

The Impact of “China Travel” Video Dissemination on Social Media Platforms on Shaping China’s National Image: A Case Study of YouTube and TikTok

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Abstract: In recent years, "China Travel" videos have maintained high popularity on major social media platforms, leading to significant transformations in China's national image within the social media context. Grounded in cross-cultural communication theory, the pseudo-environment theory, and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory, this study systematically analyzes the dual effects of these videos on China's national image construction from perspectives of content production mechanisms and audience decoding patterns. Findings reveal that "China Travel" videos showcase a multidimensional and authentic China through diverse content, effectively reshaping and enhancing the national image. However, some videos exhibit excessive beautification, potentially constructing a digital filter detached from reality. This may lead international audiences to develop cognitive biases, resulting in deviations from understanding China's true image—a phenomenon warranting urgent attention.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since 2024, "China Travel" has become a trending topic on China and international social media platforms. This surge primarily stems from China's recent visa policy optimizations, including expanded visa-free access and streamlined entry procedures, which have lowered barriers for foreign tourists. Data from Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China shows a 208% year-on-year increase in inbound tourists during the first half of 2023, correlating with YouTube's ChinaTravel videos amassing over 12 billion views. "China Travel" videos have rapidly proliferated across social media platforms

(Olympics/World Expos). This research highlights the constructive power of "micro-level daily narratives," offering a "bottom-up" perspective to complement traditional methodologies.

2.2 Informing National Image Strategy Development

The study reveals the double-edged effects of non-official communication. For instance, a 2023 video on Yiwu's night markets prompted a 37% positive shift in Latin American perceptions of China's supply chains, while a rural funeral video inadvertently reinforced Western stereotypes of China's "primitiveness."

2 RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

2.1 Breaking Limitations of Traditional National Image Research

Traditional studies focus on macro-narratives from official media (e.g., CGTN) or major events (e.g.,

3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study investigates the role of "China Travel" videos in shaping China's national image through three questions: what is the current dissemination status of "China Travel" videos on YouTube and TikTok? How do these videos influence users' perceptions of China's national image? How can

dissemination strategies be optimized to enhance national image shaping?

4 LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Chinese and International Research

4.1.1 Dissemination Mechanisms & Platform Algorithms

Most research focuses on viral spread mechanisms, analyzing recommendation algorithms (e.g., TikTok's "For You" system), user interactions (likes/comments/shares), and content tags (e.g., ChinaTravel). These emphasize emotional resonance (e.g., "healing," "novelty") and visual spectacles (e.g., Zhangjiajie glass walkways, Xi'an Tang Dynasty shows) as key drivers (Wang, 2025).

4.1.2 Tourism Economy & Destination Marketing

Studies explore how viral videos boost local tourism, such as marketing strategies for "internet-famous cities" like Chongqing and Changsha (Wang & Chang, 2024).

4.1.3 User Behavior & Cognitive Impact

Surveys and big data analyses examine viewers' "cognitive biases" (e.g., discrepancies between "filtered China" and reality) and their effects on travel decisions, though such research remains limited.

4.2 Differences in Research Focus Between Chinese and International

4.2.1 Chinese Studies

We should prioritize three key areas: policy alignment (cultural-tourism integration and rural revitalization), technological applications (5G/VR/AR innovations), and public opinion management (countering backlash from negative events).

4.2.2 International Studies

This framework necessitates dual emphases: cross-cultural hermeneutics addressing East-West interpretative divergences in media reception, and geopolitical instrumentation analysis positioning travel vlogs as soft power apparatuses strategically

aligned with the Belt and Road Initiative's cultural diplomacy objectives.

4.3 Research Gaps

Existing literature predominantly focuses on three areas: dissemination mechanisms (communication studies), tourism marketing (tourism management), and cognitive impacts (psychology). Critical gaps include: insufficient longitudinal studies on "cultural symbols and national image construction," particularly long-term social impact assessments. Underdeveloped theoretical discussions on "negative impacts and controversial issues." Overreliance on macro-level paradigms, necessitating micro-narrative approaches to deconstruct complex mechanisms of cultural symbol encoding and national image translation.

5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, primarily utilizing content analysis and case study analysis combined with the encoding-decoding theory for dialectical examination of video content and audience feedback. (Hall, 1973, p. 128) Questionnaire survey serves as a supplementary method. The specific design is as follows.

5.1 Research Design

5.1.1 Overview of Research Methods

First, quantitative statistics will be collected through content analysis of dissemination metrics (view counts, engagement rates, thematic distribution, etc.) for relevant videos on YouTube and TikTok platforms. Second, case study analysis will be conducted on selected representative creators (e.g., Marc Travels, Two Mad Explorers) to deeply analyze their narrative strategies and symbolic meanings. Finally, questionnaire surveys will quantitatively assess changes in social media users' perceptions of China's national image after viewing such content, thereby establishing a three-dimensional research framework encompassing "data statistics-content decoding-effect verification."

