

# Short Videos and City Image Communication: Taking Xi'an as an Example

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## ABSTRACT

The construction and dissemination of a good city image is an important factor in enhancing city competitiveness, which is conducive to promoting city economic, social, and cultural development. The rise of short video platforms has provided new opportunities for the construction and communication of city images. This article takes Xi'an, a popular city on the internet, as an example to explore the shaping and communication effects of short videos on city image, in order to provide ideas for the communication of city image for more cities.

**Keywords:** Xi'an, Short videos, City images, City brands, Communication.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, short video platforms represented by Tiktok and Kwai have developed rapidly. In the communication of popular culture, short videos exhibit strong expressive, communicative, and persuasive power, becoming a powerful visual force in constructing society and quickly accumulating a large number of users. According to the 52nd "Statistical Report on the Development of China's Internet", as of June 2023, the number of short video users has reached 1.026 billion.[1]

The popularity of short videos is the result of the deep popularization and continuous evolution of mobile internet. In the context of globalization and informatization, how to shape and disseminate a unique and distinct urban image has become a concern in various regions. The short video communication of city image has become a new blue ocean. Short videos provide new channels and approaches for shaping city images. What is the innovative mechanism for short videos to help the city's image "become widely known"? What problems are faced during the dissemination process? How can short videos contribute to the communication of a city's image? This article takes "Internet celebrity city" Xi'an as an example to analyze the impact of short videos on the construction of city image, providing new reference

for the change of city image communication strategies.

## 2. SHORT VIDEOS BECOMING A NEW FORCE IN CITY IMAGE COMMUNICATION

With its long history, culture, and unique natural geographical environment, Xi'an's rich, ancient, and traditional city image has deeply penetrated people's hearts. However, the traditional urban image positioning of "ancient capital" clearly cannot meet the current aesthetic needs. It is difficult for historical and cultural resources to have specific and close value with individuals. How to bridge the alienation between cultural capital and people is a challenging problem.

As early as 2010, Xi'an took the basic idea of "world city, cultural capital" and proposed to build itself into an international metropolis, the most competitive city in the western region, "forming a balance point for the national economic strategy and a driving point for regional coordination."<sup>1</sup> Xi'an already has sufficient economic strength and industrial foundation, but the updating and dissemination of its urban image cannot keep up

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1. Please refer to the "Research on the Spatial Development Strategy of the Overall Planning of Xi'an" released at the International Forum on the Development Strategy of the Overall Planning of Xi'an on June 12, 2010.

with the pace of the times. Xi'an has made efforts to build "Museum City", "Music City", "Book City" and so on, but its promotional strategy is relatively conservative and has had little effect. To expand its influence, cities must shape and disseminate their urban image through multiple channels, channels, and directions. As a western city, Chengdu was one of the earliest to hire professional public relations companies for city image marketing. Since 2003, the Chengdu Municipal Government has been cooperating with professional institutions to mature the "Panda Hometown" city business card, taking international marketing to the forefront.

The rise of short videos has become an important tool for shaping the image of cities. In April 2018, Xi'an Tourism Development Committee reached cooperation with Tiktok. Based on the full range of products of Tiktok, the two sides publicized and promoted the cultural tourism resources of Xi'an, "through the promotion of cultural cities, customized city theme challenges, in-depth experience of Tiktok talent, and Tiktok version of the city short film to carry out all-round packaging and promotion of Xi'an, and create a short video business card for Xi'an." [2] Xi'an leverages professional institutions to jointly carry out urban marketing and build urban IP brands, conveying a new urban image that combines "international style, technological style, and local flavor".

The immersive scene, rich audio-visual experience, interactive participation, interesting details, and differentiated "digital" landscape of short videos have quickly become the traffic code for Xi'an to gain popularity. Xi'an quickly leverages the traffic accumulated through short videos to change its previously low-key image as the capital city of Northwest China, forming an explosive trend of popularity. The assistance of short videos in promoting city image has achieved a positive interaction between online and offline, bringing significant and rapid tourism benefits. During the May Day holiday of 2018 alone, Xi'an delivered a remarkable report card, with total tourism revenue of 4.5 billion yuan, an increase of 139%, ranking third among the "Top 10 Chinese Tourism Destinations".

