An expression form of urban cultural image through TikTok in Xi'an city, China

Su Yao[1*], Shahrunizam Sulaiman[2]

[1,2]Faculty of Arts and Design, UiTM Perak Branch, Seri Iskandar Campus, Malaysia
[1]Vocational and Technical College, Hongshibao District, Wuzhong City, Ningxia, China

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ABSTRACT

Driven by the continuous advancement of information technology, new media information is showing a rich, highly interactive development trend and is highly favoured in various communication activities. The cultural image of a city, as an important component, has received close attention. New media serves as a crucial means of disseminating a city's cultural image; it not only promotes people's understanding of traditional culture but also significantly contributes to the formation and enhancement of the city's image, creating opportunities for the city's emerging development. TikTok, China's largest short-video platform, has over 400 million daily active users, and its overseas versions cover more than 150 countries and regions worldwide. It has a huge influence in the new media field. This article takes TikTok as an example to analyse its manifestation in the urban cultural image deeply. Researchers conducted their studies using literature reviews, case analyses, and qualitative analyses. After exploring the traditional culture of Xi 'an, they summarised and analysed the generated data, and through comparison and discussion, explored the dissemination mode of TikTok and the cultural image of Xi'an City. The visual design expression form of TikTok in the cultural image of Xi'an City; The role of TikTok in the dissemination of Xi'an's urban cultural image. After discussion, it was concluded that the systematic analysis of TikTok's manifestations in Xi'an's urban cultural image has effectively promoted the development of the city's cultural image by stimulating user creation, enhancing visual experience, and increasing a sense of participation.

[1*] Corresponding author. *E-mail address*: 417036597@qq.com

1.   INTRODUCTION

TikTok, a short-video social software born in the mobile Internet era, has swept the world at an astonishing speed since its launch in September 2016, quickly becoming an important platform for people to record their lives, share creativity, and express themselves. It is not merely an entertainment tool, but a brand-new cultural phenomenon and an emerging medium of communication, providing unprecedented opportunities for the dissemination of a city's cultural image. TikTok, with its unique dissemination model and strong visual appeal, has broken the constraints of traditional media, enabling every user to become a creator and disseminator of content. In the world of TikTok, the cultural image of a city is no longer merely a simple display of landmark buildings and historical sites. Instead, through the perspective of users and creative expression, it presents a rich, colourful, vivid, and three-dimensional appearance. It enables people to understand and experience the city in a new way, allowing them to appreciate its charm and soul in just a dozen seconds of video. Today, TikTok has become an important platform for disseminating a city's cultural image and a key platform for cities to enhance their popularity, increase their appeal, and promote cultural values.

In this era of information explosion, the rapid development of new media technology is profoundly changing people's lifestyles and information dissemination patterns. The significance of a city's cultural image, as a unique cultural symbol and soft power resource, is increasingly prominent. In the tide of globalization, the competition among cities is no longer merely a contest of economic strength, but also a comparison of cultural images. A city's cultural image with distinct characteristics and appeal can bring endless charm and vitality, enhance its popularity and reputation, and attract more tourists, talent, and investment. TikTok, as a leading player in the new media landscape, has rapidly risen to become a favourite platform for the dissemination of urban cultural images, thanks to its huge user base, strong interactivity, and unique communication advantages. TikTok's daily active user base has exceeded 400 million, and its overseas version is covering more than 150 countries and regions. On TikTok, users can shoot, edit, and share short videos anytime, anywhere. Every video may serve as a window into a city's cultural image. From the bustling city streets to the peaceful, ancient alleys of small towns, from the magnificent historical sites to the steaming hot street food, TikTok conveys the cultural connotations and atmosphere of cities to users around the world in a vivid, lively way. It makes the dissemination of the city's cultural image more down-to-earth, more humanized, and more infectious and influential.

Although TikTok has demonstrated great potential and influence in the dissemination of urban cultural images, research on its specific manifestations and mechanisms in this field remains relatively weak. In promoting the city's cultural image, how to effectively utilise the characteristics of new media platforms such as TikTok to create unique, effective forms of expression that enhance the city's cultural communication and influence is a problem that needs exploring. Specifically, issues such as the forms of expression TikTok has adopted in the dissemination of urban cultural images, how these forms function in the construction and dissemination of such images, and the limitations that urgently require study. In addition, though TikTok's algorithmic recommendation mechanism can enhance the efficiency of content dissemination, it may also lead to an information cocoon effect, causing some excellent yet niche urban cultural content to be buried and unable to be widely spread. Therefore, in-depth research on the manifestation of TikTok in the dissemination of urban cultural images, exploring its dissemination laws and optimization strategies, is of great practical significance for improving the quality of urban cultural image dissemination.

