

China's City Image Built by Others: Effects of Western Social Media Influencers on Cognition, Affect, and Behavior of Overseas Audiences

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Abstract: Due to their outsider perspectives and unique cultural insights, Western social media influencers' content on China often achieves widespread virality across platforms. Despite general agreement on the pivotal role these influencers play in cross-cultural dissemination, there is little recent research examining international audience reception of their China-related content. This research conducts a systematic analysis of user comments beneath IShowSpeed's "China Tour" livestreams on YouTube, exploring the construction of China's city image and the effectiveness of cultural transmission at three analytical levels: cognition, affect, and behavioral intention. The findings reveal that the international audience's cognitive perceptions of Chinese cities are predominantly clustered into people and city-specific attributes, with mainly positive or neutral affective responses. Almost half of these positive expressions praise the authenticity of modern China, the warmth of local residents, the country's rapid modernization, and the value of IShowSpeed's livestreams. Furthermore, IShowSpeed's broadcasts sparked multi-layered dialogue among international viewers, prompting many to reflect upon their preconceived stereotypes of China. This engagement also engendered various behavioral intentions, such as the aspiration to travel to China, thus enhancing intercultural understanding and mutual respect. Combined with analyses of official media reports, the research demonstrates that the American influencer's authentic portrayal, the multifaceted depiction of China, and interpersonal engagement collectively underpin the success of IShowSpeed's "China Tour" livestreams. This study offers valuable insights for optimizing China's external communication strategies and improving the overall efficacy of its international cultural outreach.

Keywords: Western social media influencers; China's city image; cross-cultural communication.

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, the dissemination of a positive city image paves the way for cities' cultural and economic development [1]. Besides, as a crucial component of national image, city image plays a critical role in conveying a nation's narrative [2], attracting increasing interest from governmental bodies and scholarly communities. In recent years, the development of mobile Internet has enhanced the communication impact of social media [3], numerous municipal media organizations have established presences on global social networks to foster new pathways for international audiences to engage with the city and the nation. Meanwhile, previous studies have employed a discourse-analytical perspective to reveal the implicit narrative strategies underpinning urban image construction, thereby offering theoretical support for understanding its multidimensional dissemination [4, 5]. In the context of China, nevertheless, empirical research suggests that the efforts of municipal media have yet to achieve their desired communicative effectiveness or broader influence [6]. In this context, Western social media influencers—non-Chinese nationals who have amassed substantial personal influence and large online followings—play a pivotal role. Owing to their outsider perspectives and unique cultural insights, their content on Chinese culture frequently attains viral circulation across both domestic and international media [7]. In particular, their videos on global platforms such as YouTube have inadvertently facilitated the diffusion of Chinese cultural elements worldwide, positioning these creators as exemplars of modern public diplomacy [8].

A recent example is American influencer Darren Watkins Jr. (better known as IShowSpeed), who boasts tens of millions of followers on international platforms. During his “China Trip,” he live-streamed from Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, and other major cities, showcasing Chinese cultural practices and urban landscapes through his personal lens and engaging a substantial global audience. By bridging cultural divides, IShowSpeed’s broadcasts conveyed an image of China that was vibrant, open, friendly, and sophisticated, thereby contributing significantly to intercultural exchange.

Therefore, the present study examines the intercultural communication dynamics of the IShowSpeed “China Trip” live streams on international media platforms to identify the factors that shape audience perceptions and propose innovative perspectives and strategic recommendations for the global promotion of Chinese city images.

2. City Image and Cultural Communication in the Era of Social Media

This study aims to investigate the effects of Western social media influencers in constructing China’s city image. To facilitate the research focus, a review of studies on city image on social media and social media influencers’ role in cultural communication are presented.

2.1 City Image on Social Media

The concept of city image was initially introduced by the American scholar Kevin Lynch [9] in his book *The Image of the City*, defining it as “the common mental pictures carried by large numbers of a city’s inhabitants.” Early research on city image emerged from urban planning and landscape aesthetics, concentrating on the formal design and visual organization of cities. Expanding upon this foundation, Chen [10] characterized city image as the composite impression and visual experience conveyed by a city, through which observers develop a shared understanding of its identity. Consequently, the concept has evolved beyond mere physical form to encompass socio-cultural and psychological dimensions, further expanding the study of city image to the field of marketing. Research in marketing linked city image to city branding, arguing that a favorable image fosters public engagement by communicating brand attributes and values aligned with collective cognition and psychological needs [11]. Moreover, city image is recognized as a key element of cultural soft power, intrinsically connected to the reputation and development of both cities and nations.

