

Exploring the Creation of Zibo's Viral City Image

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Abstract: Recently, the city of Zibo, known as an “internet-famous city,” has gained massive popularity on social media platforms, attracting a surge of tourists to visit and enjoy its food. Discussions about Zibo have dominated major social platforms, with data consistently ranking high as users spontaneously follow the trending topic, bringing undeniable economic benefits to the city. The development of “Zibo-style traffic” has exceeded expectations, with high levels of interest across platforms and an unusually long-lasting buzz—something rare in previous tourism promotions. Zibo has crafted a model for building a viral city image that aligns with its own growth. This model reflects the characteristics of current online communication trends and offers insights into the future direction of internet dissemination. It serves as an example for other regions to learn from when using internet communication to promote tourism and stimulate economic growth.

Keywords: Social Media, Official Media, People-Centric, Sustainable Traffic.

1. Introduction

With the continuous development of internet technology, virtual society plays an increasingly important role in our daily lives. The information we receive in the online world significantly influences our behaviors in the real world. Zibo has seized upon the characteristics of current online communication to create a prominent barbecue brand in the virtual sphere, propelling itself to become a newly popular “internet-famous city.” The successful creation of Zibo's viral city image involves numerous phenomena worth exploring.

We believe that the process of Zibo becoming a viral city aligns well with the features of today's virtual society and has achieved the expected communication impact. Zibo emphasizes the subjectivity of internet users and leverages the interactions between them to enhance the city's image, making users feel that they have control over the flow of information. This approach differs from the traditional reliance on opinion leaders to create a viral image.

The timely involvement of official media further adds credibility and goodwill to Zibo's image as a viral city. Official media in Zibo have interacted more frequently with internet users, breaking down the psychological distance between them. The “people-centered” approach has garnered greater affection from netizens [1].

Moreover, the sustained popularity of Zibo as a viral city has lasted far longer than most people expected. It remains an active topic on major social media platforms, becoming a part of daily discussions among users, rather than a fleeting trend riding the wave of temporary traffic.

Therefore, studying the creation of Zibo's viral city image helps us analyze the current state of China's virtual society, allowing for a better understanding of the communication trends in today's internet culture.

2. How Zibo Utilized Online Media to Create Its Viral City Image

With the rapid development of the new era and the full arrival of mobile network media, the ways and habits through which people access and browse information have undergone unprecedented changes. Mobile network media, with its unparalleled and unique advantages over traditional media, continues to revolutionize how we access information and has influenced our information consumption habits, gradually becoming the mainstream method of information acquisition. The threshold for participating in online social platforms is continuously lowering, turning each user into their own "media outlet." Compared to the past when traditional media held the narrative power, content created by individual users now increasingly captures the attention of the public.

Following the end of the three-year pandemic, the trend of "special operations tourism" repeatedly trended on Weibo, as the previously dormant tourism industry surged back to life almost overnight. Travel guides became an essential tool for tourists. Unlike the overwhelming promotion of popular tourist spots by influencers, Zibo broke through the online media landscape with the sincere and uncommercialized recommendations of university students, a grassroots form of "word-of-mouth" marketing. Since March 2023, the topic of Zibo barbecue has garnered over 1.38 billion views, and related topics on Weibo have been read more than 230 million times, with over ten topics related to Zibo barbecue surpassing tens of millions in both views and reads [2].

The origin of this success dates back to the pandemic when Zibo hosted students from Shandong University who were placed in quarantine across various parts of the city. As a gesture of hospitality, the city treated each student to Zibo barbecue at the end of their quarantine. In the spring of 2023, those same students returned to Zibo with friends to experience the city's culture and cuisine once again. Upon leaving, they spontaneously shared pictures and stories on online media platforms, inadvertently bringing the iconic Zibo barbecue's "grill + pancake + dipping sauce" combination into the spotlight, turning it into a signature dish with regional significance. From "student tourism" to "tourist tourism," Zibo unexpectedly took its first step toward becoming a viral sensation.

