

The Influence of Tourism Public Relations Strategies on Urban Brand Reputation via the Chinese Douyin Short Video Platform

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Abstract

This study explores how tourism PR strategies on Douyin, a leading short-video platform in China, shape city brand reputation in the digital age. Using a mixed-methods approach that incorporates semi-structured interviews and a survey, this research identifies five key strategies: content marketing, influencer marketing, targeted marketing, user-generated content (UGC), and two-way communication. Survey findings reveal that a majority of respondents view Douyin as effective in improving their understanding of tourism resources and increasing interest in cities. The qualitative data shows the effectiveness of content marketing and influencer partnerships in engaging audiences and building brand identity. However, challenges such as inconsistent influencer messaging, content oversaturation, and the spread of negative UGC pose risks to city reputations. The study highlights Douyin's dual potential as a powerful tool for city branding, offering both opportunities and challenges that require thoughtful management to ensure long-term success.

Keywords: Douyin, tourism PR, city branding, social media marketing, short-form video platform, PR strategies

1. Introduction

Digital platforms have transformed how we approach marketing and public relations (PR), especially in the tourism industry. However, Internet-based city branding is still in its infancy and has not been extensively explored (Björner, 2013). Moreover, stakeholders in the tourism industry demonstrate limited awareness of tourism-related social media platforms (Hays et al., 2013). Among these social media platforms, Douyin (China's sister app of TikTok) has become a powerful tool for city branding, allowing municipalities to promote their image through engaging short videos. While Internet-based city branding remains an emerging field (Björner, 2013), there is a notable gap in understanding among tourism industry stakeholders about the potential of social media platforms tailored to tourism (Hays et al., 2013). In this study, I draw on semi-structured interviews and surveys to explore how tourism PR strategies on Douyin shape city brand reputation in China. I also look at the lasting effects of Douyin-based PR activities on how users perceive urban brands, offering valuable insights into user engagement and practical guidance for marketers working with Douyin.

Social media has become an essential part of tourism marketing, allowing destinations to reach and influence global audiences (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). Platforms like Instagram have shown how visual content can boost tourism by showcasing cultural attractions and landscapes. Similarly, Douyin offers cities a cost-effective way to build brand visibility through creative content and user engagement. Cities like Chengdu and Xi'an exemplify this, leveraging Douyin to promote attractions and significantly increase tourism. These cities have gained such online prominence that their digital influence now rivals, and in some cases surpasses, that of China's traditionally dominant urban centres, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen.

This study aims to identify key PR strategies used on Douyin and assess their impact on city brand reputation. I address two key questions: What are the main PR strategies employed by cities on Douyin? How do these strategies influence city brand reputation?

I use a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with tourism PR professionals to explore strategic considerations and a quantitative survey to understand user perceptions. The qualitative findings highlight Douyin's effectiveness in city branding through content marketing, UGC, influencer marketing, and two-way communication, while also identifying challenges like authenticity concerns and resource demands. Quantitative results support these themes, showing that most respondents view Douyin as effective but express mixed feelings about targeted marketing and algorithmic recommendations due to content saturation and limited diversity. Together, the findings demonstrate Douyin's potential to improve city branding. This dual approach provides both depth and breadth in analysing Douyin's

role in shaping city branding. Moreover, I use the two-way symmetrical model of PR, developed by Grunig and Hunt (1984), to explore how organisations engage with audiences on Douyin and foster dialogue to shape urban brand reputation. This model, part of the broader Excellence Theory in PR, emphasises the role of dialogue in communication and its potential to improve engagement (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Kent and Taylor, 2002).

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Tourism Public Relations Strategies*

Social media and the global Internet have rapidly changed the way travel information and experiences are shared (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). Platforms like Instagram and Douyin now allow travellers to share real-time photos and videos, instantly reaching global audiences. This shift has transformed how people plan trips, enjoy travel, and spread information about destinations (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010; Wang, 2024).

In tourism, public relations is about managing the flow of information between a city and its audience to attract visitors and shape a positive image. Key strategies for tourism campaigns include storytelling, media outreach, influencer collaborations, event sponsorships, crisis communication, and content marketing. Storytelling, in particular, plays a crucial role. Hudson and Ritchie (2006) argue that visual storytelling emotionally connects with potential tourists, making destinations more appealing. Jewell and McKinnon (2008) also stress the power of high-quality visuals in influencing perceptions and decisions. Incorporating local elements, as noted by Kavoura and Stavrianea (2015), can further strengthen a destination's appeal.

Influencer collaborations have become increasingly important in tourism PR. Gretzel and Yoo (2008) highlight that influencers significantly shape consumers' travel choices and perceptions. Abidin (2016) notes that influencers, with their credibility and large followings, can sway decisions in meaningful ways. However, Audrezet et al. (2020) warn that excessive commercialisation in influencer marketing risks eroding authenticity, potentially leading to consumer distrust. Glover (2009) adds that overly polished content may create a gap between online representations and real-life experiences, leaving visitors dissatisfied.

Digital platforms also support highly personalised PR strategies, which can engage audiences by catering to their specific interests (Malthouse et al., 2013). However, Pariser (2011) raises concerns about the "filter bubble" effect, where individuals are exposed to a limited range of content that reinforces existing views, potentially narrowing perspectives. Xiang et al. (2015) recognise the value of tailored marketing but caution against over-reliance on algorithms, which can lead to privacy issues and reduced trust. Tene and Polonetsky (2013) emphasise the importance of balancing personalisation with privacy to maintain consumer confidence. Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) also note that overly idealised portrayals can create unrealistic expectations, resulting in disappointment for visitors. Authentic storytelling, as Xiao et al. (2018) point out, goes beyond entertainment—it educates and connects with audiences, making it an effective tool for promoting urban tourism.