Amid increasing globalization, the role of media in shaping city image has garnered heightened scholarly attention, prompting a rise in communication-oriented studies. For example, Potwarka and Banyai [12] investigated online travel blogs to explore city images formed by tourists visiting Sochi during the 2014 Winter Olympic Games. Uriarte et.al [13] examined how Lucca Comics & Games affected the image of Lucca by investigating the posts and comments on Twitter. These previous studies on city image in social media mainly focus on the relationship between events and cities image.

In terms of China’s city image, various studies have been conducted to investigate different countries in different social media content. Fan and Du [14], through a diachronic analysis of *Zhengzhou Daily*, identified the Yellow River as the city’s central cultural symbol and integrative emblem. The proliferation of new media and social networking platforms has shifted research focus toward short-form video and online content. Lei and Liu [15] examined the construction of Chinese city image in the documentary *Next Stop: Exit*; Huang [16] investigated how regional mainstream media employ outward-facing short videos to craft city image; and Su et al. [17] explored the challenges of Beijing’s image dissemination across traditional and new media, proposing an exposure–perception–identification model tailored to international audiences.

To sum up, the aforementioned studies are empirical and significantly provide valuable insights into the dissemination strategy and image construction of a city. However, most previous studies on China’s cities investigated cities’ self-shaping strategies—how cities curate their own images—yet

other-shaping perspective, which considers external actors' constructions of city image, remains limited. Therefore, it seems valuable to study other constructed China's cities to fill this research gap.

2.2 Social Media Influencers and Culture Communication

The rapid industrialization of social media and video platforms has spawned successive waves of social media influencers, operationally defined as “represent a new type of independent third party endorser who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media.” [18] The concept highlights the influencers' capacity to shape public opinion in digital environments. By transcending physical and geographical boundaries, these influencers act as de facto cross-cultural intermediaries, facilitating intercultural exchange through tailored content [19, 20].

In the past few years, a significant number of studies have examined the vital role of social media influencers in cross-cultural communication. For instance, Yaqub [21] conducted a discourse analysis of 195 posts from 40 Pakistani Instagram influencers using English, revealing embedded cultural persuasion strategies and their impact on socio-cultural adaptation. This study underscored the need to balance cultural adaptation with the preservation of indigenous values. Similarly, Lee and Alhabash [22] carried out semi-structured interviews with 12 Korean social media influencers who target Chinese audiences to investigate their role in international strategic communication. Results suggest that effective nation branding efforts rely on a deep understanding of both shared and distinct cultural backgrounds among nations. These investigations collectively offer valuable insights into how influencers facilitate cross-cultural communication across diverse cultural landscapes.

In the context of China, Whyke et al. [23] investigated renowned mega influencer Li Ziqi, demonstrating how her “self-Orientalized” (i.e., deliberately emphasizing traditional Oriental aesthetics and values) short vlogs convey rich narratives about rural China. In another study, Pan [24] examines Weibo comments on Li Ziqi's new work, unveiling the intrinsic mechanisms behind the enduring vitality of her brand and showing how her comeback works continue to attract widespread attention. Further research has extended these inquiries to the role of Western social media influencers in China. For instance, Xu and Zhang [25] compared the effect of “intercultural communication” with “transcultural communication” in the videos of Guo Jierui, a famous western influencer on China, finding that the former elicits broader audience participation and greater reach, while the latter yields deeper affective engagement. Additionally, Sullivan and Wang [26], from the other aspect, explored factors contributing to the virality of foreign influencers in China.

In summary, existing research has primarily focused on the characteristics of social media influencers, the content of their videos, and their contributions to communicative and image-building efforts, demonstrating their unique role in cross-cultural dissemination. However, most of the previous studies in the Chinese context have focused on domestic platforms such as Weibo, Bilibili, and Douyin, with predominantly Chinese audiences, limiting assessment of their international communicative effectiveness. Moreover, previous studies mainly investigated influencer practices or their videos, with less attention paid to investigation of audience reception, thus constraining evaluations of the success of Chinese cultural communication on a global scale. Therefore, the current study will examine the comments of the audience on YouTube, which hopes to provide a more complete picture of the effect of foreign influencers in disseminating the Chinese city image.

3. The Media Communication Effect Framework

In the Internet era, audiences have increasingly assumed an active role, and the evaluation of information dissemination primarily hinges on its utility value. The media communication effect framework, advanced by Lawrence Grossberg et al. [27], provides a foundational model for examining the cultural and informational impacts of media. According to this framework, upon

receiving information, individuals undergo shifts in perception and cognition, which subsequently elicit affective responses. These affects then shape attitudes, inform belief and value systems, and ultimately guide behavior. Cognition represents the most fundamental mental processes—encompassing sensation, perception, memory, thinking, imagination, and language—through which the brain interprets information. Affect constitutes the evaluative reaction to processed cognitive content, encompassing judgments of like or dislike and experiences of pleasure or displeasure. Behavior is the behavioral tendency that forms based on cognitive and affective factors [27].

