A Study on the Communication of City Image on Overseas Short Video Platforms—Taking the Hangzhou Image on TikTok as an Example

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Abstract. As the capital city of Zhejiang Province, Hangzhou is famous as a cultural metropolis in China with a lengthy history. Since the broad market of short videos has created new opportunities for city image communication, the emerging way of "Learn about a city on TikTok" has highlighted the cultural significance of different cities. Therefore, this paper will take short videos about Hangzhou on TikTok as the research object, employing content analysis and cases study to investigate the attractions of popular short videos and then explore the role of overseas short videos in shaping the city image. According to the study, popular short videos fall into four main categories: knowledge-based, feeling-based, peculiarity-based and entertainment-based. Based on the study of the characteristics of popular videos, this paper focuses on how to construct city images on overseas short video platforms and proposed corresponding solutions, including the clarification of the positioning of the city, the creation of representative visual symbols, the establishment of a knowledgeable database, and the integration of cultural resources.

Keywords: TikTok · Short Video Platform · Hangzhou · City Image Communication

1 Introduction

In *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*, Lewis Mumford puts forward that the city image, as a subsystem and part of the national picture, refers to people's subjective views of the city. The construction of a city's image is a special communication approach driven by the combined forces of mass media, personal experience, interpersonal contact, memory, and environment (Mumford, 1961). The short video is a new medium that combines video, text, music, and other elements. The propaganda of short videos to the city has produced the phenomenon of "Internet Celebrity City". Douyin, a popular domestic short video platform, has had a spectacular influence on shaping cities' images in recent years, spawning a slew of Internet celebrity cities in China, such as Chongqing, Xi'an, and Wuhan, which are regularly featured on short video platforms. TikTok, the international version of Douyin, has also become an important platform for Westerners to learn about Chinese culture. According to Sensor

Tower, TikTok downloads have increased significantly, with over 3 billion downloads globally as of November 2021 (Sensor Power, 2021). More and more international subscribers are getting to know the cityscapes and cultures of different countries through short video platforms.

Following a review of the literature, the author finds that the majority of the current literature focuses on the following topics. First, emphasis is put on the problems, challenges, and methods for spreading city image through short video platforms. Second, the interaction of short videos with cities is also a hot issue. Third, attention is paid to the exploration of the approaches and features of city image presentation on short video platforms. In the digital information time, video platforms have created new opportunities for the global communication of city images. However, based on previous literature, there is a lack of specific research exploring the dissemination of city images on overseas short video platforms. Therefore, this paper will take TikTok short videos about Hangzhou, a new Internet celebrity city and a digital city that stemmed from the ancient capital of China's seven dynasties, as the research object. The author chooses the top 100 Hangzhou city short videos with the highest number of likes on TikTok to explore the attractions of popular short videos and examine how overseas short video platforms can play a role in building the city's images.

2   Attractions of the Hangzhou City Short Videos

Hangzhou is famous as a cultural metropolis with a lengthy history in China. Its unique cultural symbols have become the outward expression of Hangzhou's urban image. Based on the sample collection and analysis, the highly acclaimed short videos related to Hangzhou city are mainly characterised by their intellectual, emotionally inclined, peculiar and entertaining nature.

2.1   Knowledge: Broadening Horizons

Videos that go beyond the conventional views of foreigners are likely to receive more attention. Many major activities, events and conferences, including the G20 Summit, the Hangzhou Asian Games and the Global E-Commerce Expo, have benefited from being streamed live or pushed online on the TikTok platform. For example, user hangang flavor posted a series of promotional videos for the Asian Games, featuring an overview of the event and panoramic images of the main stadium. His short video describing the origins and history of the Asian Games also received good attention, with over 69,000 views. Additionally, short videos on the prevention and control of the epidemic in Hangzhou received a considerable number of likes, such as the video on underground security procedures, which outlines the application of the Hangzhou Health Code during the epidemic. The role of knowledge-based short videos is primarily to inform people or introduce them to something they are unfamiliar with. This type of short video helps people to gain new knowledge and ideas about the city so as to get a better image of it.