2.2 *Urban Brand Reputation*

In the context of growing urbanisation and competition, a city's image has become an increasingly valuable intangible asset (Shan, 2020). Urban brand reputation refers to the collective perceptions and attitudes people associate with a city. A strong urban brand reputation is often linked to economic growth and a rise in tourism (Hanna et al., 2020). Online city branding has emerged as a key strategy, using social media to showcase a city's unique identity and attract attention. This approach has gained significant academic interest in recent years (Björner, 2013). According to Wang (2024), effective urban image communication requires a blend of legal marketing practices, adherence to Internet standards, and creative digital strategies to gain online recognition. In this context, short-video marketing has proven to be an impactful tool for city brands looking to create quick, widespread appeal (Song, 2022). Highlighting cultural heritage and historical landmarks often forms the core of such branding efforts.

Consistency in messaging and authenticity in the content are both critical for sustaining a positive urban brand reputation. Successful urban branding also depends on collaboration among various stakeholders, including residents, businesses, and visitors. However, while short videos can temporarily boost a city's reputation, they may also have unintended consequences (Wang, 2024). For instance, viral content highlighting a city's attractions might contribute to over-tourism, straining local infrastructure and potentially harming cultural and natural sites.

2.3 *The Influence of Douyin*

With over one billion users and a unique content format, Douyin has become a powerful marketing tool in China. Du et al. (2020) highlight how Chinese Millennials frequently share travel videos, shaping perceptions of destinations and influencing travel behaviours. Song (2022) observes that online famous cities rely increasingly on short-video platforms for visibility, often described as "tourist paradises" due to their environments, cuisines, and living conditions. Li and Sun (2024) note that short videos effectively grab attention and engage audiences with visually compelling content.

Effective social media strategies on Douyin focus on creating captivating content, building community connections, and leveraging user-generated content to extend reach (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). Douyin's influencer ecosystem enables brands to target niche audiences and establish trust through authentic endorsements. The platform's algorithm gathers user preference data to recommend personalised videos, enhancing campaign relevance and impact (Shan, 2020; Wang, 2023). Douyin's features, combined with tourism PR strategies, offer significant opportunities for urban brand promotion, with influencer collaborations and user-generated content amplifying messages. Interactive tools like challenges and live streams provide cities with real-time engagement opportunities.

Case studies highlight Douyin's effectiveness in tourism PR. Wang and Feng (2021) studied 294 videos promoting Xi'an, finding increases in tourist visits and positive online interactions by showcasing Xi'an's historical charm and modern appeal. Similarly, Wang (2024) analysed Harbin's use of short videos to depict its ice and snow culture, boosting its city brand and positioning it as an "Internet-famous destination".

Despite its potential, using Douyin for urban brand management presents challenges. Content saturation, reliance on algorithms, and the demand for consistent creation require substantial resources. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) emphasise that sustained success in social media marketing necessitates adequate time, effort, and financial investment.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

I used a mixed-methods approach, combining semi-structured interviews and surveys for data collection and analysis. To confirm the validity of my research instruments, I conducted pilot testing. I distributed a pilot survey to a small group of respondents to assess the clarity of the questions and carried out pilot interviews with Douyin users in Dalian to refine the semi-structured interview guide. To strengthen the validity of my findings, I employed triangulation by cross-verifying data from the interviews and surveys (Denzin, 2012).

I conducted semi-structured interviews from July 20–25, 2024, in Dalian, China, to explore user experiences with tourism content on Douyin. This method allowed me to combine structure with the flexibility to follow emerging themes (Bryman, 2016). Using an interview guide, I addressed key topics such as user engagement with PR content and its impact on urban brand perception. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to unpack the participants' nuanced interactions with Douyin's tourism PR strategies and how these shaped their perceptions of city branding.

To complement the interviews, I used surveys to gather data from a wider audience. Surveys were particularly helpful for capturing diverse perspectives and quantifying attitudes and behaviours (Fowler, 2014). I designed the questionnaire with both closed and open-ended questions, allowing me to collect structured, comparable data while giving respondents room to elaborate on their views (Dillman et al., 2014). This approach helped me identify broad trends and added depth to the quantitative findings. By combining both methods, I gained a comprehensive understanding of how Douyin influences urban brand reputation.

3.2 Sampling Procedure and Participant Selection

For the qualitative component, I sent a recruitment notice on Rednote to invite potential participants for interviews. This notice provided a detailed description of the study's purpose, the eligibility criteria for participation, and the expected contributions of participants, providing transparency and clarity from the outset. Interested individuals were encouraged to indicate their willingness to participate by commenting on my recruitment post. Following this initial expression of interest, I identified suitable candidates from the comments and subsequently contacted them by messaging them privately. By directly communicating with participants, I was able to confirm their eligibility, address any questions about the study, and coordinate interview dates and times. This process involved finding a time that worked for both of us and discussing their preferred interview format—whether in person, over the phone, or via video call. Once everything was set, the interviews took place as planned, following the agreed format and after obtaining informed consent (please refer to Appendix 1 for the interview protocol and consent form).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with six Douyin users who had interacted with tourism-related short videos. I selected participants with diverse backgrounds and expertise to ensure a well-rounded perspective on Douyin's role in tourism marketing. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 60 and included marketing professionals and digital content creators. Using purposeful sampling, I focused on individuals actively engaging with tourism-related content on Douyin. I recruited participants through an announcement on Little Red Book, followed by private invitations explaining the significance of their participation.