Accordingly, this study employs the media communication effect framework to analyze netizens' comments at cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels. This approach enables a systematic understanding of foreign viewers' cognitive appraisals, affective reactions, and potential behavioral intentions following their exposure to the IShowSpeed "China Trip" livestream. In doing so, it facilitates a precise assessment of the "foreigners narrating China's story" phenomenon on international social media platforms and informs strategies for enhancing the global dissemination of Chinese urban images and cultural content. The framework is illustrated in Figure 1:

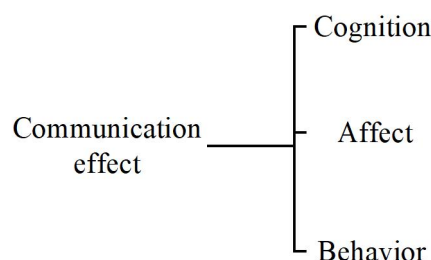


Fig. 1 The analytical framework

Therefore, the study focuses on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions and seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) After watching IShowSpeed's videos, what cognitive perceptions do overseas audiences form regarding the video content and the image of Chinese cities? (2) What affective responses do overseas audiences exhibit toward the featured Chinese cities? (3) What behavioral intentions are likely to emerge among overseas viewers? (4) What factors contribute to the considerable attention attracted by IShowSpeed's videos?

4. Methodology

The study investigates the "China Trip" livestream series by IShowSpeed on YouTube. By April 6, 2025, IShowSpeed has broadcast seven sessions in Shanghai, Beijing, the Shaolin Monk, Chengdu, Chongqing, Shenzhen, and Hong Kong. Because our analysis focuses on city image and the Shaolin Monk livestream primarily depicts the host's martial-arts training at the Shaolin Temple, which falls outside this study's scope, we concentrate on the remaining six broadcasts, namely the livestream in Shanghai, Beijing, Chengdu, Chongqing, Hong Kong, and Shenzhen.

The study begins with the collection of audience comments and the construction of corpora. First, real-time viewer comments from the six selected videos were retrieved on April 19, 2025, using Python, yielding a total of 83,730 comments. During preprocessing, all non-English comments (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Spanish) and entries consisting solely of emojis were removed, resulting in 38,970 English-language comments retained for analysis. Although some viewers in China may comment in English, this possibility is negligible due to internet restrictions. Following data cleaning, the files were saved in plain text so that concordancers could access them. Consequently, six separate corpora—each corresponding to one of the videos—were established. Table 1 shows the detailed information about the self-built corpus:

Table 1. Basic information of the corpus

City	Beijing	Shanghai	Chengdu	Chongqing	Shenzhen	HongKong
Number of Comments	6,642	7,698	5,960	7,023	5,346	6,301
Tokens	125,077	113,324	110,015	126,847	96,032	113,709

Under the framework of media communication effect [27], we analyzed how overseas audiences perceived and responded to the portrayal of Chinese cities in IShowSpeed's livestreams from cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. First, at the cognitive level, the study employed AntConc 4.0 to extract high-frequency lexical items from each video's comment corpus—after filtering out pronouns, adverbs, and other non-content words—to assess foreign viewers' perceptions of Chinese urban landscapes and culture. Later, at the affective level, the study employed Python's VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and Sentiment Reasoner) library to conduct sentiment analysis on user comments with polarity. Furthermore, at the behavioral level, we identified potential audience intentions by integrating the cognitive and affective findings with a qualitative analysis of the comment content.

Finally, to elucidate why IShowSpeed's livestreams garnered significant attention, we collected official reports on his China trip published by CCTV News and People's Daily by searching "IShowSpeed" on the WeChat Official Account of the two media on May 1st. By eliminating those only mentioned IShowSpeed and unrelated to the current study (such as the one focusing on Livestream in Shaolin Temple, Henan), altogether, five official reports from CCTV News and People's Daily were collected. By employing content analysis on these official accounts and the audience comments, we identified key factors driving engagement with IShowSpeed's broadcasts and derived implications for China's international communication strategies.

5. Results and Discussion

The study employs the framework of media communication effects to analyze how overseas audiences perceive Chinese urban images in their comments on IShowSpeed's livestreams with respect to cognition, affect, and behavioral intentions. It also evaluates the extent to which Chinese official media coverage has addressed these livestreams.

5.1 Cognitive Dimension: People and City-Specific Attributes

The study imported six self-constructed corpora into AntConc 4.0 and extracted keyword lists for user comments on livestream videos of six Chinese cities. To capture overseas audiences' overall cognitive representations of China's city image, pronouns, adverbs, and other function words were removed, and then the top 20 content keywords (ranked by log-likelihood values) were compiled from each video's comments (see Table 2).

