

Postprint: The Effectiveness of Short Videos as Channels for Disseminating Peripheral Cultures in China

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Abstract

In recent years, China's online video industry has experienced rapid development, with short-form videos witnessing the most vigorous growth. Short-video applications, represented by TikTok, have successively expanded overseas, contributing significant communicative power in cultural export and national image self-shaping, and gradually becoming important media channels for external communication. This paper takes TikTok as a case study; through analyzing the characteristics of short-video communication and the current state of TikTok's overseas dissemination, it clarifies the influence and role of TikTok in shaping national image during its overseas expansion, and proposes development recommendations for TikTok's future role in national image self-shaping.

Full Text

Preamble

The Utility of Short Videos as a Channel for Disseminating Chinese Culture to Neighboring Countries

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Abstract: In recent years, China's online video industry has experienced rapid development, with short videos growing most explosively. Platforms such as Douyin have expanded overseas, contributing significantly to cultural export and national image-building, gradually becoming important media channels for external communication. This paper uses Douyin as a case study to analyze the characteristics of short video dissemination and the current state of Douyin's overseas expansion, elucidating its influence and role in shaping national image during its internationalization process, and proposing development recommendations for Douyin's future role in national image self-construction.

Keywords: online video; Douyin; short video; cultural export; national image; TikTok

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1. Origin and Characteristics

The term “short video” emerged only in recent years, evolving from self-media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat public accounts. With total duration of approximately three to five minutes, short videos can narrate from multiple angles with refined content that avoids dragging narratives, attracting more user attention compared to long-form videos. Unlike micro-films and live streaming, short videos have no professional requirements for techniques or specific venues, feature simple production processes and easy entry for filming, offer strong interactivity, and achieve better dissemination effects than live broadcasts. Some outstanding short video teams have gained massive followings by relying on operational platforms and multi-channel distribution to produce high-quality, high-volume content. China’s short video industry entered its golden age in 2016—the inaugural year of short videos—when numerous creators emerged, various apps launched, and the market gradually became more popular and refined.

Based on a comprehensive examination of global short video platforms and content, short video dissemination demonstrates several key characteristics:

1.1 Wide Content Dissemination

When most short video apps launch, platforms invite relevant celebrities to promote them, such as high-traffic stars like Viya and Li Jiaqi. This not only attracts new users but also encourages their fans to like, comment on, and share video content, enabling broader dissemination. Simultaneously, app platforms continuously improve shooting and design functions, optimize filters, and update music libraries in real-time to increase user loyalty. Additionally, agenda-setting and various challenge activities extend users’ online time.

1.2 High User Stickiness

The China Netcasting Services Association released the *2020 China Online Audiovisual Development Research Report* (hereinafter referred to as “the Report”). The Report indicates that as of June 2020, China’s online audiovisual user base reached 901 million, with short video users totaling 818 million. Short

videos are becoming the preferred information source for an increasing number of internet users [1]. These data demonstrate that the short video industry is experiencing explosive growth with continuously expanding user numbers. As user bases grow, platform content becomes richer and dissemination effects more pronounced, providing a foundation for overseas expansion. Douyin serves as a representative example, attracting significant attention overseas, frequently topping app download charts in Southeast Asia, and playing a positive role in Chinese cultural export and international national image-building.

With accelerated modern lifestyles, people's living scenarios have become fragmented, making sustained information acquisition difficult. Short videos, characterized by fast dissemination, low data usage, concise content, and low time costs, have entered public consciousness as a new means for obtaining information and entertainment. Rapid technological development has quickened life pace, bringing various work, study, and life pressures. Most people living under such stress have begun valuing brief moments of rest. Short videos' brief duration, novel creativity, and entertaining features precisely meet their needs for temporary relaxation and pleasure. Additionally, surveys indicate that one-fifth of users spend over 60 minutes daily on short video apps. In summary, numerous short video apps and their content fully satisfy users' needs for self-expression, entertainment, relaxation, and interaction, demonstrating very high user stickiness.

1.3 Precise Content Distribution Under Algorithmic Recommendation

In today's context of highly developed big data, most short video apps employ algorithms and data scraping technologies in their back-end systems to precisely analyze users' browsing habits and preference tendencies, identifying both external and internal needs to personalize video recommendations and achieve customized content delivery. Any user behavior on a video—such as viewing duration, likes, comments, and shares—is recorded and analyzed by the back-end system, enabling similar videos to appear in subsequent push notifications to ensure recommended content matches audience interests.

2. Current Status of Short Videos Overseas

Since 2014, China has broadened diversified forms of overseas film and television cultural dissemination at the national level through high-level intergovernmental visits, media cooperation, radio and television forums, and the Silk Road Film and Television Bridge Project [2]. Following the Belt and Road Initiative proposal, cultural exchanges between China and neighboring countries have become more frequent. As audiences have grown more receptive to short video apps and domestic short video app production has increased, some platforms have turned their attention to overseas markets.