2.2   Feeling: Emotional Outpouring

In short videos, unique emotional outpouring mainly refers to the expression of ordinary feelings in unconventional ways, such as reflections on life and feelings about the city and its citizens by means of memoirs, chat logs, photos and monologues, etc. In the selected video samples, some of the foreign tourists would express their love and appreciation for the citizens of Hangzhou by sharing their personal stories and interesting experiences on the short video platform. For example, user mickey.keo posted a short video on TikTok which recorded a photo of two of him with a Hangzhou woman, a landlord who warmly and kindly received him and cooked him sumptuous meals. The user also posted a WeChat record of their chat and funny emojis exclusive for the elderly in memory of the time, which garnered 535.3k likes. This short video well portrays the kindness and friendliness of Hangzhou citizens.

2.3   Peculiarity: Unconventional Topics

The quirky and original elements in short videos often give the audience an unexpected sense of strangeness, which may achieve a good response. Different groups have different levels of information literacy, so the sense of oddity varies from group to group, and tends to have a more substantial impact on specific groups of people. For example, a video recorded by user hiniha0xincha0 about a 5G public toilet in Hangzhou detailed the features of this smart device and received 5 million views. Such videos will be more likely to be pushed to the pages of tech enthusiasts, as well as be of interest to people in areas with less-developed sanitation facilities. Another short video, consisting of footage of the 'squid game' at Hangzhou Ikea, documenting the classic scene of soldiers lining up and the game of no moving wooden men, was enthusiastically discussed by fans of the TV series. According to research and statistics, short videos on unconventional topics, especially for exclusive groups of people, often receive more likes and comments.

2.4   Entertainment: Life Records

In short videos, entertainment refers to performances and activities such as shows, plays and interesting life records that give people pleasure. Overseas users capture citizens' daily life through lenses and pictures, describing the city's culture, history, and cityscape, resulting in a distinct visual communication and sensory culture. For instance, user hiniha0xincha0 posted a few daily videos about street scenes, food, and tourists in Hangzhou, one of which received 1.3 million views. This short video depicts a delivery man dressed as a civet cat, crossing the busy street and soon disappearing, stylishly dressed pedestrians, and street food such as stinky tofu and grilled sausages outside the Hubin Yintai Shopping Centre. These short videos of everyday life are a good illustration of Hangzhou's scenic beauty and city culture.

3   Accessibilities of Short Videos in Propagating City Image

3.1   Multidimensional City Image Generated by the Masses

With producers worldwide, short videos on TikTok present vivid and multidimensional city images. Cities shown from the perspective of the masses tend to be more grounded

and closer to life. Videos on TikTok show not only scenic spots and historical sites such as the Leifeng Pagoda, the Broken Bridge and the West Lake, but also modern and civilised buildings such as the newly built Asian Games Stadium. In addition, local cuisine, sports competitions and citizens' life also help global users to get a more comprehensive understanding of Hangzhou.

3.2   Accurate Information Dissemination Based on User Preferences

Short video platforms such as TikTok have powerful algorithmic logic and data collection capabilities to push video content precisely based on user preferences. Additionally, the platform will push relevant professionally generated content and advertising resources in proportion to promote a rational distribution of resources. This will increase profits on the one hand, and broaden the range of information available to users on the other. Short video platforms can analyse and promote content that matches users' preferences based on data collection. Meanwhile, the unpredictability of short video content increases the dopamine rush that keeps people excited and motivated. In the case of city image distribution, once a user swipes on and is interested in a video, the platform will continue to push similar content based on keywords. In overseas short video platforms, the portrayal of city images in users' minds also changes according to their preferences.

3.3   Global Attention Paid to Large-Scale Cultural and Sports Events

Culture is the spirit and soul of a city. Large-scale cultural events such as the "Year of Xi'an, Most of China" and the "Qingdao International Beer Festival" has provided a window into the cultural landscape of a city. Hangzhou, a famous ancient city as well as an emerging digital city, has also demonstrated its cultural development through events such as G20 Summit and International E-business Expo. Overseas short video platforms effectively broaden the scope of information dissemination and increase the attention of significant events, making people around the world aware of and involved in the promotion. Furthermore, topics related to major events are likely to attract widespread attention around the world, thereby increasing the visibility of the city's brand.

