gamification.

The study's findings carry clear implications for library policy and practice. Libraries should develop programming portfolios that address the full spectrum of reader development, using gamification strategically for initial attraction while investing primarily in substantive content and community co-creation for sustained engagement. Evaluation systems should be reformed to capture the quality and depth of reading engagement rather than merely counting attendance figures. Library managers should be equipped with the theoretical frameworks and practical tools needed to distinguish productive innovation from alienating distraction, and to make evidence-informed decisions about how to allocate resources across different types of reading promotion activities. Most fundamentally, libraries should remain committed to their core mission of ensuring that every citizen has meaningful access to the cultural resources necessary for full participation in social and intellectual life—a mission that is more important than ever in an era of information abundance and attention scarcity.

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