

TIKTOK SHORT VIDEO PLATFORM AND THE CONSTRUCTION AND DISSEMINATION OF URBAN IMAGE

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Abstract. This study investigates the impact of TikTok, a leading short video platform, on the construction and dissemination of urban image. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 17 participants, including municipal officials, professional content creators, and active users; the research explores how TikTok's algorithmic curation, participatory culture, and immersive storytelling influence urban branding strategies and audience perceptions. The findings reveal that TikTok amplifies city visibility, fosters emotional and experiential connections, and facilitates a coexistence of official and grassroots narratives. However, challenges such as narrative fragmentation, algorithmic unpredictability, and content ephemerality complicate strategic image management. The study recommends collaborative approaches between city authorities and content creators, thematic consistency, and trend monitoring to optimize TikTok-based promotion. By integrating perspectives from media studies and urban branding, this research contributes to the understanding of short video platforms as transformative yet complex arenas for contemporary urban image-making, offering both theoretical insights and practical strategies for stakeholders in the digital communication era.

Keywords: *short video platform, TikTok, urban image, digital media*

Introduction

In the era of digital transformation, social media platforms have emerged as pivotal channels for information exchange, cultural interaction, and image shaping (Wan and Li, 2024; Kilgour et al., 2015). Among them, TikTok, known as Douyin in China, has rapidly evolved from a platform for entertainment and personal expression into a significant tool for marketing, branding, and urban promotion (Kaye et al., 2021; Zhang, 2021). With its short, visually appealing, and highly shareable video format, TikTok allows users to capture and disseminate urban scenery, cultural heritage, local lifestyles, and community events in an engaging manner. This trend has not only altered the way people perceive and interact with cities but also redefined the strategies used by urban planners, tourism boards, and policymakers to construct and project a city's image to both domestic and international audiences. The construction and dissemination of urban image have long been recognized as essential components of urban development, especially in the context of globalization and city branding. A city's image reflects a collective perception that integrates physical attributes, cultural symbols, economic vitality, and social atmosphere (Mansour et al., 2023; Smith, 2005). Traditionally, such images were shaped and disseminated through official channels such as government promotional campaigns, tourism brochures, televised advertisements, and print media.

However, these conventional methods often faced limitations in terms of timeliness, interactivity, and audience reach. The advent of TikTok has fundamentally changed this dynamic by enabling instant, user-generated, and algorithm-driven content distribution, thereby amplifying the speed and scope of urban image dissemination. TikTok's viral potential can transform a single creative video into a global cultural touchpoint, significantly influencing urban narratives.

Despite the promising opportunities brought by TikTok, challenges remain in effectively managing and steering the urban image in a digital environment characterized by decentralized content creation (Khalid and Collier, 2025). While user-generated videos offer authenticity and grassroots engagement, they can also present fragmented, inconsistent, or even negative portrayals of a city (Polat et al., 2023). Moreover, the algorithmic nature of TikTok's content recommendation system tends to prioritize emotionally engaging or sensational content, which may not always align with the strategic image objectives set by city authorities. This tension between organic content production and curated urban branding highlights a pressing research issue: how can cities harness TikTok's communicative power while safeguarding the coherence and positivity of their urban image? The problem is further intensified by the lack of systematic understanding of TikTok's unique affordances and their implications for urban image construction. Existing studies on urban image have largely focused on traditional media or earlier forms of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Although research on short video platforms has grown in recent years, much of it has concentrated on commercial marketing, influencer culture, or entertainment consumption, leaving a gap in the literature regarding their role in shaping collective urban perceptions. TikTok's algorithmic curation, participatory culture, and immersive video format represent new variables that potentially reshape the mechanisms and outcomes of urban image dissemination. This necessitates a dedicated inquiry into its specific impacts within the urban communication context.

Given this background, the present study aims to investigate the impact of TikTok on the construction and dissemination of urban image, with particular attention to the interplay between official communication strategies and user-generated content. It seeks to explore how TikTok's features, such as short-form storytelling, trending challenges, localized hashtags, and algorithm-driven personalization, facilitate or hinder the creation of coherent and appealing urban narratives. Additionally, this research intends to examine how audiences perceive and respond to TikTok-based urban image campaigns, as well as the extent to which these perceptions influence tourism intentions, investment interest, and civic pride. The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute both theoretically and practically. On a theoretical level, it expands the scope of urban communication research by integrating insights from media studies, branding theory, and digital culture. By focusing on TikTok, it addresses an underexplored domain in urban image scholarship and provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of short video platforms in place branding. On a practical level, the study offers actionable recommendations for municipal governments, tourism boards, and communication professionals seeking to optimize their TikTok strategies. By identifying best practices for content creation, influencer collaboration, and audience engagement, this research can inform policies that enhance a city's competitiveness in the global information landscape.