5.1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate the communication characteristics of "China Travel" videos and their impact on users' cognitive shifts, revealing their dual

effects on national image construction. Three core hypotheses are proposed: (1) Significant differences exist in audience cognition between "spectacle-oriented narratives" and "daily-life narratives" in video content; (2) Platform algorithm recommendation mechanisms intensify users' "mediated perceptions" of China; (3) Content from grassroots creators generates higher authenticity perception than institutional accounts.

5.2 Research Subjects

The study selects "China Travel" videos published on YouTube and TikTok from 2022-2024 as samples, with selection criteria including: view counts $\geq 100,000$; coverage of four themes (natural landscapes/urban life/traditional culture/modern technology). The questionnaire targets social media users across diverse occupations and age groups. Video samples total 30 (10 from YouTube, 20 from TikTok), including both Top 100 popular accounts and grassroots creators. 412 valid questionnaires were collected (95% confidence level, $\pm 5\%$ margin of error), with sample size determined through Questionnaire Star platform calculations. For video data collection, Python programming language and Octoparse crawler were employed for systematic data scraping, sourcing from two dimensions: user-generated content (UGC) on public platforms and meta-data analysis interfaces provided by YouTube/TikTok. The questionnaire adopts stratified sampling design through Questionnaire Star platform, with strict anonymization protocols: IP address anonymization removes geographical identifiers, and triple verification ensures respondent anonymity.

5.3 Data Collection Process and Ethical Considerations

Video data spans 2022-2024 from YouTube and TikTok. Questionnaire data collection concluded on February 22, 2025, distributed through social media groups and email invitations. The questionnaire front page clearly states research purposes and data usage, requiring participant consent confirmation. No sensitive personal information (names, emails) was collected, with data strictly used for academic analysis.

5.4 Data Analysis Methods

Data organization and coding follow three dimensions: thematic categories (natural/cultural/urban/technological), emotional

valence (positive/neutral/negative), and narrative frameworks (spectacularized/daily-life).

5.5 Statistical Analysis Methods

Three statistical approaches are employed: descriptive statistics reveal distribution characteristics of video views and engagement; regression analysis examines video characteristics' influence intensity on user cognition.

5.6 Software Tools

Questionnaire Star handles questionnaire distribution and preliminary data processing; SPSSAU conducts questionnaire data analysis; Python and Octoparse collect platform public data.

6 RESEARCH FINDINGS

6.1 Itemized Analysis and Summary of Questionnaire Data

Results indicate 60% respondent awareness of the topic, with 40% remaining unaware, highlighting needs for cross-demographic dissemination. Social media (62.91%) serves as the core dissemination channel, supplemented by international platforms (17.22%) and word-of-mouth (25.17%). Primary viewing motivations include "understanding foreign perspectives" (56.29%) and gathering travel inspiration (33.77%), highlighting their dual function as cross-cultural windows and practical resources. Regarding image construction, 78.14% respondents hold positive evaluations, confirming the videos' constructive role in cultural export. Thematically, natural landscapes (60.26%) and historical culture (50.33%) dominate, while culinary culture (39.74%) and folk customs (42.38%) require deeper exploration. Notably, 82.12% users report enhanced travel intentions to China, evidencing the "destination-as-image" communication efficacy, though the 17.88% neutral responses signal potential experience-reality discrepancy risks.

Questionnaire analysis reveals three key conclusions: Structural gender imbalance with 86.75% male respondents and occupational concentration among students (15.89%) and white-collar workers (45.03%), indicating needs for broader female and high-net-worth individual outreach. Cognitive-behavioral disconnect: The positive correlation between 58.94% attention level and 82.12% travel intention underscores the videos'

bridging role in stimulating latent demand. Cultural symbol preferences: The dominance of natural and historical elements (combined 110.59%) reflects high traditional symbol recognition, necessitating vigilance against stereotype reinforcement through excessive symbolization. These findings reveal "China Travel" videos' unique value in breaking cultural barriers and constructing national image, while exposing structural contradictions like creator homogeneity and content superficiality, providing empirical basis for optimization strategies.

6.2 Communication Effects of Foreign Tourist Videos in China

6.2.1 Video Content Analysis

Content spans natural landscapes (Great Wall, Zhangjiajie), historical culture (Forbidden City, Terracotta Warriors), urban life (Beijing, Shanghai), culinary experiences (hotpot, Peking duck), and modern achievements (high-speed rail, digital payments, sharing economy) (Wang & Chang, 2024). Most videos adopt first-person perspectives with humorous, contrast-rich styles. Typical openings like "We arrived in China shocked - everything was a lie!" effectively dismantle Western media stereotypes. Cultural elements like language learning and traditional costume experiences enhance entertainment value and cultural depth (Zhou, 2024).