To address potential interviewer bias and ensure consistency, I conducted pilot interviews and followed a standardised interview guide. During the interviews, I fostered a neutral and open environment to encourage participants to share their experiences freely and honestly, while remaining mindful of how my role as an interviewer could influence their responses. The interviews lasted between 15 and 23 minutes. Participant and interview details are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview Sampling

Interviewee	Age	Format	Date	Length
P1	18	Tencent Meeting	20 th July 2024	15 minutes
P2	30	Tencent Meeting	21 st July 2024	20 minutes
P3	55	In person	22 nd July 2024	18 minutes
P4	26	Tencent Meeting	23 rd July 2024	21 minutes
P5	21	Tencent Meeting	24 th July 2024	17 minutes
P6	45	In person	25 th July 2024	23 minutes

I conducted the survey using Wenjuanxing (Questionnaire Star), a popular online survey platform in China known for its user-friendly interface and reliable data collection. To reach a diverse audience, I shared the survey link on WeChat, targeting a broad demographic, including older users who may not actively use Douyin but engage with urban branding content. My post on WeChat included a brief but informative introduction to the research, outlining the study's objectives, the importance of participants' contributions, and the confidentiality measures in place to protect their responses. Additionally, clear instructions were provided on how to access and complete the questionnaire. The survey, conducted from 26 July to 1 August 2024, consisted of 16 Likert-scale questions. A stratified sample by age and gender ensured a representative cross-section of Douyin's user base, offering insights into urban brand perceptions across demographics.

3.3 Data Analysis

I employed thematic analysis for the semi-structured interviews to identify and report key themes, following the six-phase framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and reporting. I manually coded the transcribed interviews, uncovering themes related to PR strategies and urban branding on Douyin.

For the survey data, I applied descriptive statistical analyses to summarise demographic information and highlight key findings. Respondents largely viewed Douyin as beneficial for city branding but raised concerns about content authenticity and oversaturation, underscoring the need for improvements to sustain trust and engagement. Mixed opinions emerged regarding the platform's targeted marketing strategies and recommendation algorithm, with some participants noting repetitive content as a concern.

3.4 Reflexivity

As an active Douyin user, my familiarity with the platform may have influenced how I interpreted the data, potentially prioritising themes that align with my own experiences while overlooking other insights. Additionally, as a resident of Dalian—the city featured in this research—my background might have introduced a bias toward positive interpretations of the city's branding efforts. To mitigate these biases, I designed questions to elicit a wide range of participant views, independent of my own.

I involved participants in validating interview transcripts and initial findings to ensure their perspectives were accurately represented. This collaborative process helped me minimise the influence of personal biases, providing a balanced and comprehensive interpretation of the data.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Participants received detailed information about the study, and I obtained their informed consent for interview recording and transcription. Survey data were securely collected and stored using Wenjuanxing (Questionnaire Star), a platform known for managing large datasets efficiently. I maintained systematic records of the coding process, including codebooks and memos, for transparency and accuracy in analysis. Manual coding was used for qualitative data, while statistical software supported quantitative analysis. Reflective notes were kept throughout the study to promote self-awareness and transparency, as recommended by Finlay (2002).

Anonymity and confidentiality were prioritised to protect participant identities and personal information. Consistent with Wiles et al. (2008) and Babbie (2016), I anonymised participant data by assigning unique codes (e.g., P1, P2) to replace identifiable information. Physical consent forms and sensitive documents were securely stored and will be destroyed upon study completion. Digital recordings were stored securely and will also be permanently deleted. If sensitive topics arose during interviews, I addressed them with care and empathy to ensure participant comfort and respect.

3.6 Limitations

This study's findings are based on a limited sample size, with all interview participants being female, which introduces potential gender bias and limits the generalisability of the results. Additionally, while the survey included 203 participants; however, older adults were underrepresented, potentially leaving their perspectives on tourism PR strategies underexplored.

The study's relatively short timeframe, from 20 June to 25 August 2024, restricted the ability to assess the long-term effects of tourism PR strategies on city brand reputation. A longer research period might reveal cumulative impacts and shifts in public perception not evident in the shorter duration.

Qualitative data from interviews are also subject to self-reporting bias, as participants may have presented certain PR strategies in a more favourable light. This emphasises the subjective nature of the qualitative findings and calls for cautious interpretation, as it may affect the overall conclusions of the study.

4. Findings

4.1 Qualitative Component

The thematic analysis of the qualitative data identified several key themes. Douyin content effectively showcases urban attractions, drawing attention to unique features that appeal to tourists. User-generated content (UGC) plays a crucial role in shaping city perceptions, offering authentic experiences that resonate with wider audiences. Targeted marketing campaigns strengthen urban brand identity by tailoring messages to specific demographics, while influencer marketing enhances city visibility and credibility through their reach and authenticity. Additionally, Douyin's interactive features facilitate two-way communication, allowing real-time feedback and engagement between cities and audiences. These themes illustrate how Douyin's tourism public relations strategies contribute to building and reinforcing city brands, highlighting both opportunities, such as increased engagement and authenticity, and challenges, including the need to ensure content quality and trust.

4.1.1 Content Marketing Strategies

A key theme I identified in the study is the use of content marketing to showcase urban attractions and improve city brand images. Participants frequently noted that Douyin tourism videos often focus on a city's unique cultural and historical sites and its local cuisine. This strategy appears to create an emotional connection between viewers and the city by incorporating cultural elements into the content.

For instance, P2 appreciated “*stories about the local food, the beautiful scenery, and some interaction with the locals*”, while P6 highlighted their interest in “*usually watch the regional culture in the video, the regional special food, and the local clothing*.” Similarly, P4 shared a compelling example from Zibo, a city in Shandong Province, China, emphasising its BBQ culture: “*Zibo, for me, is more about the human aspects that draw me in. The BBQ culture in Zibo combines food with compassion*.” These insights align with Hudson and Ritchie's (2006) emphasis on the importance of visual storytelling in tourism marketing, demonstrated by Douyin's use of compelling narratives to showcase food, scenery, and cultural elements. This approach also reflects Kavoura and Stavrianea's (2015) findings, which stress that integrating local culture into PR strategies strengthens city branding, as evidenced by participants' appreciation for regional traditions like Zibo's BBQ culture.