"To forge iron, one must be strong." Riding the wave of its newfound popularity, the Zibo government took proactive steps by strengthening market oversight, strictly monitoring price hikes in hotels and restaurants, and cracking down on deceptive practices like shortchanging. They also launched special "barbecue buses" and "high-speed trains," which became a much-praised novelty among netizens. Thoughtful gestures like special souvenirs and barbecue guides transformed into mobile "landmarks." Additionally, Zibo leveraged online platforms by introducing the "Smart Zibo Barbecue Service" WeChat mini-program, which provides tourists with real-time information on queue lengths at various barbecue restaurants and recommends optimal travel routes. The city's two open letters to tourists, titled *A Letter to All Our Tourist Friends*, emphasized the importance of "sincerity as the ultimate strategy," gently advising visitors to travel during off-peak times while also promoting other cities in Shandong, thus contributing to provincial economic growth. Netizens were full of praise: "Zibo's vision is unparalleled!" and "This textbook-level service is so good, other cities can't even replicate it!"

In the field of tourism sociology, Urry and Larsen introduced the concept of the "mediated gaze," where people leave their everyday environments in search of places or things made famous by media exposure. Attracted by news about Zibo, netizens flocked to the city and had travel experiences that exceeded their expectations. They then shared their positive experiences online, telling friends and strangers alike that "Zibo is worth the hype," creating a virtuous cycle and encouraging even more netizens to visit. This phenomenon is known as "media pilgrimage," a behavior where people travel

to confirm in person the places depicted in media narratives. It's both a real journey in space and a performance within the constructed "distance" between the "ordinary world" and the "media world."

The internet influencer "B Tai" didn't find a single vendor shortchanging customers in Zibo's Badaju Market. Although such fairness should be standard, it made Zibo stand out compared to other disorderly markets in different cities. B Tai's video amplified the reputation of "Hospitable Shandong" and drew even more media attention to Zibo. From barbecues to Boshan cuisine, and from there to simply wanting to experience the collective support of Zibo's unique culture and hospitality, the city has delivered a performance that pleases multiple parties in this grand feast of online media. The emotional connection people have with Zibo has long transcended the appeal of just a few skewers of barbecue.

Traffic is a double-edged sword. Zibo's secret to success lies in continually improving its quality of service under the watchful eyes of thousands, ensuring that more tourists come with high expectations and leave equally satisfied. Zibo's overnight rise to fame is a testament to how it seized the opportunity presented by online media, coupled with the relentless efforts of the local government and its people, turning a temporary "viral" status into a long-lasting appeal. In this wave of popularity, every Zibo resident and every visitor who steps foot in Zibo is both a contributor to and a consumer of this online media phenomenon.

3. Why is "Zibo-style Traffic" Both Popular and Stable?

The breakout of "Zibo-style traffic" can be summarized as a progression from "popular to stable → both popular and stable." Why did it become popular? The most immediate cause dates back to last year when some students from Shandong University were relocated to Zibo for quarantine during the pandemic. Zibo extended the highest standards of hospitality to these students and held a farewell barbecue for them upon their departure. The students and local pandemic workers made a heartfelt promise to return for a barbecue in Zibo when spring arrived. This sincere agreement laid the groundwork for Zibo barbecue's breakout this year, establishing an early foundation for the viral network atmosphere that followed. Naturally, the success of "Zibo-style traffic" is also inseparable from the warm hospitality of Zibo's residents. Even before its breakout, the "Hospitable Shandong" brand was already closely tied to the region of Qilu. As an integral part of Shandong Province, Zibo naturally reflected this spirit of hospitality in every aspect of the city. It was inevitable that "Zibo-style traffic" would not only rise in popularity but also maintain its stability.