Table 2. High-Frequency Keywords in Overseas Audience Comments

	Shanghai	Beijing	Chengdu	Chongqing	Shenzhen	HongKong
1	China	China	China	China	China	HongKong
2	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	uncle	girl
3	translator	suit	people	Chongqing	Chinese	China
4	people	translator	Chengdu	people	Shenzhen	Chinese
5	Shanghai	people	girl	beautiful	translator	mainland
6	rude	Beijing	crazy	propaganda	goose	boat
7	vpn	country	friendly	love	love	people
8	love	propaganda	super	drone	drone	cute
9	crazy	translation	love	media	phone	guide
10	internet	internet	discrimination	amazing	car	crazy

11	go	crazy	funny	visit	best	mainlander
12	better	good	visit	crazy	huawei	hongkonger
13	bodyguards	media	cosplayer	cyberpunk	tech	wholesome
14	media	cuisine	netizens	underrated	amazing	best
15	translate	wall	clown	tony	beautiful	zombie
16	bad	better	panda	cyber	propaganda	camera
17	song	vpn	culture	want	technology	luffy
18	santai	bodyguard	hotpot	funny	robot	culture
19	nice	annoying	discrimination	translator	anime	chaos
20	videos	forbidden	archive	futuristic	better	sweet

5.1.1 Cognition on People

As shown in Table 2, people consistently emerged as a central theme in the comment of IShowSpeed's livestream, with person-related keywords—"people," "translator," "girl," and "uncle"—appearing with high frequency, demonstrating that people were particularly engaged with international audiences during IShowSpeed's broadcasts in China. This aligns with previous research that asserts embedding identifiable people in destination media significantly facilitates viewers' mental simulation process and enhance their perception of destination [28]. Psychological research also shows that immersive interaction between people and the broadcaster helps viewers feel the presence of others and perceive the broadcaster as a real person, rather than an indifferent robot, thereby enhancing social presence [29]. Among the various individuals featured, "Goose Uncle" vividly demonstrates the impact of personal figures on cross-cultural communication. During the Shenzhen livestream, the keywords "uncle" and "goose", referring to Goose Uncle, frequently surfaced. A middle-aged man from Rongchang, Chongqing, previously appearing in IShowSpeed's videos in Chengdu, Chongqing, and Hong Kong, he wore a floral cotton-padded jacket and carried his home-made marinated goose, which he offered to IShowSpeed to promote his hometown cuisine. As Gursoy et al. [30] argued, active and friendly interactions with locals can significantly enhance the audience's perception of a city's or country's human warmth and authenticity, thereby increasing satisfaction with and trust in the overall destination image. Therefore, Goose Uncle's genuineness and warmth resonated with both IShowSpeed and the audience, with many commenting: "The uncle, full of sincerity, was recognized and loved by fans during the live broadcast of IShowSpeed." Some audiences even advocated for his continued presence: "We want uncle as a part of Speed's team," and "I want more uncle!!!" Audience admiration even extended beyond the individual to encompass broader Chinese virtues: "Uncle goose is so sincere; he embodies China's kindness and warm-heartedness—I am so touched." Consequently, figures such as the Goose Uncle serve as great bridges that connect domestic and international audiences in cross-cultural communication, in turn reinforcing identification with the city's image [30].

5.1.2 Cognition on Modernization Symbols

Beyond people, the six cities visited during IShowSpeed's China tour impressed international viewers with their distinctive symbols and cultural markers. This aligns with previous research, which emphasizes that iconic cultural symbols can shape how cities are perceived and further reinforcing city identity and familiarity among international viewers [31]. Specifically, the overseas audience's perceptions of city image are principally generated by four categories of symbols: modernization symbols, historical-cultural symbols, regional-feature symbols, and urban-landscape symbols.

Modernization symbols are most pronounced in the live streams of Shanghai and Shenzhen. Unlike Chinese social media influencers, Western social media influencers more readily highlight

