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The Entertaining Sacred Land: The Turn to Popular Culture in Xizang's Official Tourism Promotion on Douyin

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Abstract: In the digital media era, short videos have become a major tool for the Chinese government to promote cultural and tourism development. Against this backdrop, this study investigates the official Douyin account "Lhasa Culture and Tourism", managed by the Lhasa Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism in the Xizang Autonomous Region. Using a multimodal discourse analysis approach, it examines how the account integrates elements of popular culture to reinterpret and disseminate cultural and tourism resources. A qualitative analysis of 255 short videos demonstrates that the account constructs narratives tailored to young audiences' aesthetics and the dynamics of the platform by incorporating elements such as popular celebrities, trending music, and viral online phenomena. Through cross-regional content co-creation and fan-economy-oriented marketing strategies, it effectively transforms cultural and tourism content into engaging and entertaining expressions, shaping an official communication image that is both friendly and relatable. This entertainment-oriented narrative exemplifies how official media adopt communication strategies that are traffic-driven, emotionally engaging, and symbolically rich. The findings offer practical insights for enhancing the promotional efforts of official accounts representing Xizang and other ethnic minority tourism destinations on short-video platforms.

Keywords: Xizang; "Lhasa culture and tourism"; entertainment; popular culture; Douyin; short videos

1. Introduction

The rapid advancement of mobile internet technology has profoundly transformed the development model of China's cultural and tourism industries, with short-video platforms such as Douyin emerging as key spaces for urban tourism promotion and digital storytelling. In recent years, a wave of so-called wanghong (internet-famous) cities has gained prominence through creative use of short videos and live-streaming, greatly enhancing urban visibility, cultural recognition, and tourism-driven economic growth [1,2]. In this new media environment, cultural and tourism departments across China have increasingly established official accounts on Douyin, strategically adapting their communication practices to the platform's participatory logic. By leveraging elements of popular culture-such as trending music, internet memes, and performative scenarios-these official accounts construct localized narratives that resonate with online audiences. This strategy not only enhances engagement but also transforms social media interactions into tangible cultural and economic outcomes. Consequently, official communication is shifting away from a purely formal and institutional tone toward a more accessible,

entertainment-oriented narrative style that aligns with the aesthetics and consumption habits of digital audiences.

Unlike other regions in China, the Xizang Autonomous Region occupies a distinctive position in national media representation and collective cultural imagination. Historically, Xizang has often been portrayed through symbolic and romanticized frameworks-emphasizing its uniqueness and spirituality-which has contributed to a mediated image shaped by both fascination and distance [3]. Such depictions tend to simplify Xizang into an abstract cultural symbol, rather than portraying it as a dynamic and lived space. In recent years, however, digital media has introduced new possibilities for reinterpreting and reconstructing regional imagery. Scholarly discussions on digital communication related to Xizang have been increasing, yet many remain focused on individual narratives, ethnic cultural representation, or tourism discourse, with limited attention to how official actors utilize popular culture and platform-specific strategies to reshape the contemporary image of Xizang in the digital sphere.

The short-video series produced by the official Douyin account "Lhasa Culture and Tourism" epitomizes this evolving communication approach. Operated by the Lhasa Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism, the account has attracted over 500,000 followers and published more than 1,000 videos since its launch in August 2021. Its content demonstrates a consistent effort to merge official communication with entertainment-driven aesthetics. Through the use of popular music, viral internet trends, and dynamic video editing, the account reconfigures the visual narrative of "Sacred Lhasa" into a more approachable and engaging cultural experience. Instead of relying solely on traditional imagery that highlights solemnity or distance, the account presents Lhasa as a vivid, interactive, and participatory destination-where culture, creativity, and tourism coexist in a contemporary digital context.

This transformation signals a broader evolution in official media discourse: a move from top-down dissemination toward emotionally resonant, platform-adaptive storytelling. The "Lhasa Culture and Tourism" account thus serves as an ideal case study for examining how governmental communication integrates popular cultural logic and user engagement to renew the digital image of regional culture and tourism.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the narrative transformation of official tourism communication in Xizang through the lens of popular culture, focusing specifically on the "Lhasa Culture and Tourism" Douyin account. The research aims to address the following questions:

RQ1: How does "Lhasa Culture and Tourism" incorporate elements of popular culture into its narrative construction?

RQ2: What communication strategies do these entertainment-oriented narratives reveal about the evolving logic of official media?