1.1   The Research Objectives

This research is dedicated to deeply exploring the mechanism and manifestation of TikTok in the dissemination of urban cultural images, aiming to achieve the following goals:

Firstly, comprehensively analyse the unique advantages of TikTok in the dissemination of urban cultural images, and reveal how it provides new channels and opportunities for their dissemination through elements such as the UGC model, visual design, and interactive functions.

Secondly, conduct a detailed analysis of the specific manifestations of TikTok in the dissemination of urban cultural images, including content creative types, visual presentation elements, and interactive model characteristics, and summarise a systematic set of communication strategies and methods with practical guidance significance.

Finally, suggestions for optimizing the dissemination of urban cultural images on TikTok are proposed, providing theoretical support and practical guidance for urban managers, cultural disseminators, and content creators, helping them better utilize the TikTok platform to enhance the dissemination effect of urban cultural images and increase the city's popularity and influence.

1.2   The Significance

This research not only holds significant theoretical value but also has remarkable practical significance. On the one hand, from a theoretical perspective, this study enriches the application research of new media communication theory in the field of urban cultural image. It expands research perspectives and the methodological system of urban cultural image dissemination. By analysing the mechanisms and manifestations of TikTok, an emerging medium, in the dissemination of urban cultural images, new ideas and methods are provided for academic research in related fields, thereby promoting the integrated development of new media communication theory and urban cultural research. On the other hand, from a practical perspective, this study provides specific and practical guidance for urban managers and cultural disseminators. The research results can help cities better grasp the communication laws of the new media era, fully utilise the communication advantages of TikTok, create attractive and influential urban cultural brands, enhance the city's popularity and reputation, and promote the development of cultural tourism and the city's economic prosperity. Meanwhile, for TikTok content creators, this research also provides creative inspiration and technical guidance, helping them produce higher-quality, more creative short videos featuring urban cultural imagery and promoting the innovation and dissemination of urban cultural content.

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Research on TikTok's Dissemination Mode

The dissemination model of TikTok has been a hot topic in both academic and industrial circles in recent years. TikTok achieves rapid and wide information dissemination through its unique short video format, precise user positioning, and strong social attributes. During the dissemination process, different types of information on TikTok have their own dissemination models. Combined with its information algorithm, this paper expounds TikTok's information transmission process and its potential impact on users' lives. It reveals TikTok's information transmission mode, offering new perspectives and strategies for the dissemination of urban cultural images (Chen & Wang, 2024). TikTok's dissemination adopts the characteristics of diverse, fragmented, and innovative content. It attaches great importance to user-generated content (UGC). Users can control audio by splicing or recording original sounds, and attract public participation in various popular songs on the Internet through singing and music performances. For instance, the Internet celebrity Fei Qiming effectively enhanced the cultural image of Xi'an by composing his own song "The Song of Xi'an People", while humorously introducing the history of the Xi'an City Wall (Xin & Du, 2020).

2.2   Research on TikTok Visual Design

Starting with the theory of visual communication, scholars focus on the combination of visual elements and information transmission on TikTok. Visual design conveys information by constructing visual language through elements such as graphics, images, text, and colour. The visual design of TikTok short videos is straightforward, fitting the fast-paced, fragmented characteristics. Its elements are eye-catching and prominent, and it pays attention to the impact. (Wang & Sheng, 2023). TikTok short videos offer a wide range of content, meeting the cultural needs and entertainment expectations of different audiences. The dazzling transition effects and brainwashing audio in short videos satisfy the "fast food" needs of the image-reading era. In terms of visual design, TikTok focuses on enhancing the audio-visual impact, using dynamic music, editing, etc., emphasizing interactivity, responding to new trends, and avoiding content homogenization (Yu & Wang, 2023). From the user's perspective, TikTok enhances information acquisition through precise algorithmic recommendations. By leveraging social interaction functions, users can engage in emotional exchanges through likes, comments, and collaborations, meeting their emotional value needs. While creating a favorable social interaction atmosphere, TikTok also attaches great importance to users' emotional value to improve the user experience (You, 2024).