symbols that diverge from their preexisting notions and Western stereotypes, most notably those signifying technological and social development [32]. While some overseas viewers continue to associate China with traditional icons such as the Four Great Inventions or traditional Chinese medicine, IShowSpeed's livestreams of urban construction and advanced technologies reveal a contrasting dimension, gradually reshaping their original impressions. As the first stop of his China tour, Shanghai generated high frequencies of the keywords "internet," "modernity," and "clean." A six-hour uninterrupted outdoor broadcast vividly demonstrated the robustness of local network infrastructure—viewers commented, "China has really good internet and no lagging best part!" This seamless, high-quality network experience became tangible evidence of Shanghai's technological sophistication, intertwining with broader perceptions of the city's development. Furthermore, Shenzhen also attracted overseas attention for its modern technologies, shown in high-frequency keywords such as "car," "Huawei," "robot," and "drone". Following IShowSpeed's perspective, viewers vicariously experienced the lives of Shenzhen residents—riding underwater vehicles, dancing with robots, and receiving deliveries by drone—and were struck by the advanced technology: "Shenzhen looks like it's years ahead of the rest of the world. The infrastructure, cleanliness, and tech vibes are next level – truly a glimpse into the future." This further reinforced Shenzhen's positioning as China's hub of technological innovation and entrepreneurial incubation. Moreover, it helped overseas audiences overcome outdated perceptions of China as "backward," cementing Shenzhen's image as a modern, dynamic city of technology in their minds: "Now Americans know how far we are behind China in technology. We still think we have the best cars, best phones, and the best AI... They just showed you BYD cars, HUAWEI phones, and Deepseek AI... Their drones are better, robots also..." These reactions demonstrate that Western influencers' video content can partially break down stereotypes and update viewers' understanding of China. The appeal of technological symbols derives not only from their novelty but also from the contrast with viewers' prior stereotypes [32]: Western audiences, expecting substandard networks or smartphones, witnessed 6 hours of uninterrupted streaming and drone deliveries, an anti-stereotype experience that swiftly elevates the image of Chinese cities as modern and progressive.

5.1.3 Cognition on Historical-cultural Symbols

Historical-cultural symbols—bearing collective memories, deep history, and uniquely Chinese characteristics—attract overseas viewers through their distinctiveness [33]. During the Beijing live stream, IShowSpeed donned traditional attire and visited renowned sites such as the Great Wall and the Forbidden City, reinforcing viewers' existing perceptions of China's profound civilizational legacy. The keywords "wall" (Great Wall) and "forbidden" (Forbidden City) under the Beijing stream indicate that these monuments remain core historical symbols in overseas audiences' minds—with comments, "The Great Wall of China is a breathtaking and iconic structure." However, IShowSpeed's coverage did more than present solemn relics; by cleverly integrating these static legends with contemporary life, it offered viewers a novel experience. Some were astonished to see a delivery person bring KFC to the foot of the Great Wall: "The dude that brought Speed KFC all the way to The Great Wall of China..... Big respect." IShowSpeed transports viewers into the time-space of a shared past and then, by combining it with present-day experiences, communicates that these heritage sites are not cold artifacts but living social spaces that continue to participate in everyday life rhythms. Simultaneously, some viewers called for deeper cultural commentary—"he need historian plus translator at forbidden city"—reflecting a keen desire to move beyond surface impressions toward substantive understanding of the historical logic underpinning these cultural symbols.

5.1.4 Cognition on Distinctive Regional Symbols

The third category comprises highly perceptible, attractive, and distinctive regional symbols. In the Chengdu live stream, "panda" and "hotpot" became the dominant keywords. As representations of Chengdu culture, pandas and hotpot possess high transmissibility and readily evoke viewers' emotional responses and cultural imaginations [2]. When IShowSpeed painted his face like a panda,

many viewers laughed aloud: “I was drinking water and I saw a panda and I died laughing.” This interaction not only provided visual comedy but also fostered a relaxed, familiar cultural connection with the audience. The panda functions not only as a biological symbol but also as an international icon of cute China, and IShowSpeed’s behavior reinforced overseas audiences’ perception of Chengdu as the hometown of pandas. Numerous viewers expressed a desire to see pandas in person: “Chengdu is the hometown of pandas, and it’s truly a pity that we couldn’t livestream from the Panda Base.” Such cultural symbols help viewers form concrete imagery of a city rich in regional characteristics. The emotional qualities conveyed by pandas—cuteness and gentleness—echo Chengdu’s portrayal in international dissemination as a leisurely, livable city, deepening viewers’ understanding of its cultural temperament. As another key cultural emblem of Chengdu, hotpot functions as a mandatory social ritual. When IShowSpeed challenged the spiciest broth in a local hotpot restaurant, it became both a popular gastronomic element and a marker of social and cultural meaning. Some viewers shared on dipping sauces and eating techniques in the comments: “When Speed was eating hotpot, no one told him how to eat it, and no one told him that he should dip the food in the oil-based sauce. As a result, he never dipped his food in the sauce even once and missed out on the essence of hotpot.” Within the context of culinary symbols, cultural differences become an avenue for communication and exchange [23].