Building on the role of storytelling in Douyin tourism videos, interviewees also highlighted the impact of cinematography and music in making these videos more engaging. For example, P2 shared:

The short travel videos I watch are in the style of vlogs, which is one of the most appealing aspects to me: the photographer's humorous language and camera proficiency. (P2, 21 July 2024)

Participants appreciated how videos on Douyin use cinematic techniques to visually narrate a story, capturing the essence of a location through innovative perspectives and dynamic sequences. This attention to high-quality visual production aligns with the findings of Jewell and McKinnon (2008), who emphasise the importance of compelling imagery in forging strong emotional connections with viewers.

Music was another key element noted by interviewees. P3, for instance, stressed upon the ability of music to create an atmosphere and recalled an example from a promotional video about Edinburgh:

The background music in the Edinburgh travel videos is European-style music, giving me a sense of beautiful enjoyment. As a music lover, I pay particular attention to this aspect. (P3, 22 July 2024)

By pairing regionally inspired soundtracks with striking visuals, these videos deepen their emotional impact and establish sensory connections to the destinations they feature, reinforcing their unique character and appeal.

Douyin travel videos, therefore, leverage a combination of storytelling, cinematography, and music to create immersive

and emotionally engaging content, showing how visual and auditory elements work together to attract viewers and foster a deeper connection with the locations being promoted. By highlighting unique cultural aspects and incorporating regionally inspired soundtracks, these videos effectively capture the essence of destinations and strengthen urban brand identity.

4.1.2 User-Generated Content (UGC)

In the age of digital media, user-generated content (UGC) has become a cornerstone of city branding strategies. By offering original, firsthand perspectives, UGC allows everyday users to shape public perceptions of destinations in ways that polished promotional content often cannot. Douyin amplifies the reach and impact of UGC, making it a powerful tool for tourism public relations. Interviewees highlighted that authentic and spontaneous content created by everyday users often carries more credibility and influence than professionally produced promotional videos. For instance, P1 shared:

I would like to watch a few short trip videos that regular people have made, showing their impressions of the area and the city. They provide real insights into what to expect. (P1, 20 July 2024)

Similarly, P5 noted:

The Orange Island Head Scenic Area in Changsha attracts a large number of regular people who shoot short travel videos and share them on the Douyin platform, transforming the city into an Internet-famous city. (P5, 24 July 2024)

These observations align with Munar and Jacobsen (2014), who argue that UGC is essential for destination branding, offering authentic experiences and peer recommendations. Additionally, Gretzel and Yoo (2008) highlight the value of UGC in leveraging word-of-mouth marketing, often perceived as more trustworthy by potential tourists.

However, relying solely on UGC presents certain challenges. The lack of professional oversight can lead to content that is inaccurate or biased, potentially misrepresenting the destination. While UGC provides valuable insights and fosters engagement, cities should balance it with professionally produced content to offer a more comprehensive and accurate portrayal. This balanced approach ensures that UGC complements rather than compromises the overall branding strategy.

4.1.3 Targeted Marketing Strategy

Targeted marketing strategies on Douyin present significant opportunities for city branding by delivering personalised content that resonates with user interests and preferences. Douyin's algorithm-driven approach tailors content to individual preferences, thus engaging users by presenting content aligned with their interests and increasing the visibility of city brands among relevant demographics. Participants highlighted the effectiveness of targeted marketing strategies on Douyin. This approach delivers highly personalised content that appeals to individual user interests, thereby increasing engagement and potentially strengthening city brands. For instance, P4 noted:

If it is pushed to my favourite travel videos, I will passively accept and then get interested in watching. When I see videos promoting events or attractions that match my hobbies, like food festivals or art exhibitions, I'm more likely to save them for future trips. (P4, 23 July 2024)

However, while the benefits of this approach are evident, participants also raised important concerns about its limitations and ethical implications. P2 observed:

Sometimes the algorithm can create an echo chamber, only showing content that reinforces my existing preferences. (P2, 21 July 2024)

This aligns with Pariser's (2011) critique of the "filter bubble" effect, which restricts exposure to diverse perspectives. Xiang et al. (2015) also highlight the potential of digital platforms to tailor marketing efforts to user preferences but caution that over-reliance on algorithmic targeting may raise privacy concerns and reduce user trust.

P5 echoed this concern, stating:

If you want to watch the sea, it will automatically suggest related short videos. In other words, Douyin will offer Qingdao and Yantai as suitable locations. I worry about how much data they are collecting about me. (P5, 24 July 2024)

This sentiment is supported by Tene and Polonetsky (2013), who stress the need to balance personalisation with privacy protection. While targeted marketing strategies on Douyin offer significant advantages in reaching specific audiences, they must be carefully managed to address these challenges and maintain user trust. By addressing these challenges, cities can leverage Douyin's capabilities to craft impactful and responsible branding strategies.

4.1.4 Influencer Marketing Strategy

Influencer marketing has become an important part of tourism campaigns, allowing social media personalities to connect with audiences on a personal level. Unlike traditional advertisements, influencer content often feels more relatable and tailored, offering audiences a glimpse into destinations through the eyes of someone they trust and admire. This strategy is particularly effective on platforms like Douyin, where visual storytelling and engagement drive audience interest.