2.3   Research on the Dissemination of Urban Cultural Image

The dissemination of a city's cultural image is becoming increasingly crucial for enhancing its popularity and competitiveness. Under the traditional communication model, urban cultural resources are integrated, and the media, relying on their professional communication capabilities, widely disseminate the city's characteristic cultural content. The content to be disseminated covers the city's history and culture, local specialties, natural scenery, and others (Lu, 2024). Pay attention to urban cultural symbols. Urban cultural symbols are carriers of a city's unique spiritual identity, and values of simplicity, vividness, ease of understanding, and dissemination. The distinctive symbols, such as "Xi'an Tang Dynasty Secret Box," have become new highlights in the dissemination of Xi'an's urban cultural image (Chen, 2022). The historical sites in Xi'an, such as the Terracotta Army and the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, as well as the local specialties like mutton, bread soup, and meat sandwiches, are all representative cultural symbols. During the process of dissemination, these symbols not only convey the historical and cultural information of Xi 'an, but also evoke emotional resonance among the audience and enhance their recognition of the city's cultural image.

3.   RESEARCH METHOD

This article employs a variety of research methods to thoroughly and deeply explore the manifestation and mechanism of TikTok in the cultural image of Xi'an City.

3.1   Literature Research Method

Review domestic and foreign literature on TikTok communication, visual design, urban cultural image, etc., sort out the current research status, and provide theoretical support and reference for the research of this paper.

3.2   Case Analysis Method

Select typical short video cases of Xi'an's urban cultural image on TikTok, such as accounts like Xi'an Cultural Tourism Voice and City Light, as well as specific contents like the promotion of Xi'an's cultural and creative products, the display of illustrations of ancient buildings and local specialties, and analyze their forms of expression and communication effects.

3.3   Qualitative Analysis Method

An in-depth analysis is conducted on the expression forms and visual design elements of TikTok (such as images, colors, dynamic effects, and immersive experiences). In light of relevant theories, the mechanism and characteristics of its role in the dissemination of Xi'an's urban cultural image are explored.

4.   ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1   Analysis of the Effectiveness of TikTok's Performance Form

TikTok's UGC model has stimulated users' enthusiasm for creation. Users spread the city culture of Xi 'an, such as the Xi'an City Wall and local cuisine, through original content, forming a wide dissemination and imitation effect, effectively enhancing the popularity of the city's culture. The clear layout and vertical screen sharing make it easier to focus, increase the audience's feeling of involvement, and show the city's culture in a more direct and lively way.

Fig. 1. an example of User-Generated Content screenshots of TikTok City Lights and Xi'an Cultural Travel Radio.

Source: https://www.Tiktok.com/search

4.2   A Comparison with the Cultural Expression Methods of Other Cities

Compared with traditional media, TikTok offers advantages such as rapid dissemination, a wide audience, and strong interactivity, which can quickly convey urban cultural information and obtain feedback. Compared with other new media platforms, TikTok's visual design and immersive experience are more distinctive, which can better attract users' attention and enhance the communication effect.

4.3   The Challenges of TikTok in the Dissemination of Xi'an's Urban Cultural Image

Content homogenization: The video content related to Xi'an's urban culture is similar and lacks innovation, which can easily lead to user aesthetic fatigue.

The authenticity of information: The review of UGC content is rather difficult and may contain false information, which could affect the authenticity and credibility of Xi'an's urban cultural image.

Insufficient in-depth cultural exploration: Many videos focus on superficial display and fail to delve into the connotations and historical background of Xi'an's urban culture, making it difficult for the audience to gain a thorough understanding.

4.4   Influencing Factors

The age, interests, and hobbies of the user group, as well as other characteristics, influence the creation and dissemination direction of Xi'an's urban cultural content. The platform's algorithmic recommendation mechanism determines the content's exposure and dissemination. The cultural characteristics and resource endowments of a city itself also influence its presentation form and dissemination effect on TikTok.

5.   DISCUSSIONS

5.1   The Dissemination Model of TikTok in the Cultural Image of Xi'an City

UGC video production model: Users freely create and share content related to Xi'an's urban culture, such as documenting the city's scenery and introducing its historical and cultural features, thus forming a rich content ecosystem.