### **3. INNOVATIVE PRACTICE OF INTERNET CELEBRITY XI'AN'S BECOMING WIDELY KNOWN**

According to the data released in the "White Paper on Short Video and Urban Image Research"<sup>2</sup>, Xi'an, a new first tier city, has surpassed Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen in terms of city image video playback. Under the influence of short videos, Xi'an has deeply explored its history and culture, innovated content dissemination, and short video dissemination based on city characteristics has been highly sought after by users. Short videos are different from traditional media. In terms of updating thinking, the planners and executors of city image communication in Xi'an use dialogue instead of propaganda, following the new gameplay and laws of short video dissemination. In terms of production content, Xi'an follows the "BEST rule", excavates the diversified and differentiated positioning of the city, and creates iconic or representative city symbols.

#### ***3.1 Thinking Update: Dialogue Replacing Propaganda***

In the traditional media stage, the communication of city image is mainly carried out by the government. Media organizations disseminate pre-made media content to specific audiences. The public understands the city's image through media reports, television advertisements, and other means. This form of city image communication is mainly one-way dissemination based on official discourse. Due to its macro positioning and weak promotion, most urban image propaganda is severely homogenized.

In the mobile short video stage, ordinary users serve as both content producers and communicators. Users are both recipients and communicators of information, as well as creators of content. UGC (User Generated Content) has stimulated the creative enthusiasm and communication potential of the public, integrating itself into the communication of city image, and participating in it in a more micro and close range way. Therefore, diverse, full, and more down-to-earth city characteristic symbols are easily explored and created by users.

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2. Tiktok, Toutiao Index and the City Brand Research Office of the National Image Communication Research Center of Tsinghua University jointly released the "White Paper on Short Video and City Image Research".

Short videos have created a content generation and communication pattern of "video+social", creating a new social scene for users. Short video platforms prioritize recommending high-quality videos with high views and like to quickly attract and retain users. Short video platforms will also continuously optimize algorithms based on the user's geographical location, age, and preferences, in order to continuously cater to the user's aesthetic and preferences, and maximize the breadth and depth of the city's image. As a result, the communication of city image has transitioned from the official discourse system to the folk discourse system, replacing the original one-way propaganda model with a dialogue model.

### ***3.2 Content Update: Following the "BEST Rule" to Deeply Cultivate Local Culture***

Short video platforms provide effective technical support for the shaping and communication of popular city tourism check-in destinations. Accurate positioning and high-quality content is the core of short videos. On short video platforms, city related short video elements include local cuisine, commercial attractions, urban landscapes, local culture, natural landscapes, government image, historical attractions, municipal settings, municipal services, and so on. Among many categories, Xi'an has integrated these elements and implanted multiple BEST symbol carriers that can display the city's image in urban short videos, quickly completing the initialization and optimization of the city's image. According to the White Paper on the Study of Short Video and Urban Image, the symbol carrier of urban image in short videos can be summarized as "BEST". This rule includes the following aspects: "BGM - city music, Eating - local cuisine, Scene - landscape scenery, Technology - facilities with a sense of technology." [3] In short video creation, these four types of symbols better reflect the unique cultural genes of modern cities.

Firstly, as the ancient capital of the Thirteen Dynasties and the starting point of the ancient Silk Road, Xi'an continues to make efforts on the basis of its already profound cultural and historical heritage. Xi'an also caught the east wind of nation tide. The coordinates of major tourist attractions in the city, such as the city wall, Bell and Drum Tower, Big Wild Goose Pagoda, Little Wild Goose Pagoda, Shaanxi History Museum, Datang Furong Garden, Beilin Museum, Xi'an Museum, and

Chang'an 24 Hours Theme Block, have become popular places for check-in. These urban landscapes condense local cultural experiences, activate and rejuvenate collective memories of the Tang Dynasty culture, and express recognition of historical and cultural significance.

"Food is the top priority for the people", a food theme with low entry barriers and down-to-earth atmosphere, has always been a hot topic on short video platforms. Located in Xi'an, Yongxingfang, it is one of the earliest popular attractions on short video platforms. The "Bowl Throwing Wine" launched within the scenic spot provides a refreshing and heroic experience when the bowl is forcefully thrown after drinking, triggering a frenzy of imitation following the trend. In addition to traditional cuisine, Maobi crispy pastry, gourd-shaped chicken, and other distinctive food symbols have become popular in Xi'an.