To answer these questions, this study employs multimodal discourse analysis to uncover the communicative mechanisms that underpin the narrative shift toward what may be described as "the entertaining sacred land." By analyzing the interplay of visual, auditory, and textual modalities, it explores how official media adapt to the participatory logic of short-video platforms while maintaining cultural authority and credibility. The study contributes to academic discussions on official media communication, the translation of popular culture in digital contexts, and the online construction of regional and ethnic imagery. Furthermore, it provides practical insights for improving the effectiveness and inclusivity of cultural and tourism communication strategies in China's diverse regional contexts.

2. Literature Review

The emergence of short-video platforms has created new opportunities for cultural and tourism communication in the digital era. Owing to their distinctive features-such as entertainment, immediacy, and interactivity-short videos have become powerful tools for

enhancing users' travel motivation and strengthening the appeal of tourism destinations. They allow for rich sensory experiences that can stimulate emotional resonance and generate positive social and economic effects [4,5]. Among these platforms, Douyin has become the most influential representative of short-form video media in China. With over 700 million daily active users, Douyin provides an extensive space for multimodal expression, making it a strategic platform for public communication and cultural dissemination [6].

Since its rise in 2017, Douyin has evolved into a central medium for destination marketing and the promotion of cultural heritage. Its advantages—such as simplified video editing, personalized recommendation algorithms, and strong social interaction—make it a preferred tool for travelers to document and share their experiences. Moreover, Douyin's algorithmic ecosystem, trending hashtags, and search-based discovery mechanisms have amplified the visibility of cultural and tourism content, connecting users with diverse destinations and cultural experiences [7]. Recognizing this communicative potential, the platform has actively encouraged government agencies to establish official accounts. These collaborations have enabled public institutions to utilize Douyin's content distribution system and promotional algorithms to deliver public information, promote local culture, and engage in interactive tourism communication [8].

Within this context, the integration of entertainment and information in travel-themed short videos has emerged as a key feature of digital tourism marketing. By presenting destination-related content through humorous, dramatic, or emotionally appealing formats, these videos offer immersive and participatory experiences that strongly influence viewers' travel intentions and destination perceptions [9,10]. Government accounts have increasingly adopted similar methods, utilizing creative editing, music synchronization, and influencer collaborations to make official communication more engaging. This entertainment-oriented transformation breaks away from rigid institutional discourse and demonstrates an adaptive shift toward a more audience-centered and visually dynamic communication style [11]. The blending of official information with entertainment-oriented storytelling not only enhances message receptivity but also reflects broader changes in digital governance and tourism branding strategies.

Historically, Xizang has been portrayed within national and international media as a culturally distinctive and spiritually rich region, often framed through narratives emphasizing remoteness and mystique [12]. Such portrayals, while highlighting its cultural depth, have also tended to simplify the region's complex realities. In recent years, however, local governments across Xizang have leveraged short-video platforms to promote cultural tourism through fresh and diversified narratives. These efforts represent a significant departure from traditional imagery. By employing digital storytelling techniques, official accounts have reconstructed the tourism image of Xizang—one that integrates natural landscapes, historical and cultural heritage, and contemporary social development. Although themes of spirituality and cultural authenticity continue to underpin promotional discourse, recent campaigns consciously avoid excessive exoticization. Instead, they emphasize inclusivity, sustainability, and the coexistence of modern life with cultural continuity, projecting an image of Xizang that is dynamic, hospitable, and future-oriented [13].

Overall, existing research has concentrated primarily on brand communication and marketing strategies in China's wanghong (internet-famous) cities, emphasizing the role of short videos in shaping urban branding and consumer engagement. However, relatively limited attention has been given to how official media accounts in ethnic minority regions employ digital storytelling and popular culture to promote tourism and reshape regional imagery [14]. The Xizang Autonomous Region, with its distinctive cultural and geographical context, offers a particularly meaningful case for examining how local authorities navigate between cultural preservation and contemporary digital expression.

Based on this research gap, the present study focuses on how official tourism accounts reinterpret and reconstruct the image of Xizang through the narrative logic of popular culture. By analyzing the "Lhasa Culture and Tourism" Douyin account, this study aims to illuminate the evolving communication strategies of official media in ethnic minority regions, offering theoretical and practical insights into the enhancement of cultural and tourism promotion in China's diverse cultural landscape.

3. Method and Data

This study adopts a case study approach, focusing on the official Douyin account "Lhasa Culture and Tourism," operated by the Lhasa Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism. Videos released from April 2025 onward were selected for analysis, as this period marks a significant shift in the account's visual and narrative style, featuring uniform cover designs, serialized content, and a more coherent thematic presentation. A total of 255 short videos were collected to form the dataset for systematic analysis.

The research investigates three interrelated dimensions of multimodal meaning-making: linguistic, visual, and auditory. Specifically, it examines how textual captions, hashtags, visuals, and sounds interact to construct narrative and emotional resonance.