Participants highlighted the credibility and visibility that influencers bring to tourism campaigns, particularly through their dedicated follower bases, who trust their recommendations. For instance, P5 noted:

The way influencers present local culture and traditions through their videos gives me a deeper understanding of the place, which is something I don't get from traditional advertisements. (P5, 24 July 2024)

This observation aligns with Abidin (2016), who discusses the significant role influencers play in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviours. However, some participants raised concerns about the authenticity of influencer promotions. P1 shared:

Some trip videos shot by influencers are really useful. This may allow us to view the lovely city landscape in the video, but if I visit the city and see how it differs from what I saw in the video, I will experience a sense of disconnect or disappointment. (P1, 20 July 2024)

This scepticism is consistent with critiques by Audrezet et al. (2020), who caution that over-commercialisation can undermine influencer authenticity and effectiveness. Similarly, Glover (2009) warns that overly curated content can lead to dissatisfaction when tourists encounter a reality that does not match the online portrayal.

Despite these concerns, interviewees frequently mentioned being inspired to visit destinations after viewing influencer-created content. P2 remarked:

When I saw a popular influencer showcasing the unique street food of Chengdu, it made me want to visit and experience it myself. (P2, 21 July 2024)

Participants also noted the power of influencers' storytelling abilities in sparking interest in urban destinations. This approach not only entertains but also educates viewers, making the content engaging and impactful for tourism promotion (Xiao et al., 2018). P3 commented:

I love how influencers use storytelling to showcase the history and attractions of a city. It makes the place come alive and feel more inviting. (P3, 22 July 2024)

While influencer marketing offers significant opportunities to improve city brand reputation, it must be executed with transparency and authenticity. By fostering trust and providing realistic portrayals, influencer campaigns can effectively attract and inspire audiences while minimising potential dissatisfaction. When implemented thoughtfully, this strategy becomes a powerful tool in tourism public relations, blending credibility with creativity to build stronger connections between cities and their audiences.

4.1.5 Two-Way Symmetrical Communication

The shift from traditional one-way communication to interactive, two-way engagement has redefined how urban brands connect with audiences. Douyin's interactive features allow city brands to promote their identity and foster meaningful dialogue with viewers, making communication more dynamic and engaging.

Interview participants frequently highlighted how Douyin's interactivity enhances urban brand reputation. Unlike traditional methods, Douyin facilitates direct interaction through comments, shares, and feedback, creating inclusive dialogue. P1 shared:

I often comment on videos, and when I get a response, it feels like travel short video accounts on Douyin value my input. (P1, 20 July 2024)

This perspective aligns with Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical communication theory, which emphasises the importance of dialogue in building strong stakeholder relationships. Similarly, Kent and Taylor (2002) note that digital platforms enable organisations to effectively address audience concerns.

User-generated content (UGC) further strengthens this connection. Participants frequently mentioned sharing their own travel videos, which were then reshared by other users or official tourism accounts, amplifying the urban brand's reach. P2 remarked:

I posted a video of my trip to Inner Mongolia, and it was shared by many others, including tourism pages. (P2, 21 July 2024)

P3 added:

When the Douyin account of the city’s cultural and tourism department shares user-generated content or acknowledges feedback, it makes me feel more connected and valued as a potential visitor. (P3, 22 July 2024)

While this approach fosters an authentic connection between users and city brands, it also presents challenges in maintaining brand consistency. Buhalis and Law (2008) caution that while two-way communication enhances engagement, it must be managed carefully to ensure that brand messaging remains aligned with strategic objectives.

The interactive nature of Douyin also facilitates real-time feedback, allowing urban brands to adapt their communication strategies quickly. This dynamic feedback loop enables city brands to stay relevant by responding to audience reactions and preferences. P4 noted:

The ability to see immediate reactions and adapt content based on viewer preferences is a game-changer for city marketing. (P4, 23 July 2024)

Similarly, P1 commented:

I often see travel video accounts on Douyin changing their content quickly based on comments and likes, which makes their posts feel more relevant and engaging. (P1, 20 July 2024)

However, this flexibility comes with its own challenges. Adapting content in real-time requires significant resources and organisational agility. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) emphasise that while real-time engagement offers opportunities for personalisation, it may lead to inconsistencies if not managed carefully. P6 reflected on this, stating:

Sometimes it feels like travel video accounts on Douyin try too hard to please everyone, and their message becomes confusing. (P6, 25 July 2024)

Douyin’s interactivity offers city brands transformative opportunities to build connections, amplify reach, and respond dynamically to audience feedback. However, challenges such as maintaining consistency and managing resources for real-time engagement remain. By balancing interactivity with strategic oversight, urban brands can leverage Douyin’s potential to strengthen their reputation and foster lasting relationships with audiences.

4.2 Quantitative Component

The questionnaire sample comprised 104 male respondents (51.23%) and 99 female respondents (48.77%), exhibiting a relatively balanced gender distribution with a slight male majority. This balance suggests that gender-related biases are unlikely to influence the survey findings significantly. In terms of age distribution, the sample was predominantly composed of younger participants. The largest group aged 18–24, made up 43.84% of the respondents, reflecting strong engagement among younger individuals. Following this, 34.98% of respondents were aged 25–34, a demographic largely consisting of young working professionals who are also likely to engage with tourism content. In contrast, older age groups were less represented, with only 8.87% of respondents aged 35–44, 6.4% aged 45–54, and 5.91% aged 55 and above. This indicates limited participation from older demographics, highlighting a potential gap in representation within the survey sample.