Taking the best-developed platform Douyin as an example: After ByteDance

acquired Musical.ly in 2018, data showed that TikTok (Douyin’s international version) covered over 150 countries and regions globally, becoming the fastest-growing mobile application worldwide [3]. In Thailand, dance, comedy, and scenario performance videos are most popular, with Thai celebrities also enjoying Douyin. Famous Thai pianist and singer Saksit Vejsupaporn and young actress Pattie have had all their short videos reach trending status. Thai women’s volleyball players Pleumjit and Hattaya actively registered accounts and filmed popular videos like the “face-holding challenge.”

2.1 Content Tailored to Overseas User Preferences

International TikTok and domestic Douyin share very similar user demographics, primarily young people around 24 years old. TikTok prioritizes displaying content that aligns with local cultural characteristics and user preferences. For instance, Thai TikTok focuses on dance, comedy, and role-playing themes that match local cultural characteristics, gaining significant user appreciation. Additionally, the app establishes special challenges and stickers during important national holidays to attract more user attention and enhance platform affinity and user identification.

Similarly, TikTok invites local celebrity influencers to join the platform, eliminating strangeness between the platform and local populations and helping users better adapt to the app. For example, the Korean version partnered with the Girl’s Day dance group, dynamically releasing tutorial videos for popular songs, allowing fans not only to watch their dances but also to learn and interact through their tutorials. Such groups have extremely high traffic among Korean youth, making TikTok’s collaboration with them undoubtedly more likely to gain market acceptance.

Current short videos primarily feature UGC (User-Generated Content) with even shorter duration, small and concentrated themes that transform abstract topics into concrete ones, enabling numerous foreign users to intuitively access Chinese culture and experience local customs and humanities. The “Following the Great Leader” series produced by “Studio on the Road to Revival” has received unanimous praise abroad for its “animation plus live-action” style, demonstrating that short video works as an efficient and convenient dissemination carrier play a significant role in winning broad recognition from neighboring countries. Through short video works, China can clarify its development direction and peaceful aspirations to neighboring and other Asian countries in rich and diverse forms that audiences are willing to accept, actively disseminating and explaining its international responsibilities and codes of conduct. This allows surrounding countries to correctly anticipate China’s national security strategies and behaviors, forming centripetal force through film and television cultural influence and enabling the Asian security concept to take root in neighboring and other Asian countries.

In 2020, after the documentary *Yong River* aired on Guangxi TV, it went abroad

and was continuously broadcast during prime time on mainstream media in the Philippines and other countries, receiving enthusiastic audience responses. Television stations in Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia also broadcast it successively, with many audiences first learning about it through mobile short videos. Short videos have made important contributions to political, economic, and cultural dissemination in neighboring regions, serving as a significant channel to some extent. In previous external communication efforts, text dominated. Compared with text, audio-visual content provides stronger persuasion and impact, allowing audiences to feel intuitively and achieve emotional resonance. In recent years, the carriers of China's cultural export have continuously evolved, from Confucius Institutes to numerous film and television works, all indicating that carrier forms significantly influence cultural export. The primary goal of cultural export is to export values and cultural connotations and establish a good national image externally. Due to their inherently strong dissemination capabilities, short videos can export Chinese culture abroad in an unobtrusive, entertaining way, enabling foreign users to easily access and accept Chinese culture. This plays a positive role in cultural export, establishing a new bridge between overseas users and Chinese culture.

2.2 Strong AI Support

TikTok's back-end also employs algorithmic recommendation technology to precisely target users with personalized video content, further enhancing user stickiness. Simultaneously, TikTok continuously develops various intelligent AI applications, among which the "awkward dance machine" feature (a new function after Douyin's update that brings the dance machine from offline to mobile phones, allowing users to play a somatosensory game on their phones using Douyin) has sparked a new trend in multiple overseas regions.

2.3 Surging Users and Massive Downloads

Douyin officially released its global monthly active user data for the first time on July 16, 2018, reaching 500 million. American research institution Sensor Tower also released data showing that TikTok was the most downloaded iPhone app globally in spring 2018, with 45.8 million downloads, surpassing perennial top-ranked apps like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Additionally, Douyin has achieved surprising results in East Asian and Southeast Asian markets, topping Japan's App Store overall chart in 2017, reaching number one in Thailand in January 2018, and capturing the top spot on Google Play's video chart in Vietnam in February 2018. These data demonstrate Douyin's tremendous success in its overseas expansion.