On this basis, the study employs multimodal discourse analysis to explore the communicative strategies and representational logic of the "Lhasa Culture and Tourism" account [15]. At the linguistic level, attention is given to explicit and implicit meanings in subtitles, thematic framing in interactive hashtags, and audience engagement through comments. At the visual level, the analysis focuses on the representation of landscapes, architecture, traditional practices, and cultural activities to uncover how visual imagery contributes to tourism storytelling. At the auditory level, it examines the use of background music, ambient sounds, and voiceovers in reinforcing emotional tone and symbolic coherence. Through this tripartite framework, the study seeks to reveal how multimodal resources collectively generate persuasive, emotionally resonant, and platform-adaptive narratives that strengthen cultural tourism communication.

4. Analysis

An analysis of 255 short videos reveals that the content of "Lhasa Culture and Tourism" demonstrates a clear shift toward the integration of popular culture. By adopting traffic-oriented narrative strategies and interactive participation mechanisms, the account constructs a friendly and approachable public image that strengthens its emotional connection with audiences. The following section provides a detailed discussion of how these characteristics are manifested in the official short videos.

4.1. Traffic-Driven Approach

The traffic-driven approach refers to the strategy adopted by "Lhasa Culture and Tourism" in its content production, which centers on the logic of platform traffic. Through a narrative model of collage and adaptation, the account integrates iconic landscapes such as the Potala Palace, Barkhor Street, and Namtso Lake with elements of popular culture. This strategy enables the precise capture of user attention and reinforces the tourism image of Lhasa.

First, the account utilizes trending symbols such as popular celebrities, viral music, and well-known public figures' remarks to attract both visual and auditory attention. Collage-style videos are employed to enhance communicative appeal and generate engagement [16]. For example, the video caption "Clock in with Jay Chou in magnificent Lhasa" leverages the artist's popularity and fan base to achieve cross-audience dissemination.

Second, the account aligns with Douyin's algorithmic recommendation system by actively participating in viral internet memes and trending topics, such as "Reborn as the Big Boss of the Cultural Tourism Industry" and "My Mental State Before Term Starts." By

engaging in these trending conversations, the account utilizes entertaining discourse to enhance visibility and interaction rates within the platform's traffic ecosystem.

Finally, "Lhasa Culture and Tourism" incorporates audiovisual materials from existing intellectual properties such as films, audiobooks, and radio dramas, embedding narrative content into the context of cultural and tourism promotion. For instance, by using voice clips from the radio drama *Evening Star over Southern Xizang*, narrative lines such as "Go to Lhasa," "Come to Xizang with your story," and "Leave your distractions behind" resonate with the visual presentation of scenic attractions. This combination reinforces the symbolic portrayal of Xizang as a "spiritual sanctuary." User-generated comments, such as "The Cultural and Tourism Bureau has a novel girl now," further stimulate secondary creative engagement and emotional resonance. This approach enhances destination familiarity and increases audiences' willingness to visit in person [17].

4.2. Interactive Participation

Interactive participation primarily refers to content co-creation and comment-based dialogue mechanisms on Douyin. Within this communication logic, official cultural and tourism accounts are no longer merely information distributors; instead, they actively participate in an interactive ecosystem co-constructed by users, other regional accounts, and platform algorithms. "Lhasa Culture and Tourism" achieves cross-regional tourism collaboration by engaging in content co-creation and interactive exchanges with official cultural and tourism accounts from Sichuan, Chongqing, Guizhou, and other regions, thereby expanding its visibility and influence.

Among these collaborations, interactions with "Guizhou Culture and Tourism" and users from Guizhou stand out. In 2025, Guizhou's cultural and tourism authorities launched the promotional slogan "Travel Across China, Enjoy the Most Beautiful and Colorful Guizhou," encouraging users to "clock in" at tourist sites nationwide and abroad using the slogan as a creative theme. Within this context, Lhasa's Potala Palace became a popular "check-in" destination, humorously nicknamed by visitors as the "Guizhou White House" or "Guiyang North Station." These playful reinterpretations created an online discursive space that merged regional identity with humor and creativity.

Since August, comments such as "People from Guizhou are lining up" and "People from Guizhou are lying down" have frequently appeared in the comment section of "Lhasa Culture and Tourism," often reaching top-ranking positions. Through comment-based recreation and collective parody, users reframe popular platform phrases and regional labels in an interactive and participatory manner.

In response, "Lhasa Culture and Tourism" seized the opportunity presented by this trending phenomenon and released videos compiling screenshots of comments and user-generated remix clips related to "Guizhou," thereby promoting Lhasa's attractions in a lighthearted and humorous tone [18]. This practice forms a reverse dissemination pathway—from user-generated comments back to official content—illustrating a traffic conversion mechanism driven by interactive participation. Through the combined effects of audience engagement and algorithmic amplification, it achieves a strengthened cross-regional communication effect for cultural and tourism promotion.