Table 2. Distribution of Respondents by Gender and Age

	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	104	51.23%
	Female	99	48.77%
Age	18–24	89	43.84%
	25–34	71	34.98%
	35–44	18	8.87%
	45–54	13	6.40%
	55 and above	12	5.91%

4.2.1 Frequency of Using Douyin

The survey results highlight significant variations in Douyin usage frequency (Image 1). A majority (53.7%) reported using the platform multiple times daily, indicating a highly engaged user base and presenting strong opportunities for city branding. However, 29.06% of respondents used Douyin less frequently, with 17.7% engaging occasionally and 11.3% never using it.

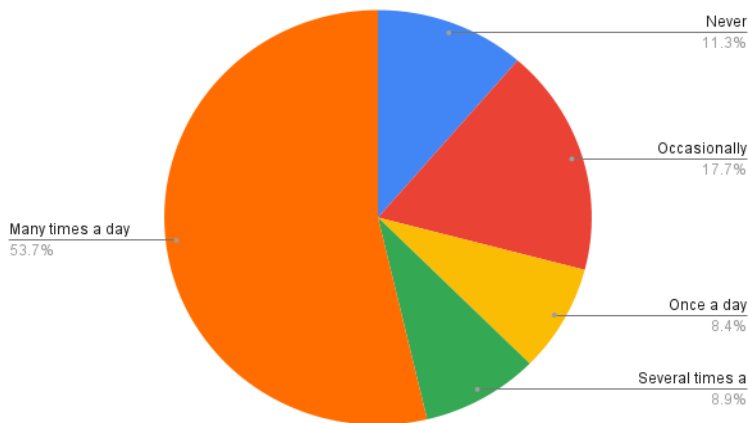


Image 1. Frequency of using Douyin

Less frequent users may have limited exposure to city branding content, highlighting the need for complementary marketing approaches. Frequent users are more likely to engage with targeted campaigns, while reaching less frequent users effectively may require tailored strategies on alternative platforms or through offline methods.

4.2.2 Perceived Usefulness of Douyin Travel Videos in Understanding Urban Tourism Resources

More than half of respondents (54.2%) agreed that Douyin travel videos help them understand urban tourism resources (Image 2), highlighting the platform’s value for city promotion. Its visual and interactive content aligns with Xiao et al. (2018), who emphasise the role of storytelling in making tourism marketing engaging and educational. However, 19.7% remained neutral, while 6.4% disagreed, indicating concerns about the quality or authenticity of the content. Pan and Fesenmaier (2006) note that overly curated portrayals can lead to dissatisfaction if visitors’ expectations do not align with reality.

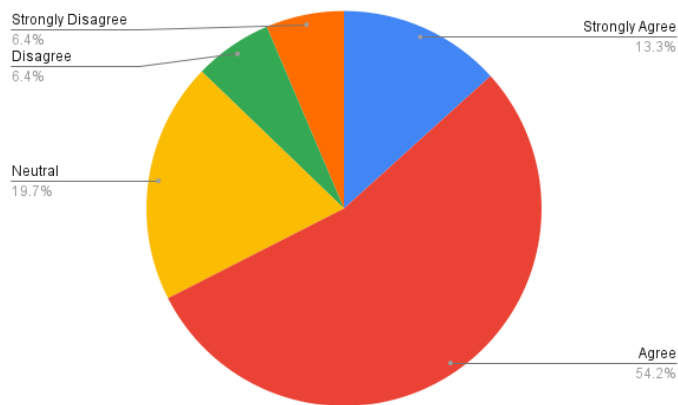


Image 2. Do you think travel videos on Douyin are helpful in better understanding tourism resources in different cities?

To address these concerns—such as the potential for overly polished or misleading content that creates a gap between expectations and reality—destinations must adopt authentic marketing strategies that present a balanced portrayal of their offerings. By accurately reflecting both the strengths and limitations of the experience, destinations can better align visitor expectations with reality, thereby sustaining visitor satisfaction and support the long-term success of urban tourism campaigns.

A smaller percentage of respondents (6.4% each) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the notion that Douyin effectively communicates tourism resources. This scepticism may stem from concerns about content authenticity. Audrezet et al. (2020) argue that over-commercialisation and the influence of paid promotions can undermine trust in the content, reducing its effectiveness in educating potential visitors about tourism resources.

4.2.3 Impact of Douyin Travel Video Content on City Interest

Douyin travel videos increased city interest for 52.2% of respondents, with 16.3% strongly agreeing (Image 3). Engaging visuals, such as those showcasing Shanghai’s nightlife or Beijing’s hutongs, employ dynamic storytelling techniques that evoke emotional responses, consistent with Pan and Fesenmaier’s (2006) findings. However, 18.7% were neutral, which may reflect content saturation, as Xiang and Gretzel (2010) note, or disengagement from excessive exposure. A minority (12.8%) expressed scepticism, echoing Buhalis and Law’s (2008) warning that overly polished portrayals risk creating unrealistic expectations.

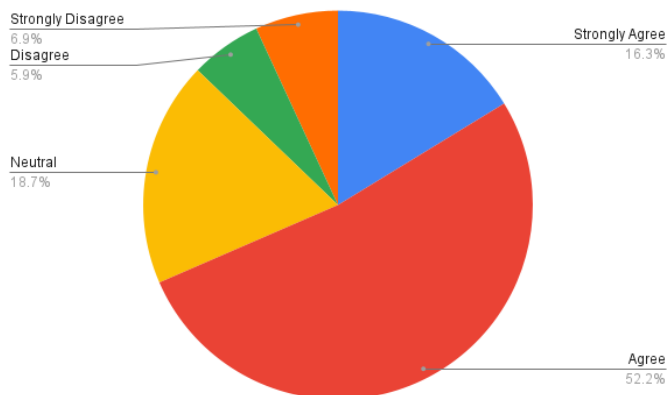


Image 3. Do you think the content of short travel videos on Douyin has increased your interest in certain cities?