5.1.5 Cognition on Urban-landscape Symbols

The fourth category comprises urban-landscape symbols. Previous research also shows that foreign audiences are often amazed by China’s unique visual elements and urban landscapes [2]. In Chongqing, the three-dimensional terrain, monorail trains passing through buildings, and distinctive nightscape provided IShowSpeed with intense visual stimulation, prompting him to exclaim, “This is Chongqing, China’s cyberpunk city!” and positioning Chongqing in viewers’ minds as a city of the future. The frequent appearance of “cyberpunk” and “futuristic” in the comment section indicates that overseas viewers perceive Chongqing’s cityscape as a hybrid of visual shock and futuristic fantasy: “Chongqing can look very cyberpunk at night and it’s a 4D city!” These remarks do more than appraise the landscape; they offer entirely new cognition: prior impressions of Chongqing as developing or backward are rapidly dispelled by streaming images that reveal a three-dimensional urban structure and technologically infused night scenes. This counter-stereotype experience reinforces Chongqing’s image as a futuristic metropolis. Hong Kong’s appeal, by contrast, lies in its harbor culture. The frequent keyword “boat” during the live stream signifies viewers’ attraction to Hong Kong’s harbor scenery. IShowSpeed’s Victoria Harbour night cruise showed city landmarks in succession, enabling viewers to rapidly form a holistic understanding of the urban structure and enjoy a romantic experience—some viewers marveling, “boat part is paradise.” The Victoria Harbour tour not only highlights the aesthetic interplay between nature and city lights but also reinforces the image of Hong Kong as a blend of East and West, a romantic metropolis. These unique urban landscapes deepen overseas audiences’ appreciation of the diverse faces of Chinese cities.

In summary, through technological, historical, cultural, and social tags, these six cities collectively sketch a rich, multidimensional picture of Chinese cities in the minds of overseas viewers. Together with the individual personas featured earlier, these symbols work in concert to construct a complex, multi-layered image of China for international audiences.

5.2 Predominance of Positive Affective Responses

This study utilized Python’s VADER library to conduct affective analysis on the audience’s comments, as shown in Table 3. The results indicate that across individual livestream sessions and the aggregated dataset, positive sentiments predominate, neutral sentiments comprise a secondary share, and negative sentiments appear infrequently.

Table 3. Affect Analysis Results of Overseas Audience Comments

City	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Shanghai	3130 (40.66%)	2835 (36.83%)	1733 (22.51%)
Beijing	2834 (42.67%)	2147 (32.32%)	1661 (25.01%)
Chengdu	2470 (41.44%)	1805 (30.29%)	1685 (28.27%)
Chongqing	3492 (49.72%)	2182 (31.07%)	1349 (19.21%)
Shenzhen	2479 (46.37%)	1835 (34.32%)	1032 (16.38%)
HongKong	2847 (45.18%)	1898 (30.12%)	1556 (24.69%)
Total	17252 (44.27%)	12702 (32.59%)	9016 (23.14%)

Tracing audience comments reveals four primary sources of positive affect. First, the shock of authentic China. Bu et. al [29] report that interactive, real-time livestreams create a strong sense of presence and emotional connection, enabling audiences to perceive urban landscapes more genuinely. IShowSpeed's enthusiastic, on-the-ground streams allow international fans to experience Chinese cities vicariously, increasing realism and positive sentiment. Viewers remarked, "This is the first time I have seen China so clearly in a live stream. Absolutely stunning!" The virtual travel experience created by the livestream enables overseas audiences to overcome geographic barriers, allowing viewers to visually appreciate the cityscape while also resonating emotionally with the on-site scenes.

Second, the warmth of local residents. As discussed in the previous section, the locals' genuine hospitality and the depth of engagement are strongly correlated with the audience's positive evaluation of the cultural ambiance [30]. Interactions between IShowSpeed and Chinese citizens in the livestreams demonstrated genuine hospitality of Chinese people, which promotes audiences' positive affect and elicits comments such as, "Chinese fans are showing real class—no drama, just pure respect. Wish more places were like that!" These exchanges narrowed psychological distance between individuals, transcended cultural barriers, and broke down misunderstandings and divisions, reinforcing viewers' affective identification with the host and his interlocutors.

Third, perceptions of China's modernization. Footage of advanced infrastructure and efficient public services shattered viewers' stereotypical perceptions of China as crowded and chaotic; what the lens captured was no longer an imagined old city, but a revitalized modern metropolis. This stark contrast elicited strong surprise, thereby generating a novel recognition of China's modernization, technological advancement, and governance capacity. These prompted the audience's favorable evaluations: "China is really clean, tidy and orderly, and China's urban construction is very advanced, which has been underestimated for a long time." Such praise extends beyond modern infrastructure to imply a new interpretation of national governance quality and innovative capacity [2].

