



## UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF AN IDEAL CITY IMAGE THROUGH DOUYIN: A GOVERNMENTAL REVIEW FRAMEWORK FOR XI'AN

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### Abstract:

Background: As short video platforms increasingly shape public discourse, public perception has become a central force in constructing and redefining city image. Cities are no longer solely defined by official narratives, but also by how they are represented and interpreted through user-generated content. Douyin, one of China's most influential platforms, provides a valuable lens to examine how contemporary users conceptualize the characteristics of an ideal city image. Objective: This study explores how the public perceives and communicates ideal city image features on Douyin, with a specific focus on Xi'an. From a governmental perspective, it synthesizes existing city image evaluation frameworks and proposes a review model that aligns with public sentiment and platform-driven engagement dynamics. Participants and Setting: A systematic review was conducted on peer-reviewed articles published in English and Chinese between January 1, 2020, and January 1, 2025, retrieved from Scopus and CNKI databases. Inclusion criteria focused on studies related to city image evaluation, city branding, digital media's impact on urban perception, and short video-based communication strategies. Methods: Adopting a systematic literature review approach, the study applied content analysis to categorize and evaluate existing assessment frameworks. Special attention was paid to models applicable to public-sector communication. Additionally, representative Douyin content and user interaction patterns were analyzed to reflect public perceptions of city image. Results and conclusion: As platforms like Douyin reshape urban branding in the Web 3.0 era, governments face new opportunities and challenges in understanding and managing digital city images. This study proposes a government-oriented evaluative framework that integrates traditional image indicators with digital engagement metrics, offering strategic insights for policymakers and urban communication practitioners navigating the evolving digital media landscape.

**Keywords:**

City Image, Douyin, Xi'an, Government Perspective, Evaluation Framework

## Introduction

### *City Image Construction as a Strategic Imperative in the Digital Age*

In contemporary urban governance, city image has become a strategic asset linked to cognitive capital, emotional engagement, and institutional legitimacy. It shapes tourism, investment, and cultural identity within global urban networks (Anholt, 2010; Jansson, 2005).

In today's increasingly competitive global urban landscape and highly visual media environment, a city's image is no longer merely a matter of perception; it constitutes a form of symbolic capital (Vale & Warner, 2021). Constructed through visual, linguistic, symbolic, and narrative means, city image shapes the public's cognitive mapping of urban space. Crafting an ideal city image goes beyond appealing to tourists or attracting investment; it is intrinsically tied to the legitimacy of urban governance, the formation of civic identity, and the cultivation of cultural pride. The public encounters fragmented representations of cities through mass media, word-of-mouth, and especially short video platforms, from which an idealized vision of the "perfect city" emerges. This vision is not necessarily rooted in physical infrastructure, but rather in a psychological landscape shaped by symbols, emotions, and imagination (Wan & Li, 2024). Furthermore, cities with positive images are more likely to attract tourists, investors, migrants, and skilled talent. Such appeal not only enhances economic competitiveness but also subtly repositions the city within broader geopolitical hierarchies (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Therefore, the construction of a city's image is fundamental to shaping what the public perceives as an ideal city.

In the Web 3.0 era, the rise of short video platforms has significantly altered the way urban narratives are created and circulated. Rather than being shaped solely by official media, city images are now co-produced by younger users through interactive content, particularly on platforms such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and Bilibili. These platforms act as algorithm-driven spaces where fragmented urban representations are continuously reassembled based on user engagement and recommendation mechanisms (Fuchs, 2021).

As urban imagery becomes more visualized and datafied, it evolves into a symbolic and participatory cultural form co-produced by multiple actors (Harvey, 1989; Lefebvre, 1991). Consequently, city image studies now span media, urban theory, geography, and visual culture. In this context, communication strategies and evaluation models must reflect the perceptual logic of platform-native users and support ongoing co-creation.

### *The Disruption of Traditional City Image Narratives by UGC on Social Media*

In today's platform-driven media landscape, city image construction is shifting away from top-down narratives traditionally controlled by governments and mainstream media. With the rise of user-generated content (UGC) on social media, especially in the Web 3.0 era, city imagery is increasingly shaped through decentralized, participatory processes (Chadwick, 2013; Carpentier, 2011). In the legacy media model, urban branding was curated by

“symbolic elites” via coordinated and authoritative messaging. Platforms like Douyin have disrupted this model, enabling individuals to co-create fragmented yet emotionally resonant narratives. UGC now actively participates in urban meaning-making, rather than merely reflecting it.

Douyin represents a “platformed visibility structure” (Bucher, 2018), where algorithmic distribution, real-time feedback, and visual formats redefine urban representation. Through content like check-ins and challenges, users continuously reshape city images, while algorithms selectively amplify or ignore certain symbols (Gillespie, 2014). This shift calls for governments to evolve from image controllers to collaborative mediators. To stay relevant, official narratives must engage with grassroots discourse shaped by public sentiment and platform dynamics.

Using Xi’ an as a case, this study examines how UGC on Douyin contributes to idealized city imagery and proposes a responsive, government-oriented evaluation model to support adaptive urban image governance in the digital age.

### ***Xi’ an as a Case of Douyin Platform-Driven Urban Representation***

Xi’ an, known for its profound historical and cultural heritage, has long relied on centralized, state-led narratives to construct and disseminate its city image (Law, 2020). However, with the rapid ascent of algorithmic platforms such as Douyin, this paradigm has shifted toward decentralized, participatory, and affective urban storytelling.