Managing content authenticity and variety is crucial for maintaining viewer trust and sustaining interest, ensuring a balanced representation of destinations.

4.2.4 Effectiveness of Douyin’s Travel Video Recommendations

Douyin’s algorithm significantly shapes user engagement by curating content tailored to preferences. While 34% of respondents agreed and 6.9% strongly agreed that Douyin frequently recommends travel videos (Image 4), 35% were neutral, and 24.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This mixed response reflects varying perceptions of the algorithm’s effectiveness.

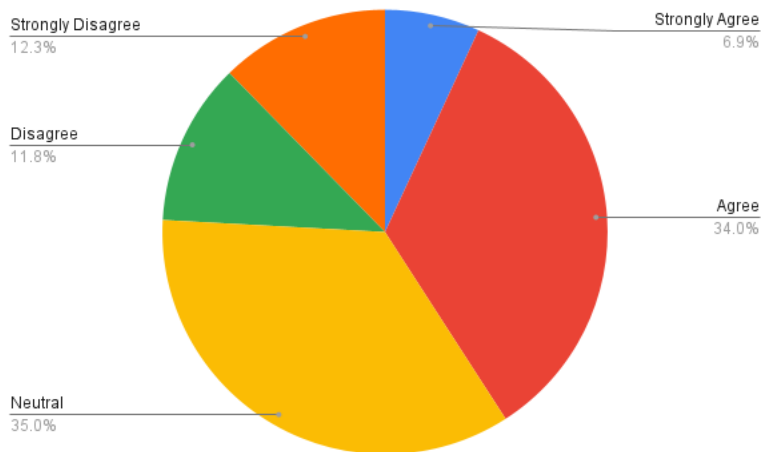


Image 4. Do you think Douyin often recommends short travel videos to you?

Douyin’s recommendation algorithm plays a significant role in driving engagement by curating content tailored to individual preferences. As Malthouse et al. (2013) emphasise, personalised marketing strategies, such as algorithmic recommendations, deliver relevant content that fosters user engagement. Survey data showed that 34% of respondents agreed and 6.9% strongly agreed that Douyin frequently recommends travel videos (Image 4). However, 35% remained neutral, while 24.1% disagreed or strongly disagreed, raising questions about the algorithm’s ability to engage all users consistently. This aligns with Pariser’s (2011) critique of the “filter bubble”, where repetitive content reinforces existing preferences, potentially narrowing users’ exposure and weakening broader city branding efforts.

Tailoring content to user preferences is a double-edged sword (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). While it increases the

visibility of popular destinations, it may obscure lesser-known locations struggling to establish their presence. For example, if Douyin’s algorithm primarily promotes major cities like Beijing or Shanghai, smaller destinations risk being overlooked, hindering their branding efforts. Balancing algorithmic efficiency with equitable content distribution is essential to help a wider range of urban destinations.

4.2.5 Perceived Impact of Douyin’s Tourism Promotion on City Brand Image

Douyin’s short travel videos have improved city brand images for 51.7% of respondents, with 15.3% strongly agreeing (Image 5). Cities like Xi’an and Chengdu have effectively leveraged Douyin to promote their cultural heritage, attract tourists, and strengthen their brands. However, 23.7% remained neutral, which may reflect content saturation or a lack of relevance (Glover, 2009). Additionally, 9.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed, possibly due to gaps between promotional portrayals and actual experiences, consistent with Buhalis and Law’s (2008) findings.

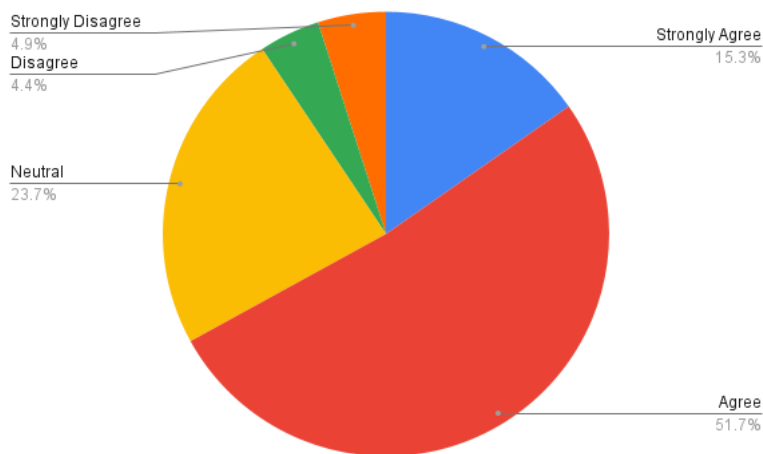


Image 5. Do you think the tourism promotion on Douyin has improved the brand image of certain cities?

Promotional campaigns should present balanced portrayals of destinations, addressing challenges like overcrowding or infrastructure limitations. Authenticity and transparency can sustain trust, ensuring long-term success in urban branding on Douyin.

5. Discussion

This study highlights the multifaceted impact of tourism PR strategies on urban brand reputation through Douyin, revealing both significant benefits and challenges. The research identified five predominant strategies used on Douyin: content marketing, influencer marketing, targeted marketing, user-generated content (UGC), and two-way symmetrical communication. These strategies collectively contribute to building positive city brand images, increasing visibility, and engaging potential tourists. However, they also present challenges, including brand consistency, algorithmic biases, and risks related to misinformation or off-brand content.

Content marketing has proven to be a highly effective tool for showcasing a city’s attractions through visually compelling and emotionally engaging videos. By incorporating storytelling, cinematography, and music, cities can highlight their unique cultural and historical elements, creating lasting impressions among viewers (Kotler and Keller, 2016). For example, cities like Shanghai have successfully utilised short, vibrant videos to appeal to diverse tourist demographics by showcasing modern skyscrapers alongside historical sites. Quantitative findings further support this, as 52.2% of respondents agreed, and 16.3% strongly agreed, that Douyin travel videos increased their interest in certain cities. This indicates that content marketing not only draws attention but also cultivates a desire to visit featured destinations.