Short videos are also becoming a new hub for promoting Chinese music. A piece of music is a unit of content aggregation. The contextualized lyrics and the dialect singing of the creators in "The Song of Xi'an People" resonate with the dissemination subject and audience. The characteristics of landmark buildings (Drum Tower, Bell Tower, Xi'an City Wall, trains, high-rise buildings), specialty cuisine (steamed buns), and the carefree personality of Shaanxi people were portrayed in "The Song of Xi'an People". The popularity of city folk songs and the popularity of short videos are mutually reinforcing, rebuilding people's imagination of the city of Xi'an.

Xi'an relies on local historical and cultural resources to create a series of activities for its brand IP "Spring Festival in Xi'an, Best Expression of China". Xi'an in history was a symbol of China's strength and openness. Xi'an has hosted drone performances, light shows, etc., enhancing the impression of the ancient capital being "open". More and more scenic spots are using creativity and technology to bring history and culture to life, stimulating new energy in tourism consumption. Xi'an has continued to create immersive interactive tourism experiences inspired by Tang Dynasty ladies, such as "Little Sister of the Tumbler" and "Secret Box of the Prosperous Tang Dynasty", which are highly characteristic of Tang Dynasty culture.

In short, the symbolic embedding of urban scenes, embodied experiences of urban life, and ceremonial performances and series of festival activities has attracted more users and tourists to

explore and experience Xi'an. The cultural and tourism value of Xi'an has been explored.

#### **4. REDEFINING THE CITY IMAGE OF XI'AN THROUGH DEDUCTION, SUBSTITUTION, AND RETELLING**

"City image is the overall impression and evaluation of the public on material elements such as industrial economy, architectural space, and non-material elements such as cultural history and social appearance of a city. It reflects the past and current situation of a city, as well as expectations for its future development." [4] In the current era of economic globalization and information networking, the shaping and communication of city image not only directly affects the city's popularity and influence, but also constantly reconstructs people's understanding of the city, constructing society's confidence in the future development of this city.

In the pre-mobile internet era, the government and official media were the planners and executors of city image communication. The visitors can only obtain information about the city's image through traditional media such as television and newspapers. Compared to the perspective of onlookers in the traditional media era, short videos bring deep interaction based on "scenes". Taking "check-in" as an example, "watching videos - going to clock in - taking videos to share and clock in - attracting more visitors" has formed a new closed-loop of urban marketing. In the process of content dissemination, "users automatically enter the first perspective of tourists and fantasize about the tourism experience". [5] Therefore, immersive interpretation and vivid camera perspectives break through traditional regional boundaries. The media has influenced people's understanding of the real world because it creates a virtual geography that is changing people's perception of places. "Cities have always been a material symbol with a distinct sense of locality, but the deconstruction of locality by global media has created another form of urban spatial image." [6]

Unlike the past where a city's attributes were defined based on natural conditions such as docks, industry, and technology, the emergence of "internet celebrity" cities reflects the enormous potential of short videos in promoting city image communication, as well as the consumerism, networking, and media aspects of society. Short videos have rewritten the city's image, realizing the reconstruction of the meaning of city image

communication, and presenting a more diverse appearance of the city. Short videos have filled the three major gaps in Xi'an's city marketing: strong content but weak form, rigid and flat urban image, and estrangement from young people. Xi'an excavates its own historical, cultural, or contemporary resources, extracts the city spirit, and allows these characteristics and spirits to be reflected through symbolic operations. Xi'an has increased its emphasis on the selection and communication of content corresponding to the four major symbol carriers - "BEST", shaping a brand new image in the virtual online space. Xi'an has changed people's traditional positioning of Xi'an as an "ancient city" through the communication power of short videos. It has replaced the previous flat and singular city impression with "localization, marketization, and freshness", forming a more three-dimensional, diverse, and inclusive city image.

#### **5. THE CHALLENGES FACED BY "INTERNET CELEBRITY" XI'AN AFTER IT BECOMING WIDELY KNOWN**

Short videos provide strong support for the shaping and communication of the city image of Xi'an, and this new form of communication also exposes many practical problems. The popularity of the internet does not equal the spread of reputation. The city is facing severe challenges as it rapidly becomes popular.

