

International Students' Short-Video Practices as Cultural Media: The Case of Urban Narratives of Ningbo

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Abstract. In the increasingly intertwined context of short video platforms and urban communication, the daily posts of international students in China have become significant sources for urban image production. However, existing research often overlooks their active role as cultural intermediaries. This study takes the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) as a case study, exploring how international students construct and disseminate the narrative of "Ningbo" through their Vlogs on WeChat Video Account. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research combines multi-modal content analysis of approximately 30 vlogs with semi-structured in-depth interviews of 10 creators. Findings reveal that students construct an image of Ningbo as a "livable and attractive" city through bright visuals, diary-style narratives, and bilingual subtitles, centering on themes of daily life, urban landscapes, and campus–urban connections. Additionally, platform algorithms and audience feedback shape their content choices and encourage a sense of representation and emotional labor in continuous creation. This study extends cultural intermediary theory into a platformized context, emphasizing the dual agency of international students in constructing urban imaginations.

Keywords: Cultural intermediaries, Short-video, International communication, International students, Urban narratives

1. Introduction

In the past decade, short video platforms, exemplified by WeChat Video Account, have become deeply integrated into the daily life of Chinese cities, representing a critical space for producing, circulating, and negotiating urban imagery. Under the national and local call to "telling well China's stories" and enhance urban image building, institutions and local governments increasingly encourage international students to share their lives online [1]. At UNNC, for instance, numerous international students engage with their daily lives, campus activities, and urban explorations through vlogs on the WeChat Video Account. Initially intended as informal updates for friends and peers, these videos also contribute to shaping the broader Ningbo narrative.

While existing studies on urban communication through short videos predominantly focus on official tourism accounts or local influencers, there is a significant gap regarding international students as active participants in urban narratives [2]. This paper posits two primary research questions:

How do international students narrate Ningbo on WeChat Video Account, and what are the characteristics of themes, narrative strategies, and multimodal presentations?

How are these practices shaped by the platform's features, recommendation algorithms, and audience feedback, and how do these students understand and enact their role as cultural intermediaries between Ningbo and transnational audiences?

To answer these questions, a qualitative research paradigm is employed, utilizing a case study design that combines multimodal content analysis of selected vlogs with semi-structured thematic interviews with creators.

2. Literature review

2.1. International students as cultural intermediaries

The concept of "cultural intermediaries", originating from Bourdieu's studies on cultural production and taste construction, refers to actors who select, construct, and translate significance between cultural production and consumption [3]. In the digital age, scholars have expanded this concept to various platform-based entities, such as influencers and content creators, who curate lifestyles, places, and identities for specific audiences [4].

In international higher education research, international students are often seen merely as learners or policy subjects rather than independent cultural mediators. There exists a rich body of research around international students and China's national image, particularly in the frameworks of storytelling about China, yet there is a notable dearth of studies specifically focusing on how international students' daily mediated practices contribute to shaping the image of specific cities such as Ningbo [2].

This study aims to examine international students as cultural intermediaries situated between the urban space of Ningbo, China's social media platforms, and primarily local audiences. Rather than viewing their vlogs as mere byproducts of study abroad life, this research will analyze these short videos as a concrete cultural medium allowing for an exploration of the production and circulation of urban narratives about Ningbo.

2.2. Short video urban narratives, multimodality, and platform environment

Over the past decade, short video platforms such as WeChat Video Account have emerged as essential arenas for urban brand promotion and storytelling in China. Previous studies indicate that local governments and influencers promote landmarks, neighborhoods, and authentic daily life using recognizable visual codes, upbeat music, and emotionally resonant narratives [2].

From a multimodal perspective, short videos utilize a range of semiotic resources, including images, speech, text, music, and editing techniques—to construct specific urban imaginaries. Visual sociology and multimodal discourse analysis emphasize how elements like composition, color, perspective, audio landscapes, and subtitles work together to frame cities as "attractive", "livable", or "authentically local" [5].

However, existing research primarily focuses on official accounts, commercial creators, or local residents, leaving little room for exploring how "non-local youths"—such as international students—navigate and employ these multimodal resources to tell urban stories. Their dual position as both "insiders" and "outsiders" shapes the content and tone of their urban narratives and remains under-explored.

Simultaneously, studies on platform algorithms and "algorithmic visibility" reveal that creators' practices are shaped by recommendation systems, platform features, and perceived audience expectations [6]. Users often develop a so-called "platform experience rule" during their practices, adjusting their posting strategies accordingly. In the Chinese context, research has predominantly centered on local influencers and commercial creators, lacking systematic analysis of how international students learn and respond to these platform logics.

This study leverages cultural intermediary theory, multimodal urban narrative research, and platform user practice analysis. It treats the vlogs of international students on WeChat Video Account as contextualized cultural mediums, focusing on how these videos narrate the urban space of Ningbo and how this narrative is negotiated and shaped within the ecosystem of Chinese short video platforms.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and data sources

This research adopts a qualitative case study design. UNNC is positioned as an entry point into the broader context of Ningbo, rather than a singular focus. The primary research materials consist of vlogs published by current or recently graduated international students at UNNC on WeChat Video Account. Through keyword searches, topic monitoring, and snowball sampling rooted in existing student accounts, this study identified international content creators and collected around 30 short videos explicitly related to Ningbo's urban spaces, everyday urban life, and campus-city connections between 2025 and 2026.

To supplement the video materials, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 creators. Participants were recruited through counselor outreach and international student community networks. Interviews were conducted in Chinese, English, or a combination, depending on participants' language preferences, focusing on their motivations for creating content, imagined audiences, understanding of platform functions and recommendation mechanisms, and self-reflections around "showcasing Ningbo" and "representing China".