Influencer marketing emerged as a critical strategy, leveraging the relatability and credibility of influencers to amplify city brand messages (Abidin, 2015). The collaboration between Chengdu and food bloggers on Douyin demonstrates how influencers can effectively showcase local culture, enhancing the city’s reputation as a culinary destination. Quantitative data support this, with 67% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that Douyin’s tourism promotion improved city brand images. However, qualitative findings reveal risks such as over-commercialisation and misaligned messaging, which can dilute a city’s brand identity and reduce campaign effectiveness (Scott, 2022).

Targeted marketing strategies also play a significant role, with Douyin’s algorithm delivering personalised content to specific demographics (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). For instance, videos promoting Hangzhou’s West Lake are tailored to users interested in nature and cultural heritage, boosting engagement. Survey data showed 34% of respondents agreed,

and 6.9% strongly agreed, that Douyin frequently recommends travel videos. However, 35% remained neutral, reflecting concerns about the “filter bubble” effect, where algorithmic curation restricts content diversity (Pariser, 2011). Balancing precision with equitable content distribution is essential to ensure that a broader range of urban destinations gains visibility.

UGC further improves city branding by fostering authenticity and community engagement. Encouraging visitors to share their experiences allows cities to showcase destinations through the lens of real travellers, often making for more persuasive marketing than traditional methods (Muñiz and Schau, 2011). Beijing, for instance, has effectively utilised UGC by promoting specific hashtags to encourage user participation. While 54.19% of respondents found Douyin videos helpful in understanding tourism resources, qualitative findings highlight potential risks, such as inaccuracies or biased portrayals, which could mislead viewers and harm a city’s reputation (Xiang et al., 2015).

Two-way symmetrical communication on Douyin fosters real-time dialogue between city brands and audiences, strengthening engagement and loyalty (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). Interactive features like comments, shares, and UGC create dynamic feedback loops, enabling city brands to adjust messaging based on audience feedback. However, maintaining consistency in Douyin’s fast-paced ecosystem can be difficult, particularly for smaller cities with limited resources. Buhalis and Law (2008) stress the importance of aligning digital marketing strategies with long-term goals to maintain cohesive branding.

The findings of this study deepen our understanding of how social media, particularly Douyin, shapes city branding in the digital age. By applying Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) two-way symmetrical communication model, this research highlights how Douyin goes beyond traditional marketing by enabling real-time engagement between cities and audiences. Instead of one-way promotional messaging, users actively participate in shaping a city’s reputation through comments, shares, and discussions. The role of UGC is particularly significant—when everyday travellers share their experiences, they add an element of authenticity that official campaigns often struggle to achieve (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004). At the same time, influencer marketing plays a double-edged role: while influencers help cities reach wider audiences and build brand identity, their content can sometimes create unrealistic expectations or dilute brand consistency (Abidin, 2016). The study also raises important questions about the impact of Douyin’s recommendation algorithm. As Pariser (2011) warns, algorithm-driven content curation can lead to a filter bubble, where users are repeatedly exposed to similar content, potentially limiting the diversity of urban narratives. Together, these insights expand our theoretical understanding of city branding in a world where social media isn’t just a tool for marketing—it’s a space where brands, users, and algorithms interact in complex and sometimes unpredictable ways.

While these strategies offer significant advantages, they also present challenges. Overly curated portrayals risk creating unrealistic expectations, leading to dissatisfaction when reality falls short (Pan and Fesenmaier, 2006). Algorithmic biases often favour major cities like Beijing and Shanghai, marginalising lesser-known destinations struggling to gain visibility (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). UGC, while amplifying positive messages, can also spread negative or off-brand content, potentially harming a city’s reputation. As Scott (2022) notes, a single viral post with inaccurate information can quickly overshadow carefully curated branding efforts, underscoring the need for vigilant monitoring and responsive strategies.

Douyin’s tourism PR strategies offer innovative opportunities for urban branding through authentic content, influencer partnerships, targeted marketing, and interactive communication. However, challenges such as misinformation, content saturation, algorithmic biases, and resource limitations require careful management. To maximise Douyin’s potential, cities should prioritise authenticity, ensure consistent messaging, and promote equitable content distribution. By addressing these complexities strategically, urban brands can leverage Douyin to build sustainable and impactful reputations.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the impact of tourism PR strategies on urban brand reputation through Douyin, integrating qualitative and quantitative insights. The findings highlighted the effectiveness of content marketing, user-generated content (UGC), influencer campaigns, targeted strategies, and two-way communication in fostering emotional connections, delivering personalised messages, and facilitating dynamic interactions between city brands and audiences.

While Douyin offers significant potential for city branding, challenges such as misinformation, overly curated portrayals, content saturation, and algorithmic biases were evident. These issues risk undermining audience trust and reducing the visibility of emerging destinations, underscoring the need for equitable content distribution and authentic portrayals.

Quantitative data supported these findings, with respondents acknowledging Douyin’s effectiveness in shaping city brand perceptions. However, concerns about content authenticity and the recommendation system highlight areas for

improvement. These insights suggest that while Douyin is a valuable tool for tourism PR, careful management is crucial to ensure sustainable and effective branding outcomes.

By addressing these challenges—prioritising authenticity, diversifying content, and optimising resource use—cities can fully leverage Douyin’s potential. A strategic, balanced approach will enable urban brands to build meaningful connections with audiences and achieve long-term success in digital tourism promotion.

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