Literature review

TikTok and short video platforms

TikTok, launched internationally in 2017 by the Chinese technology company ByteDance, has swiftly become one of the most influential short video platforms in the world (Kaye et al., 2021; Ma and Hu, 2021). Characterized by its easy-to-use editing tools, personalized recommendation algorithms, and an emphasis on brevity, videos typically lasting between 15 seconds and 3 minutes, TikTok has redefined online content consumption habits. The concept of short video platforms is grounded in the convergence of mobile technology, user-generated content, and algorithmic curation. Unlike long-form video platforms such as YouTube, short video platforms prioritize immediacy, virality, and emotional engagement, enabling content to spread rapidly across diverse audiences. TikTok's defining features include the "For You" page, which algorithmically tailors content to individual preferences; the use of trending music and audio clips that facilitate participatory remix culture; and the incorporation of hashtags and challenges that foster collective content creation around specific themes. These affordances create a communicative environment where both individual users and institutional actors can participate in storytelling, brand promotion, and cultural expression. In the context of urban communication, TikTok offers unique opportunities for cities to present themselves through immersive, visually appealing, and emotionally resonant narratives (Sallaku et al., 2025; Kułaga, 2024). While TikTok is often grouped with other social media platforms, its operational logic is distinct. The platform's algorithm relies heavily on machine learning to predict and cater to user interests, ensuring a high level of content relevance and engagement. This "content-first" model prioritizes virality over the social graph, meaning that a piece of content can gain immense visibility regardless of the creator's follower count. Such a mechanism democratizes exposure but also decentralizes control over the narratives being disseminated. Understanding these structural and functional characteristics is critical when examining TikTok's role in the construction and dissemination of urban image.

Urban image: definition and dimensions

The term "urban image" refers to the mental representation or perception of a city held by individuals or groups (Gnatiuk et al., 2022; Hou et al., 2021). This construct encompasses both tangible attributes, such as architecture, infrastructure, and natural landscapes, and intangible elements including cultural heritage, social atmosphere, economic vitality, and governance quality. Past study seminal work, *The Image of the City*, conceptualized urban image in terms of legibility and the ease with which city dwellers can mentally map their environment. Since then, the concept has evolved to include symbolic and experiential dimensions shaped by media representations and interpersonal communication. Urban image is multidimensional, typically comprising cognitive, affective, and conative components. The cognitive dimension refers to factual knowledge and beliefs about a city's attributes; the affective dimension relates to emotional responses toward the city; and the conative dimension involves behavioral intentions such as visiting, investing, or relocating (Su et al., 2023). Media plays a critical role in influencing all three dimensions by framing the narratives through which cities are perceived. For instance, images of vibrant street markets may enhance positive affect, while reports of efficient infrastructure may strengthen cognitive evaluations. In the contemporary media environment, urban image is not solely shaped by official promotional efforts but is also co-created through the participatory practices of citizens,

tourists, and influencers (Zhao and Agyeiwaah, 2025; Kádár and Klaniczay, 2022). This participatory shift challenges traditional top-down models of city branding and introduces a dynamic, negotiated process where multiple stakeholders contribute to the city's projected identity. In this sense, TikTok can be viewed as a hybrid space where curated and organic representations intersect, potentially amplifying or complicating a city's intended image.

Social media and urban image construction

A growing body of research has explored the intersection between social media and urban image, focusing on how digital platforms facilitate city branding, tourism promotion, and cultural dissemination. Early studies on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram highlighted their capacity to extend the reach of urban marketing campaigns, engage audiences through interactive content, and foster a sense of community among residents and visitors (Ramadhani and Indradjati, 2023; Hunter et al., 2022). These studies underscored the shift from one-way communication toward dialogic engagement, where audiences are active participants in image-making processes. Research on visual platforms like Instagram revealed the power of aesthetic imagery in shaping urban perceptions, particularly in tourism contexts (Fan and Zhang, 2023; Hauser et al., 2022). Instagram's emphasis on curated, high-quality visuals was found to enhance the desirability of urban destinations, though it often resulted in idealized portrayals that omitted fewer appealing realities. Studies on YouTube and other video-sharing platforms identified the importance of narrative in conveying urban experiences, suggesting that audiovisual storytelling can evoke stronger emotional responses than static images or text alone (Kara et al., 2025; Nagappa, 2023; Du et al., 2022). In recent years, scholars have begun to examine short video platforms, noting their distinctive role in accelerating content virality and encouraging participatory trends. For example, Kaye et al. (2021) analyzed how Douyin was used by Chinese municipal governments to promote cultural tourism, finding that short, engaging videos could effectively boost audience engagement and visitation intentions. However, research remains limited in scope, often focusing on single campaigns or specific tourism contexts, without fully addressing the broader implications for urban image construction and dissemination in a globalized digital environment.

