

REFRAMING CHENGDU'S URBAN IMAGE ON TIKTOK IN THE SHORT VIDEOS ERA: THEMES, DIFFUSION AND ENHANCEMENT STRATEGIES*

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Abstract

Short-video platforms do not simply transmit city images; their recommendation systems and engagement incentives actively select what becomes visible internationally. Using Chengdu as a case, this study examines platform-driven urban visibility on TikTok and asks how a city's digital brand is shaped when "fast" cultural symbols outperform "slow" narratives such as modern industry and natural landscapes. A qualitative case study triangulates content analysis of 200 Chengdu-related TikTok videos (June-July 2025), 15 semi-structured interviews with public-sector practitioners, academics, and creators, and four focus groups with 32 users. Food (34.0%), cultural heritage (22.5%), and lifestyle scenes (18.0%) dominate the visible repertoire, while modern development (14.0%) and natural scenery (4.0%) receive limited attention. Diffusion relies mainly on algorithmic recommendation (65.0%), within a creator ecology led by individual amateurs (63.6%), and engagement is primarily low-

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effort (likes) rather than co-creative participation. The paper proposes a four-dimension enhancement framework-content optimization, creator support, platform collaboration, and policy safeguards-together with evaluation indicators to monitor engagement depth and shifts in perceived city image.

Keywords: Chengdu, urban image, TikTok, short videos, city branding

Introduction

In the short-video era, city image is increasingly produced through platform infrastructures rather than through single media outlets. When urban life is compressed into 15-60-second clips, visibility is governed by recommendation systems, trend formats, and engagement metrics-making the platform an algorithmic gatekeeper of what counts as a city's "representative" image in global circulation.

Chengdu is a suitable case because its international reputation contains a structural tension: it is widely recognized for food, leisure, and cultural heritage, while it is also a rapidly developing high-tech city with major industrial and innovation zones. If TikTok rewards "fast" and low-context symbols (e.g., hot pot, pandas, teahouses), the city's modern development and ecological resources may become comparatively invisible, producing a partial and stereotyped brand.

Most city-image studies on short videos still emphasize thematic description and overlook the combined mechanism that links platform affordances, creator ecology, and audience interpretation. To address this gap, this study integrates content patterns, distribution channels, and user perceptions within one case-study design.

The study is guided by three research questions: (RQ1) Which themes and visual/narrative repertoires dominate Chengdu-related TikTok videos? (RQ2) How do creator types and platform distribution mechanisms shape diffusion and engagement? (RQ3) How do audiences interpret Chengdu's image through TikTok

content, and what interventions can broaden and stabilize the city’s international digital branding?

Objectives

1) Describe the dominant themes and visual/narrative patterns through which Chengdu is presented on TikTok.

2) Explain the dissemination pathway, focusing on creator types, platform mechanisms, and audience engagement.

3) Propose a strategy package for improving Chengdu’s TikTok based city branding and for evaluating communication effectiveness.

Literature Review

City image can be defined as the relatively stable set of perceptions through which external audiences recognize a city, including cultural symbols, lifestyle imaginaries, economic expectations, and environmental impressions. On short-video platforms, this image is often built through repeatable “visual tokens” (iconic foods, landmarks, rituals) and affective micro-narratives that are easy to understand without extensive context.

TikTok’s core affordances—algorithmic recommendation, trend templates, and low-threshold creation—reshape city communication in two ways. First, distribution is heavily engagement-driven, which can amplify content that is entertaining and instantly legible while suppressing topics that require explanation. Second, visibility is co-produced by creator ecology: amateurs, professional teams, and official institutions compete under the same attention metrics but with different resources and constraints.

To synthesize prior research, this paper uses an integrated analytical lens that connects (1) platform affordances (recommendation logics and trend formats), (2) creator ecology (who produces Chengdu content and with what

incentives), and (3) audience perception and participation (how users interpret and act on the content). This lens helps explain not only what themes dominate, but why certain urban dimensions become structurally under-represented in platform circulation.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case-study design and triangulates three datasets-video content, stakeholder interviews, and user focus groups-to capture both platform-level visibility patterns and audience interpretation.