Transparent interface and vertical screen communication: The transparent interface reduces interference, and the vertical screen form makes the subject more intuitive, creating a realistic visual effect, enhancing the audience's sense of participation.
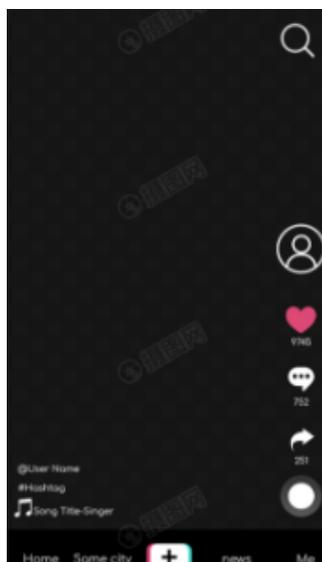

Fig. 2. the transparent interface of TikTok.

Source: https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?ct=503316480

5.2   The Visual Design Expression Form of TikTok in the Cultural Image of Xi'an City

5.2.1   *Image Presentation*

Mainly in the form of illustrations, highlighting information, conveying emotions, and adding fun. Images are generally presented in the form of illustrations, mainly demonstrating three advantages:

Firstly, it can highlight the information conveyed by TikTok, strengthen the user's impression with illustrations, and enhance the style of TikTok short videos; second, it conveys emotions, touching the user's emotions through the emotional expression of illustrations; third, it adds fun to TikTok. In a fast-paced life, people are prone to stress, and illustrations can help users experience the pleasure of relaxation and entertainment, making creative practice lively and engaging.

Take the Xi'an cultural and creative "Style" brand as an example. The brand's main slogan is "Chang'an Style cultural and creative products, allowing you to bring the thousand-year-old Chang'an home." It combines Xi'an's unique cultural elements and famous historical sites as the main elements throughout the product design and promotion. This not only makes it highly recognisable but also gives users a sense of closeness and makes it closely related to daily life, creating a brand effect for the products. As shown in Figure 3, "Youth 100" on TikTok is a column of the "Wanwuzhi" public account. It conducts semi-structured interviews with 20 contemporary young people's favourite figures. The article's avatars are illustrations that highlight the personalities of different figures and cater to the aesthetic preferences of the youth audience. It is a typical case of using illustrations as a TikTok presentation form.

Fig. 3. the cultural and creative products of Xi'an in different forms of illustration.

Source: https://www.Tiktok.com

5.2.2   *Colour Expression*

Colour plays a crucial role in visual design. It can effectively convey the emotional connotations the creator intends. Deeper contrasts of warm and cool tones, color saturation, hue saturation, and other factors are all important tools for adjusting colour. The correct use of colour can meet people's pursuit of aesthetic experience and their high demands for visual enjoyment, and promote TikTok's overall development. To cite an example, designers use ancient buildings in Xi'an to create illustrations, as shown in Figure 4."The Illustrated Story" not only depicts the scenery but also teaches you how to draw. You can both enjoy and learn. The Figure also shows a unique Xi'an menu that is extremely lifelike and makes people salivate just by looking at it, wanting to go there and taste it. Some unique TikTok accounts in Xi'an reproduce the styles of modern historical figures and the truths of major events. Unlike the serious, formal view of previous theoretical knowledge, it is presented in a relaxed, illustrated form, bringing it closer to users and making it easier for readers to read.

Fig. 4. the ancient buildings and delicacies of Xi'an in the form of illustrations.

Source: https://www.Tiktok.com

5.2.3   *Visual Dynamic Design Presentation*

Visual dynamic design is based on the new media environment, innovates visual technologies, expresses images in novel ways, abstractly processes images, and improves the effectiveness of visual information transmission (Zhou, 2022). At present, the dynamicization of visual design is an inevitable outcome of its development, and it is quite profound. Using dynamic effects such as inertia and parallax to create a sense of depth on the screen and guide users' attention. TikTok's refresh animation and emotional design, such as the dynamic "like" effect, enhance user experience.

Dynamic design has three major advantages: First, consciousness meets users' psychological expectations. Through reasonable dynamic effects, such as inertia and parallax, the screen creates a sense of depth, no longer being a simple two-dimensional plane. Second, it can guide users' attention. Reasonable animation effects can capture people's attention at a low cost. The TikTok's refresh animation is a good example. When the platform's main interface slides up and spots change, the refresh is completed. This does not interfere with the main function, colour, and visual effect of the entire page. However, through small animations, the visual refreshing has been enhanced. It makes it very easy for us to notice it and has a very beneficial guiding effect. The third is emotional design. The purpose of emotional design is to evoke positive emotions in users during their usage and prevent negative emotions. The "Like" function on TikTok can express your attitude (Figure 6), such as liking, commenting, collecting, sharing, etc. Although these static functions are sufficient, the details of the generation expression can surprise users and increase expression usage.

