

Analysis of Short Video Communication Mode of City Image under Cross-cultural Threshold: Taking Chengdu on TikTok as an Example

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Abstract: Cities are carriers of culture, and the process of shaping and disseminating city image is also the process of exporting Chinese culture to foreign countries and attracting audiences. TikTok, as an overseas short-video sharing platform with the characteristics of fragmentation, interactivity, and fast dissemination, has attracted widespread attention from overseas audiences for its short videos about Chinese city image and culture, which has become an important channel for cross-cultural communication. This paper takes the international image shaping and dissemination model of the popular Chinese city Chengdu on TikTok as the research object and uses the 5W model and the “encoding decoding” theory as the theoretical basis to explore the strategies and effects of Chinese city image and culture dissemination on TikTok from a cross-cultural perspective. The study shows that Chengdu’s communication on TikTok is characterized by self-media as the major communication body, young travelers as the target audience, the use of “city branding” and “other shaping perspectives” as the content communication strategy, and the use of emotional resonance and cultural interactions to enhance the appeal and communication effect of the city, which provides some references and guidance to China’s external communication of its city image.

Keywords: TikTok, city imagery, cultural symbolism, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

City image refers to people’s subjective impression of a city, which is mainly formed through the joint action of mass media, interpersonal communication, memory, environment, and other factors [1]. With the gradual acceleration of China’s globalization and the need for cross-cultural publicity such as “the Belt and road initiative” and “telling a good Chinese story”, the international image-building and dissemination of Chinese cities has become an important proposition. The traditional external communication of China’s city image is mainly carried out by the city government, relying on the external publicity department, contacting the international media, and holding large-scale international events, forums, and other means [2]. The narrative theme of this publicity method is relatively grand and broad, with timeliness, and the long-term effect may not be significant enough. With the development of media technology, the short video self-media represented by TikTok has narrowed the gap between the virtual image and real life in a unique

symbolic and non-mandatory way, using words, sounds, and images, so that the public can skip the process of experiencing the city, more easily form the cognition and imagination of the city, and become a new window for the shaping and external communication of the city's international image [3].

Several Chinese cities, such as Chongqing, Chengdu, and Xi'an, are now relying on overseas self-media platforms to build a Netflix city image with international influence to enhance international communication and city attractiveness. Especially Chengdu, China's national center city, has a world-renowned giant panda breeding base and Bashu culture and has become one of the most popular Chinese cities on TikTok by relying on the 31st World University Summer Games as a sports event. This paper will take the shaping of Chengdu's international image and cultural communication on TikTok as an example to explore the mode and strategy of short video communication of city image under the cross-cultural perspective and summarize the inspirations of shaping the city's international image and cultural communication from the successful practice of Chengdu's foreign communication, to provide certain reference and guidance for the foreign communication of the image of other cities in China.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1. The 5W Communication Model

In 1948, American scholar L. Lasswell first proposed five basic elements of the communication process in the structure and function of communication in society and arranged them according to the communication order, namely, who, says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect, collectively referred to as the 5W communication mode [4]. The 5W model divides the communication process into five elements and links, and on this basis forms five major fields of mass communication research, namely "control research", "content research", "media analysis", "audience analysis" and "effect analysis" [5]. This paper will mainly follow the analytical thinking of the 5W communication mode. As the channel of communication has been identified as TikTok this paper will focus on the research of the communication subject, content, object, and effect in the shaping and communication of the city's image.

2.2. Encoding and Decoding Theory

In 1973, Stuart Hall formally put forward the theory of "encoding and decoding" for the first time in *encoding and decoding in television decode*, believing that information production is a process of "encoding, transmitting and decoding". He described TV programs (or other media texts) as meaningful discovery, which is encoded and transmitted to the audience by the information producer according to the idea structure it supports, and then decoded by the audience with different meaning structures and knowledge frameworks [6]. "Coding and decoding" theory pays more attention to the process of "decoding", emphasizes the subjective initiative of the audience when receiving information, and puts forward three decoding modes of "dominant hegemonic interpretation", "negotiated interpretation" and "adversarial interpretation" [7]. In the context of cross-cultural communication, communicators and audiences often misunderstand cultural symbols in the process of coding and decoding due to differences in culture and social systems, or "antagonistic interpretation" of cultural resistance due to stereotypes, which directly affects the effect of external communication. When analyzing the video content of Chengdu international image communication on TikTok, this paper will focus on the coding and decoding of communication symbols and their effect on cross-cultural communication.