Content analysis: 200 publicly accessible TikTok videos related to Chengdu were sampled in June-July 2025 using keyword/tag searches (e.g., “Chengdu,” “Sichuan,” “panda”). We accessed TikTok via a Thailand regional entry point to reduce the effect of China-domestic personalization and to approximate an overseas browsing environment; this choice is treated as a methodological constraint rather than a claim of global representativeness. A codebook was developed to code (a) content themes, (b) traditional-modern integration forms, and (c) interaction indicators (likes/comments/shares). Two coders independently coded the full sample and resolved disagreements through discussion; Cohen’s kappa indicated good inter-coder agreement.

Interviews: 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with three stakeholder groups (5 public-sector practitioners in culture/tourism communication, 5 academics in digital media/urban studies, and 5 creators with Chengdu-related production experience). Interviews focused on content decisions, perceived platform constraints, and feasible collaboration mechanisms.

Focus groups: 32 TikTok users were organized into four groups (eight participants each) based on whether they had visited Chengdu. Discussions

examined perceived city image, reasons for engagement, and expectations for more informative or participatory content.

Analytical strategy and reflexivity: We used thematic analysis to integrate patterns across the three datasets. Given that the sampling relied on one regional entry point and a limited time window, findings should be interpreted as evidence of a platform-conditioned visibility pattern rather than as a stable measure of global public opinion.

Table 1 Distribution of Travel Experience Among Focus Group Participants

Focus group	Total	Visited Chengdu	Never visited
FG1	8	5	3
FG2	8	5	3
FG3	8	2	6
FG4	8	2	6
Total	32	14	18

Table 1 indicates that the focus-group sample included 32 users, with 14 participants who had visited Chengdu and 18 who had never visited. This composition allows the analysis to compare “experienced” and “imagined” city images in users’ interpretations.

Results

Results are organized around two linked components: (1) the visible thematic and symbolic repertoire through which Chengdu is represented on TikTok, and (2) the diffusion mechanism that connects creator types, platform distribution, and audience participation. Tables 2-8 summarize the quantitative patterns from the 200-video sample and the focus-group coding, which are interpreted together with interview insights.

Table 2 Core Content Theme Distribution of Chengdu related TikTok Videos (n=200)

Content topic	Video count	Proportion	Avg. interaction rate	Typical subtopics
Local delicacies	68	34.0%	18.7%	Hot pot, Sichuan cuisine, Mapo tofu, street food
Cultural heritage	45	22.5%	15.3%	Historical landmarks, Sichuan Opera, shadow puppetry
City lifestyle	36	18.0%	16.5%	Teahouses, mahjong, parks, nightlife
Modern development	28	14.0%	13.2%	Tianfu New Area, high-tech industries
Cultural activities	15	7.5%	19.1%	Food festival, opera festival
Natural scenery	8	4.0%	11.8%	Dujiangyan, Mount Qingcheng

Table 2 shows a strong thematic concentration. Food content (“local delicacies”) accounts for 34.0% of the sample and is paired with high interaction (18.7%). Together with cultural heritage (22.5%) and lifestyle scenes (18.0%), these three clusters make up 74.5% of visible Chengdu content. In contrast, modern development (14.0%) and natural scenery (4.0%) receive limited visibility, suggesting that low-context cultural tokens outperform topics that require explanation.

Table 3 Forms of Traditional Modern Integration in Sampled Videos

Fusion form	Video count	Proportion	Positive review rate	Typical example
Parallel presentation	23	51.1%	78.3%	Historic sites contrasted with modern streets
Creative combination	16	35.6%	85.7%	Opera face-changing mixed with electronic music
Thematic fusion	6	13.3%	82.1%	Series on “traditional culture in modern life”

Table 3 focuses on videos that explicitly combine tradition and modernity (n=45). “Parallel presentation” is the most common (51.1%), while “creative combination”-mixing traditional elements with contemporary music or editing styles-receives the highest positive review rate (85.7%). This implies that integration is most effective when it is not merely juxtaposed but actively re-edited into platform-native storytelling.