3. Development Recommendations

3.1 Enhance Content Screening and Establish Relevant Review Systems to Ensure Higher-Quality Chinese Cultural Content Output

Short video apps need to optimize and improve their content push screening systems, with the overseas version particularly needing to recommend more content that plays a positive role in shaping national image. This requires improving back-end algorithmic recommendations to accurately push higher-quality content to users, actively contributing to cultural dissemination. Additionally, platforms must strengthen content review mechanisms to avoid vulgar images and increase content that promotes excellent culture, positively contributing to establishing a favorable national image.

3.2 Establish an Orderly Two-Way Interactive Three-Dimensional Communication System

Peripheral communication is not unilateral or one-way but rather two-way interactive three-dimensional communication, though information flow is asymmetrical. Countries most influenced by traditional Chinese culture are basically China's neighbors, such as South Korea, North Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Similarly, the cultural customs of China's Northeast, Northwest, and Southwest regions are also influenced to some extent by neighboring countries [4]. It is necessary to establish an orderly two-way interactive three-dimensional communication system.

3.3 Achieve Multilingual Communication and Break Traditional News Models

English is currently the primary international lingua franca with widespread users, especially in ASEAN countries like Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, as well as in Northeast Asian countries like Japan and South Korea, where there is a good language foundation. However, Russian, Arabic, and Central Asian languages are also effective carriers for cultural dissemination in China's periphery. Achieving multilingual communication with corresponding subtitles better facilitates local audience acceptance.

Current short video external communication primarily uses news reporting genres and often employs visual forms, with traditional news models still dominating the narrative. Although the content shows considerable innovation, the model is overly singular. Inserting some animation production into appropriate subjects can fully leverage the supplementary meaning and watchability of multiple superimposed symbols.

3.4 Leverage New Technology Development and Continue Lightweight Development

Compared with general film and television works lasting over 30 minutes, short videos of 15 seconds to 10 minutes demonstrate significant lightweight characteristics, highlighting their goal of being faster than radio, more concise than television, and more convenient than newspapers from the outset, allowing audiences to “digest” video content within fragmented time to the maximum extent.

Simultaneously, short videos can achieve “precise positioning” of audience users against the backdrop of big data algorithms, pushing personalized content according to each user’s viewing preferences. Based on lightweight design and big data precision, the rapid development of network technology adds wings to short video dissemination.

Currently, our mobile phones have achieved universal intelligence, and with continuously improving internet speeds, connecting to WIFI and 4G networks has become more convenient. More significantly, since 2018, major communication operators have expanded data channels, substantially reducing mobile phone costs for ordinary users, enabling almost unlimited data usage for watching any short videos. The arrival of the 5G era will cause future short video dissemination speed and efficiency to increase exponentially. 5G networks feature high speed, low latency, and massive connectivity, while current short videos already match user consumption habits, laying a solid foundation for large-scale 5G application.

Since video dissemination depends more heavily on and demands higher network speeds, the constraints and limitations of internet speed will gradually be eliminated with the 5G era, and short videos will directly benefit from this, becoming a basic form of life consumption and thus an absolute main force in content dissemination [5].

3.5 Deepen Local Content Operation and Enhance User Acceptance

Provide works that locals highly concern about, love to watch, or are intensely interested in. The Songkran Festival in early April each year is a traditional Thai festival. During this period, Thais typically celebrate by splashing water on each other, hence it is also called the Water Splashing Festival. During the festival, you will see this scene: many young Thai people, while carrying buckets and water guns to splash around, also hold up their phones to record the “craziness” on-site in short video form.

During Thailand’s Water Splashing Festival, TikTok launched the “I’m the Most Fashionable at Songkran” challenge. To encourage user participation, Douyin specially designed three festival stickers, which were used over 40,000 times in just the three weeks around the festival, receiving enthusiastic responses from local users.

Based on the concepts of “peaceful development” and a “community with a

shared future for mankind,” and according to the film and television industry development status in neighboring and Belt and Road countries, China should strengthen cultural exchanges with neighboring countries through their unique cultural and geographical advantages. Short video apps have gained certain user bases and ecosystems in many countries and regions using the concept of global products with local operations. Shaping and disseminating national image also requires support from local governments and other departments.

Different periods have corresponding forms of information expression, dissemination, and reception, representing the natural development of human information and media following objective laws. Facing the transformation of the new era, short videos can release aesthetic and cultural functions while fulfilling entertainment and leisure functions, subsequently forming a distinctive cultural development path with content, vitality, quality, and innovation. Their diversified development will bring us more expectations in the near future and can play a positive role in mutual communication and interaction with neighboring countries. In the future, we should adhere to this concept, using its high-quality content and concise narrative means to conduct characteristic dissemination to users and shape a positive Chinese national image.

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