3. Analysis of Short Video Communication Mode of City Image under Cross-cultural Threshold

3.1. The Main Force in the Communication of the City's Image

The official description of TikTok is as a short video platform that allows internet users to express themselves and record their lives, which greatly reduces the barriers to video creation and consumption compared to traditional television, film, and documentaries [8]. Short video media has changed the traditional relationship of urban communication, transforming the human-land relationship into a human-land media relationship [3], viewers are free to tour the city through short videos and can participate in the production of city image content on an individual level, and be exposed to community interaction on a collective level [9]. This greatly liberates users' autonomy and encourages public participation in the construction and external dissemination of urban image. A search of TikTok accounts posting Chengdu-related content reveals that, except for the official account of the Chengdu University Games (chengdu2021_fisugames), the other accounts are user-operated, and that not only Chengdu locals but also tourists from other countries are involved in the process of shaping and spreading Chengdu's image. Kamar from the University of Pennsylvania shared a short video on TikTok of his visit to the Chengdu Global Mall and described in detail how the luxurious mall made him feel, which received 74.3k plays. The footage of Chengdu's life shared by overseas tourists replaces official promotional videos with real-life experiential feelings and increasing the acceptance of overseas audiences. The public can also gain a lot of attention when producing and disseminating short videos of Chengdu, enhancing their sense of participation and local recognition in the external dissemination of the city's image, and will be more involved in the dissemination process of the city's image.

3.2. The Content Communication Strategy of "City Brand"

The so-called city brand mainly refers to the names, terms, or symbols displayed by the city to reflect its core values, positioning, and core characteristics [10], which can arouse the audience's association with the geography, culture, emotion, and show the irreplaceable attraction of the city. Through TikTok's search of Chengdu's short video content, it can be found that Chengdu, as China's giant panda breeding base and the birthplace of Bashu culture, has successfully become a cultural symbol and city brand that attracts TikTok's overseas audiences, such as pandas, hot pot and Sichuan opera face changing. Taking the short video of giant pandas in Chengdu as an example, the short video blogger china.panda chose to capture the real and lovely images of giant pandas in the Chengdu base to attract overseas tourists and to show the picture of harmonious coexistence between man and nature by showing the interesting interaction between keepers and giant pandas. Cityviews888, a blogger on urban landscape records, successfully built Chengdu into a city of giant pandas by recording the logo and cartoon image of virtual giant pandas on Chengdu's buildings. As the city brand of Chengdu's international image communication, the giant panda has been encoded by different short video communicators. Because the cute image of animals and the protection of animals are common concepts that can span different cultural backgrounds, overseas audiences have almost no loss of the meaning of symbols in the process of watching short videos, receiving information, and decoding, and have successfully achieved the purpose of city image building and publicity.

3.3. The Main Communication Targets--Young and Travel Loving Audiences

According to the 2021 digital global report released by SlideShare, 56.1% of the global audience of TikTok are women. At the same time, 60% of the monthly active users of TikTok are between 16

and 24 years old, and 63% of the users of TikTok in the United States are between 10 and 29 years old. This means that the women of Generation Z (born between 1995 and 2009) and the young millennials (born between 1982 and 1996) are the main force in TikTok [11]. At the same time, according to the selective contact theory, the users on TikTok are dynamic. Their interests, life attitudes, and cultural levels are different. They will watch short videos according to different needs and preferences, and decode the video content based on their own experience [12]. This shows that to achieve the goal of international image dissemination of the city, it is necessary to master certain audience portraits and needs. The videos of Chengdu fashion streets, skyscrapers, delicious scenery, and other related types on TikTok fully grasped the imagination needs of the target users, accurately positioned the city image of Chengdu, and promoted Chengdu as a young, open, and livable city. In addition to creating visual spectacle videos for young audiences, Chengdu also encourages international tourism bloggers with a high voice and influence to experience and share Chengdu life and summarize tourism tips. Professional and high-quality short videos have attracted many tourism enthusiasts. Tourism enthusiasts were infected by tourism bloggers and went to Chengdu. They changed from audience to disseminator. The short videos they experienced and shot were re-transmitted on TikTok, thus forming a publicity video stream. The frequent and continuous spread of this viral video can make the “famous online city” full of news and publicity value, and transform the “focus on dividends” into the “development momentum” of city branding [3], forming a virtuous circle and attracting tourists continuously.

3.4. Effect Analysis of Emotional Resonance and Cultural Interaction

In addition to encoding city-specific symbols, the short video blogger on TikTok also injected emotional consumption into the shaping and dissemination of the city image of Chengdu. During the Chengdu University Games, the peoplesdaily_renminribao recorded the scene of foreign athletes enjoying singing and dinner at the barbecue shop in Chengdu. The atmosphere in the video also infected the audience, saying in the comment area that it was true happiness and freedom. The theory of emotional social sharing points out that individuals in deep emotional sharing environments are more likely to be induced by emotions and stimulate secondary sharing behavior. The higher the emotional intensity, the stronger the willingness to share, to achieve a wider range of group emotional change [13]. Video bloggers in Chengdu inject free, happy, and harmonious emotions into the short video of the city image of Chengdu. The release and sharing of emotions can arouse the emotional resonance of people around the world, attract more netizens' positive imagination and sharing of the city, and shape Chengdu into a beautiful city with warm human feelings, freedom, and openness.