5.2.4   *Immersive Experience Presentation*

If we analyse the immersive design of "TikTok" from the perspective of visual design, it has two distinct visual features:

The first is the de-modal design of the floating layer operation (Hou, 2020). During video viewing, when performing interactive behaviors such as commenting and sharing, the floating layer operations that float up the interactive buttons are all semi-transparent temporary floating layers, without mask processing,

and will not interrupt the current video playback behaviour. This is a non-blocking interaction method to ensure immersion. The video's design is still playing in a loop, and the user interaction behaviour creates a strong atmosphere.

Second, TikTok does not display the time. Before TikTok launched its anti-addiction system, the immersive experience on TikTok was quite similar to the design of the game. There was no status bar on its page, and users couldn't see the time during the experience. Although each horizontal timeline of the video is only 15 seconds long, it adopts a loop playback mode. Unconsciously, the video continues to loop for an extended period. By swiping up and down to switch between videos, users will not subconsciously count the number of swipes, thus not unconsciously ignore the time. From this, it is clear that TikTok's interaction mode has enhanced the user experience of short videos. The previous interaction modes, such as active triggering and fixed-position operation, are complex and costly, and they will no longer meet users' needs. The core strategy of TikTok's interactive mode playback is to reduce users' action costs and enhance the product's experience. Visual design serves application scenarios and has become the key factor influencing user experience.

 Fig. 5. this figure shows TikTok's "like" function

Source: https://www.Tikok.com

5.3   The Role of TikTok in the Dissemination of Xi'an's Urban Cultural Image

Through diverse forms of expression, TikTok has effectively disseminated Xi'an's urban culture, enhanced the city's popularity and reputation, promoted the integration of urban culture with modern media, and brought new opportunities for the development of the city's cultural industry.

Fig. 6. The floating layer in TikTok operates to remove the mode.

Source: https://www.Tiktok.com

6.   CONCLUSION

This study systematically analysed TikTok's manifestation in the urban cultural image of Xi'an, including visual design elements such as UGC dissemination modes, transparent interface, vertical screen dissemination, images, colours, dynamic design, and immersive experience. These forms of expression have effectively promoted the dissemination of the city's cultural image by stimulating user creation, enhancing visual experience, and increasing a sense of participation. There are limitations for this research, namely: i) Sample limitations (i.e., taking Xi'an as an example for analysis, there is insufficient research on other cities, which may not fully reflect TikTok's performance in the dissemination of cultural images in different cities.); ii) Data timeliness (i.e., The cited data is mainly up to 2023. With the continuous development of TikTok, the latest user behavior and dissemination trends may change); and iii) Insufficient in-depth analysis (i.e., mechanisms of action and long-term impact analyses for some manifestations are not thorough enough, and there is a lack of quantitative research to support them).

Future research will include: i) Expand the research scope: more forms of cultural image expression of Xi'an City on TikTok can be studied, and the differences and characteristics of different cultures can be compared. ii) Stay updated with the latest developments: Track the functional updates and user behavior changes of TikTok, and study the impact of new forms of expression on the dissemination of the city's cultural image. iii) Strengthen quantitative research: By integrating data analysis and user surveys, deeply explore the quantitative relationship between the expression forms of TikTok and the communication effect of Xi'an's urban cultural image. iv) Explore cross-platform comparison: Compare the differences between TikTok and other short-video platforms or social media in the dissemination of Xi'an's urban cultural image, and provide more comprehensive strategic references for the dissemination of Xi'an's urban culture.

7.   CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

The authors confirm the equal contribution in each part of this work. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of this work.

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All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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About the Authors

Su Yao, holds a degree in Art and is currently pursuing a master's degree in Art at the Faculty of Art and Design, UITM. You can contact her via her email address. The email address is: 2021145819@student.uitm.edu.my or 417036597@qq.com

Shahrunizam Sulaiman, is a senior lecturer with a doctoral degree at the College of Creative Arts I, UiTM Perak Branch. You can contact him via his email: shahrunizam@uitm.edu.my