Fourth, affirmation of IShowSpeed's livestream as a vehicle for cross-cultural exchange. Traditional media often employ one-way narratives, whereas IShowSpeed's live streams function as a two-way interactive platform for cross-cultural exchange [26]. Many international viewers revised preconceived media narratives after watching: "Yoo American media shits on China so bad this place looks amazing thank you speed for showing us the truth!" When international viewers revise the negative impressions previously shaped by mainstream media after watching the livestream, it indicates that the streams not only offer an avenue for updating information but also serve as a crucial means for rebuilding the communication bridge between East and West. This model of cross-cultural exchange breaks down existing information barriers, enabling audiences to engage with a more authentic and dynamic image of China through first-hand experiences.

By contrast, negative affect primarily stemmed from two sources. Firstly, cultural differences and behavioural norms provoked dissatisfaction among certain viewers. Some viewers felt uneasy about IShowSpeed's or others' behaviours, or they misinterpreted cultural cues: "After watching this, I'm convinced Speed is an asshole. People are just trying to give gifts. He's telling them to be quiet." This response underscores viewers' sensitivity to communicative norms and cultural divergence. Besides, the recurrent presence of the translator provoked controversy. During the Beijing livestream, a Chinese barber expressed that he was not familiar with dreads, so he's not confident about messing with IShowSpeed's hair. However, the translator's rendition, "hair was raggedy," not only misrepresented the barber's original meaning but also risked perpetuating negative stereotypes about Chinese people among international viewers." Numerous users condemned this mistranslation: "I don't speak Chinese but that translator is terrible and deserves his social credit score to be zero." These responses highlight the critical importance of accurate and professional translation in cross-cultural contexts.

Secondly, some viewers questioned the authenticity of the livestream content, for example: "Most scenes were fake and artificial and lacked confidence and never natural. Speed felt it and had horrible vibes in China." "How much the Chinese govt paid you?" Such remarks reflect suspicions that the influencer was compensated to produce orchestrated positive publicity, revealing audience concerns regarding source transparency and content impartiality. This suggests that even when a Western social media influencer shares the audience's cultural background or appearance, their positive impact on international viewers remains limited; some audiences still interpret and evaluate content through preexisting cognitive frameworks [32].

Notably, the livestream in Chongqing received higher neutral and positive affect. Firstly, Chongqing's distinctive mountainous terrain and its monorail traversing buildings generated a strong sense of novelty. IShowSpeed visited the monorail that traverses high-rises and the mountain city's topography; these features of the 8D magical city are visually striking and fresh, attracting numerous users' positive comments: "Chongqing is a mountain city... you might think you're on the 1st floor but it's actually the 20th floor..." The city's three-dimensional urban landscape itself became a focal point for discussion and emotional resonance. Secondly, interactions with residents and the enthusiasm of local residents were warmly received—and even praised—by international viewers. The joint dance between IShowSpeed and the locals made viewers find it entertaining, endearing, and even moving, thus eliciting positive evaluations: "bruh that dance was so good and it was really unexpected as well." These responses expressed strong appreciation for the locals' hospitality. Previous research indicates that Western social media influencers addressing serious topics, such as Chinese politics or societal issues, tend to provoke skepticism [32]. By concentrating on cultural experiences and everyday interactions, the Chongqing livestream avoided controversies over sensitive subjects while fully engaging viewers' emotions, thus garnering broader positive feedback.

5.3 Behavioral Intentions of Overseas Audiences

The trajectory from the initial formation of cognitive awareness, through the deepening of affective engagement, to the manifestation of concrete behavioral intentions signifies the cumulative and amplifying effect of cross-cultural communication [34].

As shown in Tables 2 and 3, keywords such as "visit," "want," and "go" frequently occur and are largely associated with positive or neutral sentiment. This pattern indicates that IShowSpeed's livestream has had a notably positive impact, with numerous overseas viewers explicitly expressing an intention to travel to China. The resulting travel intentions are consistent with previous research, showing that streaming vivid destination experiences can directly stimulate travel desire as they include rich social presence (images of people, interactions), thus improving trust [32]. As viewers comment, "After watching all the Speed streams I cancelled my recent Germany trip, and going to visit China now. Chinese people are humble and friendly". Moreover, some users proactively inquired about practical travel matters, including visa applications and itinerary planning. The

resulting behavioral intentions constitute an initial step toward enabling real-world practice and exchange.

Furthermore, many viewers shared their personal experiences in China: “I had the privilege of visiting China twice... It was actually my very first international trip... I’m sure it has changed a lot since then, but I was so amazed by what I experienced there that when I visited Western countries afterward, I barely felt like sightseeing. Nothing really impressed me in comparison.” These firsthand narratives — conveyed through multilayered dialogue — not only deepen users’ understanding of cultural differences but also stimulate diverse behavioral intentions [33]. They form a socialized information network of word-of-mouth diffusion, offering potential tourists a reliable behavioral reference. By sharing personal experiences, viewers not only transmit positive evaluations of Chinese urban realities but also cultivate a sense of authenticity through multiple narrative perspectives.