At the operational level, there are problems with the communication of city image through short videos, such as insufficient cultural connotations, concentrated types, and insufficient cultural heritage. The novelty and highlights of short videos is the key to attracting many audiences. Due to the limited carrying capacity of short video information, fragmented narratives emphasize interest and cater to the entertainment needs of the audience. However, excessive pursuit of sensory novelty in cultural forms will inevitably overlook the exploration of the deeper connotations of urbanization. The uneven quality of short video content and the long-term use of short videos can bring about the "information cocoon" effect, which also deeply affects the shaping of city image. In addition, blindly pursuing sensory stimulation and following the trend has led to the production of more similar videos, becoming a major bottleneck for short video platforms to spread the city's image. Relying on algorithmic recommendation models,

content distribution algorithms will also push such videos, gradually causing users to experience aesthetic fatigue and unable to form a long tail effect.

On the other hand, in order to gain network traffic and fans, some short videos create gimmicks, distort the truth, and deconstruct mainstream values. Only traffic theory can also disrupt the normal urban marketing mechanism, and even cause false advertising, which cannot reflect the real situation. Users lack sufficient rational thinking on the authenticity of short video information content and intentionally guiding public opinion, which can easily lead to controversy and trigger negative emotions among online groups. Negative urban image events will also be rapidly fermenting on short video platforms. Once an inherent urban image perception is formed, it is difficult to change in the short term. If the effectiveness monitoring and evaluation of short video communication are ignored, it will actually undermine the sustainability of urban development. At present, Xi'an has weak public opinion monitoring, weak crisis awareness, and a lack of professional response measures from relevant departments to emergencies.

## 6. SUGGESTIONS

Becoming an internet celebrity is not the ultimate goal of a city. The popularity of Xi'an is not only due to the victory of brand marketing achieved through the use of short videos in urban image, but also the inevitable result of the joint shaping of various comprehensive factors in urban development. The competition between cities is becoming increasingly fierce, and in the context of the increasing talent dividend, how to turn "internet celebrity" traffic into a driving force for development and how cities can have a sustained siphon effect have become unavoidable propositions.

The government should do a good job in top-level design, clarify and continuously update urban positioning, strengthen urban characteristics, concentrate advantageous resources, and attach importance to urban management, in order to avoid outdated urban positioning affecting the city's image and keeping up with the times, thereby limiting urban development. "The highest level of city brand construction is to shape the long-term strategic guidance of urban brands, cooperate with city positioning, and carry out comprehensive, planned, targeted, and feasible city symbol

management and dissemination from an overall perspective." [7] City top-level designers need to develop a sustainable, hierarchical, and holistic urban high-quality communication system, pay attention to the dynamics and trends of public opinion, continuously output cultural and creative scenes, use innovation to face the "traffic economy", timely summarize experience, and achieve a complementary and virtuous cycle of online and offline.

At a deeper level, the essence of urban competition is the competition and competition of various resources, market opportunities, development opportunities, and living spaces between cities. It is not only a display of urban cultural soft power, but also a struggle between multiple and complex factors such as politics, economy, culture, and population. The explosive popularity of cities has brought about a surge in migrant population. If cities lack corresponding infrastructure carrying capacity and social service management level, it will lead to the destruction of urban social life order and bring risks and hidden dangers. To build a long-lasting high-quality urban brand and make "internet celebrities" become "long-lasting", it is necessary to explore the endogenous driving force of urban marketing and enhance the city's organizational strength.

With the new globalization led by the "the Belt and Road", it has become the need of the times for Chinese culture to go global and contribute more Chinese wisdom to the common well-being of all mankind. The Chinese economy is deepening, and as an important hub city, Xi'an not only represents itself, the western region, but also represents the image and culture of the country. This puts forward higher requirements for the spread of the city image, improves the city's global narrative ability, speeds up the construction of the global identity system of the city image, and integrates into the overall pattern of jointly building the "the Belt and Road".

## 7. CONCLUSION

In the context of media changes, most urban brands are facing reshaping rather than simply replicating, thereby activating the driving force of urban development. It is necessary to give full play to the positive role of short videos and empower the shaping of urban image. Exploring the impact of short videos on the communication of Xi'an's urban image is a valuable attempt to study urban image communication and provides valuable reference experience for China's urban image communication.

How to utilize emerging media to promote the communication of urban image remains a topic that requires long-term exploration.

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