Table 4 Audience Perception of Chengdu’s Image in Focus Groups (n=32)

Dimension	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Typical description
Cultural features	87.5%	6.25%	6.25%	Rich heritage and distinctive culinary culture
Lifestyle	78.1%	9.38%	12.5%	Leisurely and comfortable, high quality of life

Modernization	56.25%	21.88%	21.88%	Fast development but less visible in content
Environment	50.0%	15.62%	34.38%	Good ecology, yet scenery is underrepresented
Overall image	90.62%	3.12%	6.25%	An attractive city blending tradition and modernity

As summarized in Table 4, audiences form an overall positive image of Chengdu (90.62% positive). Positive perceptions are highest for cultural features (87.5%) and lifestyle (78.1%), matching the dominant video themes. Perceptions of modernization (56.25% positive) and environment (50.0% positive) are weaker and more mixed, consistent with their lower visibility in the content sample.

Table 5 Creator Types in Chengdu-related TikTok Content Ecology

Creator type	Count	Proportion	Content focus	Avg. followers	Output frequency
Individual amateur creators	89	63.6%	Food and daily life	12.8k	2-3/week
Professional content teams	27	19.3%	Heritage & city promotion	256.5k	1-2/week
Government/institution accounts	15	10.7%	Development & public services	189.2k	~1/week
Tourist creators	9	6.4%	Travel experience	8.5k	Irregular

Table 5 reveals a creator ecology led by individual amateurs (63.6%). Their frequent output (2-3 posts/week) sustains volume but tends to cluster around food and everyday life. Professional content teams and institutional

accounts have far larger follower bases on average, yet lower output frequency, which limits their role in maintaining topic diversity over time.

Table 6 Main Distribution Channels and Average Reach

Channel	Spread ratio	Avg. views	Audience age split (18-24 / 25-35 / 36+)
TikTok recommendation algorithm	65.0%	128k	38% / 42% / 20%
Creator social sharing	20.0%	45.6k	45% / 38% / 17%
Cross-platform sharing	10.0%	32.8k	20% / 48% / 32%
Official promotions	5.0%	215.3k	32% / 40% / 28%

Table 6 highlights the platform’s distribution structure: algorithmic recommendation accounts for 65.0% of diffusion and delivers broad reach (128k average views). Official promotions achieve the highest average views (215.3k) but contribute only 5.0% of overall spread, indicating that campaign-style pushes can spike exposure but do not replace routine algorithmic circulation.

Table 7 Audience Participation Behaviors

Behavior	Audience proportion	Core motivation	Note
Like	89.4%	Emotional identification /support	Most common low-cost action
Comment	46.8%	Ask questions/share experience	Often practical travel/food queries
Share	38.5%	Recommend/save	Cross-platform sharing appears
Follow creators	27.3%	Get more content	Driven by creator trust
Imitative creation	12.1%	Join trends/express identity	Relatively rare active participation

Audience participation is mainly low-effort (Table 7). Likes are nearly universal (89.4%), while comments (46.8%) and shares (38.5%) are moderate.

Active co-creation through imitative production is relatively rare (12.1%), which helps explain why the city image tends to stabilize around a few highly recognizable motifs.

Table 8 Factors Affecting Communication Effect (1-5 scale)

Category	Key factor	Avg. score	Practical implication
Content quality	Authenticity	4.7	Increase trust and resonance
Content quality	Novelty	4.5	Attract attention and interest
Content quality	Cultural depth	4.3	Show unique charm beyond stereotypes
Platform	Recommendation algorithm	4.6	Expands reach and shapes visibility
Environment	Policy support	4.2	Provides resources and guidance

Table 8 suggests that both content attributes and platform mechanisms drive communication effectiveness. Authenticity (4.7) and algorithmic recommendation (4.6) score highest, followed by novelty (4.5) and cultural depth (4.3). This pattern implies that expanding Chengdu's image requires not only diversifying topics, but also packaging modern and ecological narratives in ways that feel authentic, novel, and platform-compatible.

Discussion

The findings illustrate a typical platform shaped city branding pattern: easily recognizable and emotionally “fast” themes (food and leisure) dominate visibility, while dimensions that require slower narration (modern industry, landscapes, governance) are relatively invisible. This concentration is not only a content choice but also an outcome of algorithmic selection and engagement incentives.