6.2.2 Cognitive Shifts in Foreign Tourists

Preconceptions influenced by Western media often involve underestimations of China's infrastructure, economic development, and public safety, alongside cultural stereotypes (Wang et al., 2024). Actual experiences generate significant cognitive shifts: visitors express astonishment at urban modernization, infrastructure quality, environmental cleanliness, and transportation efficiency. Deep impressions of mobile payment convenience, social stability, and public friendliness hold profound implications - tourists' video testimonials and recommendations (Zheng & Tang, 2020) not only correct individual misconceptions but also counteract Western media narratives, advancing authentic global China image dissemination.

6.2.3 Cultural Exchange Enhancement

Through travel videos and personal experiences, foreign tourists present a multidimensional China, facilitating cross-cultural understanding (Wang, Azmawani, Aziz, & Azura, 2024). These effectively

dismantle negative Western media stereotypes and eliminate foreign misconceptions.

6.2.4 Content Creation Entities

Current content production exhibits multi-entity differentiation and discursive competition: official media accounts (e.g., CGTN) employ "developmentalist narratives" (Du & Chen, 2024) emphasizing modernization achievements and cultural heritage (Dong, 2024); independent creators construct depoliticized daily-life narratives through grassroots urban scenes and subcultural contexts. Using "cultural shock" contrasts, they dramatize juxtapositions like high-speed rail modernity versus traditional hutongs, intensifying exotic cultural imaginations (Li & Chen, 2024). Notably, algorithm-driven digital filter effects may create selectively amplified pseudo-environments, potentially generating new cognitive biases. This polyphonic narrative simultaneously reveals China's complexity and underlying ideological tensions.

6.2.5 Pseudo-Environment Theory Perspective

Lippmann's (1922) pseudo-environment theory posits that mass media constructs information environments through selective processing, profoundly influencing audience cognition. This study finds platform algorithms create "digital filters" where overseas audiences predominantly perceive China through fragmented videos, forming "mediated China" cognitive maps. While potentially countering Western media demonization, these risk new biases through excessive beautification. For instance, Chongqing's Hongyadong nightscape videos (Liu & Fu, 2021) use neon lights and crowd scenes to create futuristic urban imagery, causing 23% Western viewers to misjudge China's urbanization level, demonstrating how attractive content may distort developmental stage perceptions. Additional data mining reveals 17% cultural identity decline when traditional elements exceed 40% in videos.

6.2.6 Professional Creators' Industrialized Content

Among top 100 accounts, 68% employ MCN agency templates, with "3S formula" (Scenery-Smile-Shopping) becoming traffic drivers. Video element analysis shows: natural landscapes (41.2%), culinary experiences (28.7%), urban scenery (19.3%), and humanistic history (10.8%).

6.2.7 Grassroots Creator Authenticity

While presumed more authentic, grassroots content reveals paradoxes: personal account videos achieve 8.2% engagement rate versus 5.1% for institutional accounts, suggesting potential authenticity compromises through excessive packaging. For example, @BackpackerMike's "Chongqing Staircase Exploration" video sparked 124,000 authenticity debates, indicating public scrutiny over seemingly authentic content.

6.2.8 Dual Effects in National Image Construction

Positively, grassroots videos disrupt Western media hegemony through micro-narratives, exemplified by Yunnan coffee farmer series countering "sweatshop" stereotypes and Chongqing rail-transit viral phenomena building cross-cultural connections. (Liu & Fu, 2021) Negatively, spectacle-driven traps damage cultural authenticity: 58% high-view Miao ethnic dance videos exhibit excessive "Disneyfication," exacerbating fragmented national image. Contextual stripping causes cultural misinterpretations, as evidenced by Henan opera clips being weaponized as "cultural oppression" evidence, revealing semiotic translation risks.

6.2.9 Platform Mechanism Influence Disparities

YouTube and TikTok mechanisms create cognitive anchoring points and instant China impressions, with comment sections often becoming ideological battlegrounds (Liu & Xu, 2018). Platform moderation policies cause covert suppression, like Xinjiang-related video throttling. Short-term cognition and long-term image show divergence: 27.4% immediate favorability boost contrasts with 9.2% three-month retention rate.

7 CONCLUSION

"China Travel" videos are reshaping digital-era national image cognition paradigms. This bottom-up image construction presents opportunities to counter Western discourse hegemony while facing cultural distortion risks from technological alienation. Future communication practices must balance cultural authenticity and communication efficacy dynamically.

The study reveals that national image construction in the social media era may have evolved into "algorithm-mediated cultural negotiation processes." Only through rigorous analysis of the dynamic alignment mechanisms between creator narratives and audience decoding patterns can a qualitative transformation from "China as spectacle" to "China as dialogic partner" be achieved in transnational communication contexts.

Optimization recommendations include three key dimensions:

Narrative Reconstruction: Establishing balanced aesthetics between authenticity and spectacle, with reference to the NHK documentary *China: Between Heaven and Earth*.

Intercultural Mediation: Cultivating "cultural intermediary" creators bilingual in Sino-Western discursive systems.

Algorithmic Governance: Developing ethical frameworks for digital platforms to curb pathological proliferation of "misery narratives" and "utopian narratives".

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