4   Problems with Tiktok Short Videos in Propagating City Image

4.1   Single Genre and Homogeneous Content

TikTok's algorithmic coding technology can push more videos with similar content that may be of interest to users based on their preferences, but it also produces many homogenised videos with certain characteristics. Besides, there is always a homogeneity in the presentation of the city's tourist attractions due to the wide distribution of popular videos and events. Among the video samples chosen, the most popular videos are about cityscape, commercial attractions and local diet. Many users choose the street scenes around the Hubin business district to represent Hangzhou and record them in short videos, using the platform as a medium to spread them. Although prosperous night scenes in videos are likely to attract viewers and increase popularity, one-sided content tends to overlook some other niche but representative scenic spots, such as ancient towns like Wuzhen and Tangqi.

4.2   Lack of Clarity in the CIty's Positioning

According to the content analysis of Hangzhou image communication on short video platforms, the problems that can be identified are the excessive commercialisation of the city's image and the unclear positioning of Hangzhou city. To develop a good city brand, the city should first have a distinctive connotation and personality, rather than a uniform city image. As one of the seven ancient capitals of China, Hangzhou has obvious cultural advantages. Humans flourished here as early as 5,000 years ago, and the ancient city site of Liangzhu was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2019. However, these cultural connotations and displays of civilisation are not prominent in the modern cityscape created by technological advancements. For example, the light show, intelligent robots and innovative architecture in the video highlight the beauty and technological development of Hangzhou, but lack cultural symbolism and historical context. As a result, the image of the city is relatively simple for the public.

5   Strategies for Constructing City Image on the Overseas Short Video Platform

5.1   Clarifying the CIty's Positioning and Creating Visual Symbols

As famous ancient cities, Hangzhou and Suzhou have always carried the city tag of "Heaven above, Suzhou and Hangzhou below". With the development of the digital economy, Hangzhou has progressively developed into an international metropolis. Therefore, in addition to historical images, new city identities such as e-commerce and digital cities should also be conveyed through short videos. Furthermore, aside from grounded content published by the general public, professional producers such as cultural and tourism enterprises, news agencies and large corporations can also be stationed on the short video platform to produce more professional and targeted content and create more distinct visual symbols to help audiences clarify the city's image and understand Hangzhou's history and culture in more detail. In a context where web celebrities also have a huge influence, relevant accounts can collaborate with internationally renowned online celebrities to co-brand the city and build a visual identity for the city.

5.2   Incorporating Different Elements to Make Engaging Videos

In general, based on the previous study, the author finds that explosive short videos related to Hangzhou's city image mainly fall into four categories: knowledge-based, feeling-based, peculiarity-based and entertainment-based. In these short videos, different elements of appeal can be combined to provide viewers with a richer cultural resource from multiple perspectives. For example, in the promotional videos for the Asian Games, knowledge-based elements such as the introduction of the Asian Games mascot and the events can be linked to entertaining elements such as the folk activities to welcome the Asian Games, which may further reflect the humanistic spirit of Hangzhou and innovate the narrative expression. In addition, the use of special topics can make the content more interesting and appeal to different groups, thus updating their views of Hangzhou.

5.3 Increasing Knowledge-Based Information and Integrating Cultural Resources

Short videos with explicit knowledge can be used not only as a kind of popular science but also as a tool for viewers to expand their horizons and get fascinated by urban culture. Furthermore, establishing an extensive database of the city's cultural memory is also an effective method to manage cultural resources. Based on the Geographic Information System, the big data infrastructure brings together the rich resources of Hangzhou libraries, archives, cultural centres and history databases, allowing short videos users to travel through the city's past and present, from all walks of life, and thus reduce cultural discounts by obtaining a thorough understanding.

6 Conclusion

As an overseas short video platform, TikTok has changed the way people communicate, given a new look to cities, and offered the new potential for molding city images. Therefore, using Hangzhou city-related short videos on TikTok as an example, the author explores the appeal of short videos and examines how overseas short video platforms can play a role in building the city's images. This paper also proposes suggestions to promote the city's external communication, and expand the theoretical discussion of the construction and propagating of city image in the digital era.

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