The creator ecology is strongly grassroots. Amateur creators add authenticity and narrative variety, yet their content can become repetitive without guidance and resource support. Meanwhile, professional teams and official accounts have stronger resources but lower posting frequency and weaker interaction, limiting their contribution to sustained diffusion.

The focus group data suggest that audiences tend to respond positively to Chengdu but remain largely passive participants. To shift from “watching” to “co-creating,” content needs to embed interactive tasks and practical utility (e.g., itinerary templates, bilingual cultural explanations, participatory challenges).

To support implementation, an evaluation framework is recommended that monitors content quality, communication effect (views/shares), engagement depth, and changes in perceived city image.

Theoretically, the results support a platform-society perspective: urban visibility is co-produced by platform logics and attention metrics rather than by municipal messaging alone. The dominance of food and leisure indicates an “algorithmic imaginary” in which audiences come to treat what the platform repeatedly surfaces as the city’s essence. In this sense, TikTok functions as an infrastructural filter that turns complex urban realities into a limited set of globally consumable tokens.

Compared with prior studies that focus only on thematic depiction, this study contributes an integrated mechanism linking theme distribution, creator ecology, and engagement depth. The findings align with research showing that food-centered short videos can shape destination image, while extending such work by demonstrating how algorithmic distribution and grassroots creators jointly stabilize a narrow repertoire. This helps explain why modern development remains less visible even when it is central to Chengdu’s urban transformation.

Table 9 Recommended Strategy System for Strengthening Chengdu’s TikTok City Branding

Dimension	Concrete measures	Target	Expected effect
Content optimization	Diversify themes; add modernization & nature; deepen cultural explanation; provide practical tips; innovate formats (mini dramas/challenges)	All audiences	More balanced image; higher engagement
Creator support	Training for amateurs; funding for professional teams; improve official account interaction; creator exchange network	Creators	Higher quality and sustainable output
Platform collaboration	Themed campaigns; cross platform synergy; collaborate with KOLs; improve distribution for high quality content	TikTok & partners	Broader reach and better targeting
Policy safeguards	Dedicated leadership team; incentive policies; heritage protection; regular evaluation	Government & institutions	Long term and systematic promotion

Table 9 translates the empirical findings into an implementable strategy system. It links each proposed measure to a concrete target group and an expected communication outcome, enabling subsequent monitoring and adjustment.

Conclusions

This paper examined Chengdu's urban image on TikTok through triangulated content analysis, stakeholder interviews, and user focus groups. The evidence shows a platform-conditioned visibility pattern in which food, heritage, and leisure dominate what is seen and remembered, while modern development and natural landscapes remain comparatively under-represented. Diffusion is driven primarily by algorithmic recommendation within a creator ecology led by amateurs, and user engagement tends to remain shallow. The proposed four-dimension framework-content optimization, creator support, platform collaboration, and policy safeguards-offers a practical route to broaden the city's international digital image while making performance measurable.

Limitations include the single-platform design, a two-month sampling window, and reliance on one regional entry point for data collection, which may not capture all forms of personalization across countries. Future research can compare multiple platforms (e.g., TikTok, YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels), extend sampling across seasons, and conduct longitudinal tracking to test how perceived city image changes after specific communication interventions.

Recommendation

Based on the evidence above, three near-term interventions are recommended. First, diversify content supply by developing bilingual thematic series on modern development and ecological attractions, and by embedding brief cultural explanations so that heritage content remains legible to non-Chinese audiences. Second, invest in creator capacity-especially high-output amateurs-through short workshops on shooting, editing, and cultural storytelling, paired with resource packages (venue access, filming support, and reusable visual materials) to reduce repetitive content. Third, coordinate with TikTok and cross-platform partners to run periodic challenges that encourage user imitation and

itinerary sharing. Implementation should be tracked with a small dashboard of indicators, such as theme diversity (share of non-food topics), engagement depth (share/comment rate and comment content), creator mix (institutional vs. amateur output), and periodic perception checks in overseas audiences.

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