4.3. Crafting a Friendly Image

"Lhasa Culture and Tourism" deconstructs the traditional authoritative tone of official publicity and reconstructs a friendly, approachable image through conversational and emotionally expressive communication, reflecting a broader shift from top-down dissemination to attention-driven engagement [19]. The account demonstrates a user-centered approach in both content planning and audience interaction, integrating the logic of fan culture with the communicative functions of public information dissemination.

First, the account closely aligns with the lifestyle and online context of younger audiences by engaging with trending platform topics-such as short-holiday complaints, post-vacation work fatigue, and online matchmaking. Through a humorous tone combined with popular music, dynamic visual effects, and interactive stickers, the account not only showcases Lhasa's natural and cultural attractions but also creates a narrative atmosphere centered on "relaxation," "freedom," and "escape from everyday pressure." This emotion-driven narrative resonates with the psychological needs of contemporary youth, making official content more relatable and engaging [20].

Second, the account refers to itself as "Sasa" and its fan community as "Safan." By adopting nicknames and community-specific terminology, it imitates the participatory logic of fan culture, strengthening audience identification and sense of belonging. For instance, during the #LhasaCultureTourismFanChallenge, the account responded to a follower's request to "climb up Nanshan" by fulfilling the request in a short video, thereby addressing users' emotional expectations through personalized interaction. This communicative strategy demonstrates the account's personification shift, transforming government communication into a service-oriented and emotionally responsive dialogue [21].

Finally, "Lhasa Culture and Tourism" maintains a unified visual design across its content, featuring bilingual text in Tibetan and Chinese, alongside images that highlight local landmarks, cuisine, and cultural motifs. From a consumer psychology perspective, the consistent use of visual symbols generates familiarity and enhances recognizability, strengthening the account's distinctive identity and emotional appeal. This familiarity functions as a positive psychological cue that encourages users' intention to visit the destination [22].

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigates the content creation strategies and promotional discourse practices of the Lhasa Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism on Douyin. By analyzing linguistic, visual, and auditory dimensions, it finds that "Lhasa Culture and Tourism" effectively integrates elements of popular culture-such as celebrity presence, trending music, and viral online topics-to construct a narrative style that aligns with young audiences' aesthetic preferences and the communication logic of short-video platforms.

Through cross-regional content co-creation and fan economy-oriented marketing, the account enhances emotional engagement and transforms cultural and tourism content into an entertainment-driven narrative. By utilizing popular culture resources, "Lhasa Culture and Tourism" maintains institutional credibility while simultaneously integrating into the cultural dynamics of digital platforms. This approach achieves a balance between cultural authority and public accessibility, resulting in a more relatable and humanized form of official communication. The entertainment-oriented narrative signifies a strategic evolution of official media-from a traditional one-way dissemination model to a symbolic and emotion-centered mode of communication guided by platform traffic mechanisms.

The turn toward popular culture reinforces Lhasa's image as a distinctive travel destination, resonating with long-established perceptions in the tourism market. Meanwhile, it also caters to the preferences of younger travelers who seek individuality, authenticity, and experiential forms of tourism. By incorporating discourses such as "escaping the city" and "resisting overcompetition," the account aligns with contemporary youth values and consumption psychology [13]. This adaptive strategy reflects a market-oriented trend in official cultural and tourism promotion, emphasizing resonance and engagement rather than authority and formality.

However, the analysis also reveals certain limitations in the account's communication approach. The content predominantly relies on entertainment-oriented narratives, with an excessive focus on popular cultural symbols while insufficiently highlighting traditional cultural elements and local perspectives. This reliance on collage-based and

trend-driven storytelling constrains the depth of cultural presentation, limiting its capacity to convey the richness of Xizang's historical and cultural resources. To achieve more meaningful audience engagement, future communication strategies should more deeply explore local heritage, values, and intangible cultural expressions to present a more authentic and multidimensional image of the region.

In addition, this study acknowledges its own limitations. It is based on a single case study and does not incorporate comparative analyses across other short-video platforms or regions. Furthermore, the absence of audience perception data prevents a comprehensive assessment of communication effectiveness, introducing potential subjectivity. Future research could broaden the analytical scope through multi-platform and multi-regional comparisons, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore differentiated characteristics of official cultural and tourism promotion across various ethnic regions in China. Such research would contribute to refining theoretical understanding of the popular culture turn in official communication and its evolving narrative forms within the digital media environment.

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