In addition to using emotional resonance to improve the communication effect, the disseminators of Chengdu city image also convey the concept of a community of shared future for mankind by recording the scenes of friendly exchanges and interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds. In FISU village uploaded by Localpanda, Chinese staff dressed in Chinese uniforms exchanged cultural souvenirs with German volleyball players, and the short video of making friends successfully won 10.3k likes. The real communication and interaction between different cultures have broken the cognitive limitations of the previous mainstream media context in which Chinese culture was mainly used for viewing and discussion by overseas people in cross-cultural communication [14], which not only strengthened the connection between China and the world, but also directly drew the distance between communicators and overseas audiences, and imperceptibly improved the acceptance and recognition of culture.

4. Effective Communication Strategies of City Image by Using TikTok

4.1. Encourage Narration from Multiple Perspectives to Shorten the Distance Between Overseas Audiences

TikTok, as a “decentralized” short video social media, hands the creation, distribution, and dissemination of information to users. Therefore, in the process of shaping and disseminating the image of Chinese cities, not only needs the city’s official account strengthens its communication capacity but also should encourage the city’s people to participate in communication activities, to stimulate the people’s urban pride, cultural confidence, and enthusiasm for external communication. As TikTok is an overseas video platform, short videos uploaded by overseas audiences to observe Chinese cities from the perspective of “other shaping” can also help shape the city image more truly, comprehensively, and objectively. Therefore, Chinese cities can choose to invite overseas influential opinion leaders such as tourism bloggers and Internet celebrities to participate in the content production and value creation of the city image, Outline the international features of Chinese cities with the other country’s discourse system, and directly draw in the distance of overseas audiences.

4.2. Explore Common Cultural Symbols and Adhere to High-quality Content Output

In the process of cross-cultural communication of city image, to prevent the misinterpretation of symbolic meaning caused by different cultural backgrounds, and even the phenomenon of “antagonistic interpretation”, Chinese cities should grasp the needs of overseas audiences and select cultural common symbols, such as food, architecture, sports, animal protection and other symbols with world common significance for coding. At the same time, urban communicators should be aware that the quality of video content also directly determines the scope and influence of video transmission. Using AHP fuzzy comprehensive evaluation as the framework to study TikTok users’ forwarding behavior, the results show that the quality of short video content has a great impact on users’ willingness to share, and “content practicability” also plays a role in users’ forwarding or sharing [15]. Therefore, urban communicators should adhere to high-quality urban content output, such as making relevant videos that can meet the spiritual pleasure needs of overseas audiences or provide practical urban tourism guidance, to leave a good memory and impression on the audience.

4.3. Grasp the Law of Short Video Transmission and Strengthen Cultural Interaction

TikTok’s short video transmission rules include that the main body of the transmission is self-media, with fast transmission speed, wide range, and diversified content. In addition, the platform algorithm and the preference recommendation mechanism under big data analysis have promoted the city’s image transmission from the traditional serious government’s external transmission to the penetration of we media, allowing overseas audiences to shape and resonate with the city’s image in the video stream. Therefore, the idea of short video communication of the international image of Chinese cities should shift from “publicity” to “dialogue”, replace the previous pure display and persuasion publicity mode with storytelling and emotional communication, enhance the stickiness of overseas audiences and the sense of city intimacy using interactive communication between different cultures, and practice the idea of a community with a shared future for mankind. The use of lively and interesting lenses to tell high-quality and distinctive Chinese city stories can focus the story perspective on the happy and interesting life moments of the general public, inject the city image into the vivid story, and imperceptibly shape and spread the international image of cities.

5. Conclusion

This paper takes the international image shaping and dissemination model of the popular Chinese city Chengdu on TikTok as the research object and uses the 5W model and the “encoding decoding” theory as the theoretical basis to explore the strategies and effects of Chinese city image and culture dissemination on TikTok from a cross-cultural perspective. This paper analyzes the current situation and mode of international image building and communication of Chengdu on TikTok in detail from four aspects of communicators, communication content, communication audience, and communication effect, and summarizes the external communication strategy of China’s urban image. The dissemination subject should be diversified and encourage an “other shaping” perspective narrative, the dissemination content should have urban uniqueness and cross-cultural barriers. On the basis of grasping the dissemination law of TikTok, this study chooses to use dialogue instead of propaganda, making the urban image more intimate, three-dimensional, and vivid. However, the current dissemination mode of urban images on TikTok has also experienced homogenization, with audiences experiencing varying degrees of aesthetic fatigue. Therefore, innovative content and narrative methods on the basis of short videos are the key to future international communication in Chinese cities.

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