Historically, motivated by ideological and political interests, Western mainstream media have frequently employed biased frameworks in their reporting on China, thereby reinforcing international audiences’ stereotypes and prejudices [33]. By contrast, IShowSpeed’s vivid first-person recordings have emerged as a pivotal medium for challenging this entrenched narrative. Some viewers began to question these negative portrayals. For example: “All I see on western media and YouTube is people making china look like a horrible dystopian nightmare but in reality it looks beautiful and makes me want to visit.” Audiences’ challenge of traditional reporting suggests that, through real-time interaction, they acquire more comprehensive and diverse information. This cognitive contrast effect, in turn, prompts a reassessment of the original negative narrative.

5.4 Factors for IShowSpeed’s Success

The study also conducted a content analysis of media coverage of CCTV News and People’s Daily, revealing that these reports predominantly highlight the favorable aspects of IShowSpeed’s China tour, portraying it as a paradigmatic case of people-to-people diplomacy.

Specifically, CCTV News and People’s Daily assert that IShowSpeed’s livestream dismantled overseas audiences’ entrenched stereotypes and reconstructed an authentic image of China. First, they underscore revised perceptions of China’s technological and social advancement. Technological feats—such as buffering-free livestreaming at 350 km/h on a high-speed train, drone-based meal delivery, and demonstrations of Huawei foldable-screen smartphones—counter the notion of “China’s technological backwardness” and bolster the view of “China’s technological leadership.” Likewise, the uninterrupted and secure nature of the livestream in China—juxtaposed with reports of IShowSpeed encountering theft or assault abroad—reconfigured the global perception of China’s safety. Second, the reports emphasize an enriched appreciation of China’s cultural diversity through the livestream. From traditional practices such as TCM pulse diagnosis and Sichuan-opera face-changing to regional gastronomic specialties like douzhi, houttuynia, and Chongqing hotpot, foreign viewers gained insight into the depth and locality-specific character of Chinese culture. Finally, these livestreams present grassroots interactions as exemplars of informal cultural diplomacy. Friendly engagements—exemplified by Goose Uncle’s feeding, Chongqing residents intervening in English to prevent hazards, and fans coordinating lighthearted group-singing—are cited as cross-cultural exchanges that epitomize authenticity and goodwill.

Based on audience and official report insights, the study identifies three key factors underpinning this success and offer targeted recommendations to enhance the international dissemination of Chinese city imagery. First, uninterrupted, unedited livestreaming with an American host. IShowSpeed’s prolonged, first-person livestream eliminated the cuts typical of short-form video, affording viewers an immersive and authentic experience. His role as an external observer further reduced skepticism of official narratives and bolstered trust in the content. To capitalize on this dynamic, Chinese official communication channels could use livestream and invite diverse western influencers, would broaden the perspective presented and enable global audiences to develop a multidimensional understanding of contemporary China, thereby reinforcing cultural outreach

efficacy. Second, integration of distinct cultural symbols and cutting-edge technology. The livestream's showcasing of heritage landmarks, combined with IShowSpeed's direct engagement, created memorable viewer experiences. Simultaneously, technological novelties heightened curiosity and illustrated China's modern sophistication. Authorities might also broaden the perspective presented and enable global audiences to develop a multidimensional understanding of contemporary China. Third, vivid personal interactions as bridges. Live, personable exchanges with local figures transformed the broadcast from passive sightseeing to active cross-cultural dialogue, fostering affective rapport with Chinese citizens and culture. To build on this, authorities could also involve interactive scenes between people, not only for cultural experiences but also for common dialogues, further advancing mutual understanding and affective resonance.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the construction of China's city images and the cultural communication effects of IShowSpeed's livestream tour of China by analyzing user comments across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. The findings reveal that overseas audiences focus their perceptions on people and iconic urban symbols; the majority expressed positive attitudes toward these cities and indicated intentions to visit China. Official media concurrently portrayed IShowSpeed's tour as a model of people-to-people diplomacy, affirming its communicative influence. Collectively, these results demonstrate that the livestream achieved significant success in projecting favorable images of Chinese cities to a global audience, attributable to the American influencer's authentic presentation, the multidimensional portrayal of China, and interpersonal engagement.

Overall, this study offers valuable insights for optimizing China's city image communication. However, it is limited to IShowSpeed's livestream and overlooks the effect of other Western social media influencers. Future research should incorporate other representative Western social media influencers to conduct comparative analyses of their strategies and impacts, further refining China's global city-image promotion approaches.

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