Research gap

While the existing literature provides valuable insights into the relationship between social media and urban image, several critical gaps remain, particularly regarding TikTok's role in this domain. First, most studies on urban communication have concentrated on static or long-form media, leaving the unique affordances of short video platforms underexplored. TikTok's algorithm-driven distribution, participatory challenges, and integration of local cultural elements present new dynamics that traditional frameworks may not fully capture. Second, research on TikTok often centers on consumer marketing, influencer branding, or youth culture, with limited attention to its function as a strategic tool for urban branding and image dissemination. The interplay between user-generated content and official urban communication strategies on TikTok has not been systematically analyzed, creating a knowledge gap in understanding how these narratives converge, diverge, or compete in shaping collective perceptions. Third, there is a lack of empirical studies employing qualitative

methodologies, such as semi-structured interviews, to capture the nuanced perspectives of stakeholders involved in TikTok-based urban promotion. Quantitative content analyses and sentiment studies, while useful, may overlook the strategic considerations, challenges, and unintended consequences experienced by practitioners and policymakers. Addressing these gaps, the present study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how TikTok influences the construction and dissemination of urban image, drawing on insights from both official communication actors and content consumers. By integrating perspectives from media studies, urban branding, and digital culture, this research contributes to a more holistic understanding of the opportunities and risks posed by short video platforms in contemporary urban communication.

Materials and Methods

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method (Belina, 2023; Ruslin et al., 2022; Striepe, 2021). Qualitative inquiry is particularly suitable for exploring complex, context-dependent phenomena such as the role of TikTok in constructing and disseminating urban image, as it allows for the in-depth examination of perceptions, experiences, and strategies from multiple stakeholder perspectives. While quantitative methods could capture statistical correlations between TikTok engagement and urban perception metrics, they may fail to reveal the underlying narratives, motivations, and interpretations that shape these relationships. The choice of semi-structured interviews is informed by the need to balance consistency and flexibility. By preparing a set of guiding questions aligned with the research objectives, the interviews ensure that core topics, such as content creation strategies, audience engagement, and perceived impacts, are consistently addressed across participants. At the same time, the open-ended nature of the questions allows respondents to elaborate on issues they consider important, potentially uncovering emergent themes not anticipated in the initial framework. This design aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, which posits that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the subjective meanings' individuals assign to their experiences.

Sample

The sampling strategy for this study is purposive, targeting participants who have direct experience with TikTok-based urban image construction and dissemination. This includes three main stakeholder groups: (1) municipal government officials and tourism board representatives responsible for urban branding initiatives; (2) professional content creators, influencers, and media practitioners who produce TikTok videos featuring the city; and (3) active TikTok users who engage with urban-themed content either as residents or potential tourists. Purposive sampling ensures that the participants can provide rich, relevant, and diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation. Within each stakeholder group, efforts will be made to achieve variation in demographics (e.g., age, gender, and professional background) and experience levels, to capture a wide range of insights. The target sample size is approximately 15–20 participants, distributed as follows: 5–6 government and tourism board representatives, 5–6 professional content creators, and 5–8 active TikTok users. This size is deemed

sufficient to achieve data saturation, the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from additional interviews, while remaining manageable within the scope of the research timeline.