The initial wave of popularity for "Zibo barbecue" occurred around March 5, when university students responded to Zibo's hospitality by organizing group visits to enjoy its barbecue. This topic sparked a small peak of attention on platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin. On March 10, Zibo even held a press conference specifically for its barbecue, which led to peaks of interest across Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin on March 11.

Traces of "Zibo barbecue" soon flooded various social media platforms, and this wave of attention extended to the city itself. Zibo seized this opportunity by leveraging online platforms like Sina Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu, immediately disseminating a series of convenient and people-friendly policies. The positive feedback from internet users completed the first phase: "from popular to stable."

The second phase, "both popular and stable," followed shortly thereafter, with online platforms continuing to play a vital role. Zibo utilized its official media channels and even sponsored short video creators to promote the city, riding the wave of its barbecue's success to highlight Zibo's natural beauty and cultural heritage [3]. This phase showcased heartwarming moments, such as Zibo residents offering free transportation to barbecue stalls for out-of-town tourists, local leaders promoting Zibo on dedicated trains, and law enforcement improving its procedures. Zibo's historical and cultural richness, as well as its natural landscapes, rival those of other cities, and online promotion

allowed more people to discover this gem in the Qilu region. In the digital space, Zibo became synonymous with words like “warmth” and “sincerity.” When netizens encounter the name “Zibo,” these positive associations are the first to come to mind, further proving that “Zibo-style traffic” has evolved into a phenomenon that is both popular and stable.

4. Conclusion and Reflection

Zibo’s sudden rise to fame has become a viral phenomenon. Behind the immense benefits brought by this influx of attention, deeper questions arise: What has allowed Zibo to become an overnight sensation as a “trending city”? Zibo is a city with “warmth,” and from this perspective, we can unlock the secret behind Zibo’s viral success and reflect on the phenomenon of Zibo becoming an internet sensation.

“Warmth”: Whether it’s the cozy atmosphere of gathering around the barbecue, the ritualistic appeal of activities like “taking photos at the high-speed train station” or “lining up for a barbecue,” or the social interaction and festive gathering with friends, this sense of warmth, which provides comfort to everyday people, has shaped Zibo into a local food consumption scene that integrates food tasting, cultural creativity, and community interactions. This social recognition has laid the foundation for Zibo’s rise as a trending city.

“Measure”: Winning temporary attention does not guarantee a lasting reputation. A healthy flow of traffic requires joint efforts from market participants and careful nurturing from the government. From strengthening market regulation and standardizing tourism order to improving public services and optimizing the consumer environment, it is the balance between enthusiasm and measured control that allows Zibo to “steadily manage the influx of traffic” [4].

“Viral Formula”: As a city that has gained fame through online social media, Zibo’s viral breakout showcases the power of short videos in creating internet sensations under the current media ecology. This is the core of Zibo’s viral success. By leveraging short video platforms, where university students’ check-ins served as a catalyst for video traffic, Zibo was crafted into a “trending city” that is both warm and distinctive. With promotion across local, national, and various online platforms, Zibo’s rise as a viral city became inevitable.

However, how can a trending city harness the “viral effect” and systematically build a “long-lasting effect”? It’s commendable that Zibo’s viral fame has not been fleeting, but the rising attention it continues to receive also brings undeniable risks. To become a “long-lasting” city, Zibo should strengthen the supervision and management of online media dissemination, strategically operate media content, establish a new brand image for the city, and promote its unique cultural features and products. This would increase Zibo’s momentum in communication and enable it to capitalize on popular intellectual property (IP) through commercialization and digital platforms. Only then can Zibo gradually adapt to a new normal and steadily manage its influx of traffic [5].

From “starting with barbecue and going beyond barbecue,” Zibo’s transformation from a “viral tag” of barbecue to a cultural brand as a “trending city” is inseparable from the powerful driving force of online and social media dissemination. Each step forward will be an even greater test. We look forward to Zibo becoming an enduring viral city through more innovative exploration.

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