3.2. Analysis pathway

The collected WeChat Video Account vlogs underwent multimodal content analysis, examining three dimensions:

- (1) Narrative themes and storylines, such as daily life, dining experiences, leisure, urban walks, and campus-city relations;
- (2) Multimodal resources, including visual composition, recognizable locations and landmarks, color filters, music choices, and on-screen text or subtitles;
- (3) Basic elements related to the platform, like tag usage, posting times, and visible engagement metrics.

Subsequently, thematic analysis was performed on the interview transcripts. Initial coding identified recurrent patterns related to imagined audiences (e.g., Chinese classmates, home friends, potential applicants), empirical understanding of what content is popular on WeChat, interactions with algorithmic recommendations, and self-narratives about "showcasing Ningbo" and "representing China". These primary codes were then synthesized into several higher-order themes to answer the research questions [7].

4. Research findings

4.1. Ningbo narratives: Themes, strategies, and multimodal features

In the sampled WeChat Channels vlogs, international students predominantly narrate Ningbo through three interwoven thematic clusters: daily life, urban landscapes, and campus–urban connections. Daily life videos often take the format of "A day in my life", showcasing moments like grocery shopping, riding the subway, dining in local restaurants, and studying in cafes. Urban landscape videos highlight iconic landmarks such as riverside promenades, historic districts, and commercial centers. Additionally, some content explicitly juxtaposes campus spaces with surrounding neighborhoods, portraying the university as an embedded node within the urban fabric rather than an isolated ivory tower.

Regarding narrative strategies, many videos employ a first-person diary-style tone, guiding viewers with subtitles or voice-overs such as "Come with me to..." and "Let me show you..." Although creators claim to merely document their daily lives, video titles, hashtags and comment interactions indicate that their intended audiences mainly include local Chinese peers, other international students in China, and prospective incoming students.

Their diverse audience composition calls for a tone that combines informality, reassurance, and a subtle form of "soft promotion", emphasizing the safety, convenience, and friendliness of life in Ningbo.

On a multimodal level, Ningbo is constructed as a warm, livable, and "aesthetically pleasing" city. Creators commonly utilize bright filters and stable handheld shots, repeatedly featuring recognizable urban landmarks. Music choices predominantly feature a mix of popular Chinese and English songs alongside trendy background music, aiming to create a lighthearted or upbeat atmosphere in sync with editing rhythms.

In subtitles and hashtags, common phrases such as "Life in Ningbo" and "Study in China" are frequently used in bilingual form, grounding the content in a local context while ensuring accessibility for non-Chinese-speaking audiences.

4.2. Cultural intermediary practices in the platform environment

Interview results reveal that international student creators actively learn and negotiate the "platform logic" of WeChat Video Account during their practices. Most participants mentioned attempts to experiment with different posting times, video lengths, background music, and popular tags to maximize view counts and audience reach. Although they lack a full understanding of algorithmic technical mechanisms, these creators gradually form a set of empirical rules about what types of content the platform prioritizes. These rules often emerge from observing and mimicking other lifestyle and urban vlogs.

Audience feedback further enhances their sense of representation. Several respondents noted that comments from Chinese viewers—such as "You capture Ningbo beautifully!" and "Thank you for introducing our city!"—made them feel as if they were "voicing" the city. Comments and direct messages from other international students or potential applicants about safety, costs of living, and campus life place them in a role of informal guidance or "city ambassadors". As one participant reflected, "Initially, it was merely about documenting my daily life; now I feel like introducing Ningbo to friends back home as a cultural host."

In this interactive process, international students gradually adopt a dual cultural intermediary role that is both voluntary and shaped by platform dynamics. On one hand, they leverage their daily

experiences and linguistic skills to "translate" Ningbo for their audience, explaining local foods, transportation systems, and festival customs in accessible ways. On the other hand, they also experience pressures to maintain a positive tone, avoid sensitive topics, and consistently produce content, a burden some describe as feeling "a bit like work" or as a form of "emotional labor". Accordingly, such short-video practices exemplify how non-local young people participate in the mediated construction of urban imaginaries, while constantly negotiating their identities between insider and outsider positionalities.

5. Conclusion

This study explores how international students at UNNC produce and disseminate narratives about Ningbo on WeChat Video Account, positioning them as active cultural intermediaries situated between urban spaces, the Chinese platform ecosystem, and transnational audiences. Two primary conclusions emerge from the research:

First, content analysis reveals three interwoven themes—daily life, urban landscapes, and campus-city connections—forming the narratives constructed by students. These narratives adopt multimodal strategies—including vibrant filters, steady handheld footage, trending background music, and bilingual subtitles—to portray Ningbo as a livable and attractive city aligned with platform aesthetics and accessible to international audiences.

Second, interview data suggest that creators internalize platform "visibility rules" in their content practices.. They adjust their posting schedules, content duration, tags, and music to attain greater reach, with audience appreciation and inquiries further reinforcing their roles as informal city representatives. However, this role does not come without challenges; creators feel the dual pressures of maintaining a positive portrayal and the constant demand for content production, presenting a nuanced dynamic of platform-driven emotional and creative labor.

Theoretically, this research extends the concept of cultural intermediaries to a platformized, transnational context, highlighting the agentic capacity of non-local youth in constructing urban narratives. Methodologically, the combination of multimodal text analysis and creator interviews reveals how textual and platformized practices jointly generate urban narratives. The study's focus on UNNC and WeChat Video Account as singular case studies limits generalizability. Future research could expand to other cities and platforms (like Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Bilibili), employing longitudinal tracking of creator evolution while incorporating quantitative audience analyses to outline broader circulation patterns. Additionally, comparisons with non-Chinese platforms or local student creators could further clarify how platform norms and cultural contexts coalesce to shape urban narratives.

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