Procedures

The research will be conducted in four stages. In the first stage, potential participants will be identified through professional networks, social media searches, and official contacts within municipal government and tourism organizations. An invitation letter outlining the study's purpose, scope, and ethical considerations will be sent to potential participants, along with an informed consent form. In the second stage, interviews will be scheduled at mutually convenient times. For online interviews, technical arrangements such as stable internet connections, functional microphones, and quiet environments will be ensured to minimize disruptions. Prior to the start of each interview, participants will be reminded of their rights, including the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. The third stage involves conducting the interviews according to the semi-structured guide while allowing for follow-up questions that probe deeper into participants' responses. Interviewers will adopt an empathetic and neutral stance to avoid leading participants or influencing their answers. In the fourth stage, interview recordings will be transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts will be reviewed for accuracy. Any clarifications needed from participants will be sought promptly after the interview to maintain data integrity. This step ensures that the dataset is ready for systematic analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis will follow a thematic analysis approach, as outlined by Braun et al. (2019). This method is well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data, and it offers the flexibility to accommodate both deductive and inductive coding processes. The analysis will begin with a close reading of the interview transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data. Next, initial codes will be generated to capture meaningful units of information related to the research questions. Deductive codes will be based on the conceptual framework from the literature review, such as "official content strategy," "user-generated narratives," and "algorithmic influence," while inductive codes will emerge from participants' unique perspectives. Codes will then be collated into broader themes, which will be reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and external distinctiveness. For example, themes such as "enhanced audience engagement" or "risk of narrative distortion" may emerge to encapsulate multiple codes. The final step involves defining and naming each theme, and selecting illustrative quotes from the interviews to support the analysis. NVivo software may be used to facilitate data organization, coding, and retrieval. By combining systematic thematic analysis with a rich qualitative dataset, this methodology aims to produce nuanced insights into the mechanisms through which TikTok shapes urban image construction and dissemination. The approach ensures that the findings are grounded in participants' lived experiences while also informed by theoretical constructs, thereby enhancing the credibility, transferability, and analytical depth of the study.

Results and Discussion

The semi-structured interviews generated rich qualitative data from 17 participants representing three key stakeholder groups: municipal government and tourism board officials (n=6), professional content creators and influencers (n=5), and active TikTok users (n=6). Participants ranged in age from 22 to 48, with varied professional backgrounds including public relations, marketing, tourism management, and digital media production. Across the interviews, participants consistently recognized TikTok as a powerful platform for urban image construction and dissemination. Government and tourism officials emphasized its unparalleled reach among younger audiences and its ability to humanize official campaigns through authentic, relatable narratives. Content creators highlighted TikTok's creative affordances, such as trending sounds and video effects, which allow cities to be presented in innovative and emotionally resonant ways. Meanwhile, active users expressed that TikTok often served as their primary source of information about a city's culture, events, and lifestyle, sometimes influencing travel or relocation decisions more than traditional media. Despite these positive perceptions, interviewees also noted limitations. Officials expressed concern over losing control of the narrative due to user-generated content that might conflict with official branding goals. Content creators acknowledged that TikTok's algorithm could favor entertainment over substance, potentially oversimplifying or distorting urban realities. Users, while generally receptive to city-focused content, admitted that their impressions could be shaped by viral trends or selective portrayals rather than a balanced representation.

Themes related to TikTok's role in urban image construction

The thematic analysis identified four dominant themes: (1) Amplification of City Visibility, (2) Emotional and Experiential Storytelling, (3) Coexistence of Official and Grassroots Narratives, and (4) Algorithmic Mediation of Urban Content. Amplification of City Visibility emerged as a core finding, with participants emphasizing TikTok's ability to transform local attractions or events into globally recognized symbols. A government official noted, "One short clip of our night market reached over two million views in a week, it brought in tourists we could never have reached through conventional channels." This visibility was not limited to tourism; several participants mentioned that TikTok exposure had attracted business investment and cultural exchanges. Emotional and Experiential Storytelling was identified as a differentiator between TikTok and more static platforms. Users expressed that short video allowed them to "feel" the atmosphere of a city through sights, sounds, and human interactions. A content creator explained, "It's not just about showing landmarks; it's about showing the laughter, the smells, the rhythm of daily life." Coexistence of Official and Grassroots Narratives reflected the dynamic interplay between municipal campaigns and independent creators. While some collaboration existed, such as influencer partnerships initiated by city authorities, many narratives developed organically. This duality was seen as both a strength, providing authenticity, and a challenge, risking inconsistency in messaging. Algorithmic Mediation of Urban Content referred to the way TikTok's recommendation system shapes exposure. Several participants acknowledged that the algorithm sometimes prioritizes entertaining or unusual content over strategic urban promotion, leading to uneven representation. As one influencer put

it, “The algorithm is the gatekeeper, if it doesn’t push your video, even the most beautiful footage of the city goes unseen.”

Challenges and limitations in TikTok-based image dissemination

While TikTok offers significant opportunities for enhancing urban visibility, participants highlighted challenges that can undermine these benefits. The most frequently mentioned issue was narrative fragmentation, where multiple, sometimes contradictory, portrayals of the city coexist. For example, while official channels might emphasize heritage and culture, viral user-generated content could focus on nightlife or sensational incidents, shaping public perception in unintended ways. Another concern was content ephemerality. TikTok trends change rapidly, and videos that gain traction today may be forgotten within days. This short lifespan requires constant content production, placing pressure on both official teams and independent creators to maintain relevance. A further limitation is audience segmentation. While TikTok is popular among younger demographics, older audiences may be less engaged, creating a generational gap in how the city is perceived and discussed. In addition, algorithmic unpredictability means that even high-quality content may fail to reach its intended audience if it does not align with current recommendation patterns.

Comparative analysis and thematic summary

The interplay of the four main themes is summarized in *Table 1*, which highlights their implications for different stakeholder groups and provides representative quotes from the interviews. This synthesis demonstrates the complex, multi-layered nature of TikTok’s influence on urban image construction. The findings suggest that TikTok operates as both a tool and an environment for urban image-making, where content virality, narrative diversity, and algorithmic dynamics converge. While official actors can harness TikTok’s reach for strategic branding, they must navigate a landscape in which control over representation is shared with, and sometimes ceded to, the broader community of users.

Table 1. Key themes in TikTok-based urban image construction.

Theme	Implications for stakeholders	Representative quote
Amplification of City Visibility	Cities gain rapid, global exposure; requires readiness to handle increased attention	“Our local food festival went viral, and within days we had tourists arriving from other provinces.” – Government Official
Emotional and Experiential Storytelling	Enhances audience connection; builds affective ties to the city	“I want my audience to feel like they’re walking the streets with me.” – Content Creator
Coexistence of Official and Grassroots Narratives	Adds authenticity but may create inconsistent branding	“Sometimes the most popular city videos have nothing to do with our campaigns, but they still shape perceptions.” – Tourism Board Representative
Algorithmic Mediation of Urban Content	Determines visibility; may prioritize entertainment over strategy	“If the algorithm doesn’t pick it up, even your best video can vanish in the noise.” – Influencer

Conclusion

This study set out to examine the impact of TikTok, a leading short video platform, on the construction and dissemination of urban image. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with government and tourism officials, professional content creators, and active TikTok users, the research explored how the platform’s unique features, algorithmic curation, participatory content creation, and immersive storytelling, intersect with urban branding strategies and audience perceptions. The findings reveal a

nuanced landscape in which TikTok serves both as a strategic communication tool and as a decentralized space for grassroots narratives, producing opportunities and challenges for city image management. The first major finding is that TikTok significantly amplifies city visibility, enabling local events, attractions, and cultural elements to reach national and even global audiences within short time frames. This amplification is not confined to tourism promotion; it extends to broader urban branding goals, such as attracting investment and fostering civic pride. Second, the platform's emphasis on emotional and experiential storytelling allows urban narratives to resonate more deeply with audiences. By conveying not just physical spaces but also the atmosphere and rhythms of daily life, TikTok fosters affective connections that traditional promotional materials often lack. Third, the research highlights the coexistence of official and grassroots narratives. While municipal campaigns benefit from the authenticity and relatability of user-generated content, they also face the challenge of narrative fragmentation. Uncoordinated portrayals, sometimes humorous, sensational, or controversial, can conflict with strategic image objectives. Fourth, algorithmic mediation emerges as a double-edged sword: while it drives virality and engagement, it also introduces unpredictability, privileging content that aligns with trending formats rather than strategic priorities.

Recommendations arising from these findings emphasize the need for cities to adopt an adaptive, participatory approach to TikTok engagement. First, municipal and tourism agencies should actively collaborate with local content creators, leveraging their storytelling skills and audience networks while providing them with resources and thematic guidelines. Second, cities should diversify content types to balance entertainment with informational value, ensuring that audiences receive both engaging and accurate representations. Third, official teams must invest in ongoing trend monitoring and algorithm literacy, enabling them to optimize posting strategies and capitalize on emerging opportunities. Fourth, establishing thematic consistency, through hashtags, challenges, or signature visual styles, can help integrate diverse narratives into a coherent brand identity. In terms of limitations, this study's qualitative design, while yielding rich insights, also limits generalizability. The purposive sample, although diverse, was confined to one city context, meaning that findings may not fully capture variations in TikTok's impact across different cultural, economic, or regulatory environments. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported perceptions may introduce biases, as participants could overemphasize positive or negative aspects based on personal experiences or professional stakes. Moreover, this study did not incorporate quantitative measures of audience engagement or sentiment analysis, which could complement and triangulate the qualitative findings.

Future research can address these limitations by adopting mixed-methods approaches that combine in-depth interviews with large-scale content analysis and user surveys. Comparative studies across cities, both domestically and internationally, would shed light on contextual factors shaping TikTok's effectiveness in urban image-making. Furthermore, longitudinal research could track how urban narratives evolve over time on the platform, capturing shifts in public perception and content trends. Given the rapid technological evolution and the emergence of competing short video platforms, future studies should also investigate cross-platform dynamics and their implications for integrated urban branding strategies.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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