As of early 2024, Douyin has surpassed 750 million monthly active users in China. Among them, more than 60 percent are between 18 and 30 years old, a demographic that is particularly influential in digital culture production (QuestMobile, 2024). The hashtag #西安 (Xi’ an) has accumulated over 42 billion views, making it one of the most circulated city labels on the platform. This visibility is not passive. It is generated through millions of likes, shares, and comments, many of which reflect emotional engagement with the city’ s cultural identity. For example, videos showcasing traditional Hanfu performances or Tang Dynasty-style architecture regularly receive hundreds of thousands of interactions. This suggests that symbolic authenticity and visual aesthetics are key variables in shaping the “ideal city” in the platform context (Feigua Data, 2024).

This digital prominence is not merely cosmetic. It reflects a reconfiguration of urban legitimacy and governance. Cities like Xi’ an are now being continuously imagined and negotiated through affective publics and algorithmic amplification. In this context, statistical indicators such as view counts, engagement rates, and content virality are no longer just metrics of popularity. They function as proxy indicators of public perception and symbolic capital. The city is rendered visible, desirable, and memorable not through planning documents, but through emotional resonance and algorithmic repetition.

Furthermore, a recent bibliometric survey of CNKI and Scopus databases reveals that more than 120 peer-reviewed articles, published between 2020 and 2024, have focused on the intersection of short video platforms and urban image in China. Among them, cities such as Xi’ an, Chengdu, and Chongqing have emerged as recurring case studies (CNKI, 2024). This indicates a growing academic recognition of social media as a crucial space for urban identity construction, one that extends beyond traditional branding models.

While Douyin has undeniably expanded Xi'an's cultural visibility among younger digital natives (Xu, 2023), its unstructured and non-linear representation of the city presents both epistemological and practical challenges for governance. City image is no longer a centralized narrative to be pushed. Instead, it is a distributed discourse that must be curated, evaluated, and negotiated. Yet, existing urban communication strategies often lack the analytical tools required to measure or interpret this shift effectively.

This study therefore takes Xi'an as a case to explore how governments can move beyond top-down dissemination and toward co-creative frameworks of urban image production. By proposing a perception-based and data-informed evaluation model, it seeks to bridge the gap between algorithmic publics and strategic urban governance in the age of platform logics.

### Research Objectives

1. To synthesize existing scholarly literature on frameworks for evaluating city image.
2. To extract and analyze public expressions of Xi'an's city image as represented on the Douyin platform.
3. To construct a government-oriented evaluation and communication framework for city image, grounded in public perception.

### Research Methodology and Data Sources

**Table 1: Research Methodology and Data Sources**

Step	Method	Clarification
1	Systematic Literature Review (SLR)	Retrieving and organizing research related to city image, brand communication, public perception, and short video platforms
2	Integration Analysis	Cross-comparison of literature and platform data to summarize the dimensions and communication elements that should be included in the "ideal image of Xi'an".

Source: (Self-compiled by the author to present the stepwise research methodology of the study)

This study employs a systematic narrative review to investigate the shaping of city images on short video platforms and to propose a government-oriented evaluation framework. Unlike traditional quantitative meta-analyses, the narrative review approach enables the integration of heterogeneous literature, theoretical models, and empirical findings across disciplines. By adopting a transparent and replicable search strategy, the review synthesizes existing frameworks, methodological tools, and key results to construct a holistic understanding of platform-based urban image formation. The review not only maps current research trends but also provides a conceptual foundation for designing a responsive, perception-driven evaluation

model that aligns with the algorithmic dynamics and participatory logic of short video environments.

### **Identification**

The first phase of the systematic review involved identifying relevant literature aligned with the research questions. Using the keywords “City image” AND “TikTok” AND “Public perception,” search strings were developed based on prior studies and iterative refinement. Searches were conducted in Scopus and CNKI, yielding 147 articles that preliminarily matched the review’s scope.

**Table 2: Database Retrieval Process**

<b>Scopus</b>	<b>TITLE-ABS-KEY ( "City Image" AND "Tik-Tok" AND Governmental approach AND City Image Building ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( DOCTYPE , "ar" ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( PUBSTAGE , "final" ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( SRCTYPE , "j" ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( LANGUAGE , "English" ) )</b>
<b>CNKI</b>	"city image" AND "Tik-Tok" AND Governmental approach AND city image building

Source: (The results of the search through the two databases are tabulated in a self-contained table)

### **Screening**

During the screening phase, 35 duplicate records from Scopus and CNKI were removed. Remaining articles were evaluated against strict inclusion criteria: only peer-reviewed studies with clear quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs were retained. Theoretical essays, editorials, and reports lacking methodological transparency were excluded.

To ensure comprehensiveness, both Chinese and English publications were included, covering the period from January 1, 2020, to January 1, 2024—a key phase in the rise of short video platforms. After two screening rounds, 58 articles were selected for in-depth analysis and framework development.

**Table 3: Inclusion And Exclusion Criteria**

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Inclusion</b>	<b>Exclusion</b>
<b>Language</b>	English & Chinese	Non-English & Chinese
<b>Time line</b>	2020 – 2025	< 2020
<b>Literature type</b>	Journal (Article)	Conference, Book, Review
<b>Publication Stage</b>	Final	In Press

Source: (Chart of statistics on the screening process for the second phase of the systematic evaluation)

### ***Eligibility***

Following the initial screening and quality control process, a structured eligibility assessment was carried out based on the titles, abstracts, and full research content of each article. Studies were evaluated according to three primary criteria: theoretical relevance to city image and public perception, methodological rigor, and alignment with the objectives of this study. A total of 45 studies were excluded during this phase: 22 for lacking relevance to public perception of city image on social media platforms, 6 for possessing titles unrelated to the research scope, and 17 for presenting abstracts that diverged from the study's thematic focus. After this multi-stage screening, 13 peer-reviewed studies that demonstrated both conceptual relevance and empirical quality were retained for in-depth analysis.

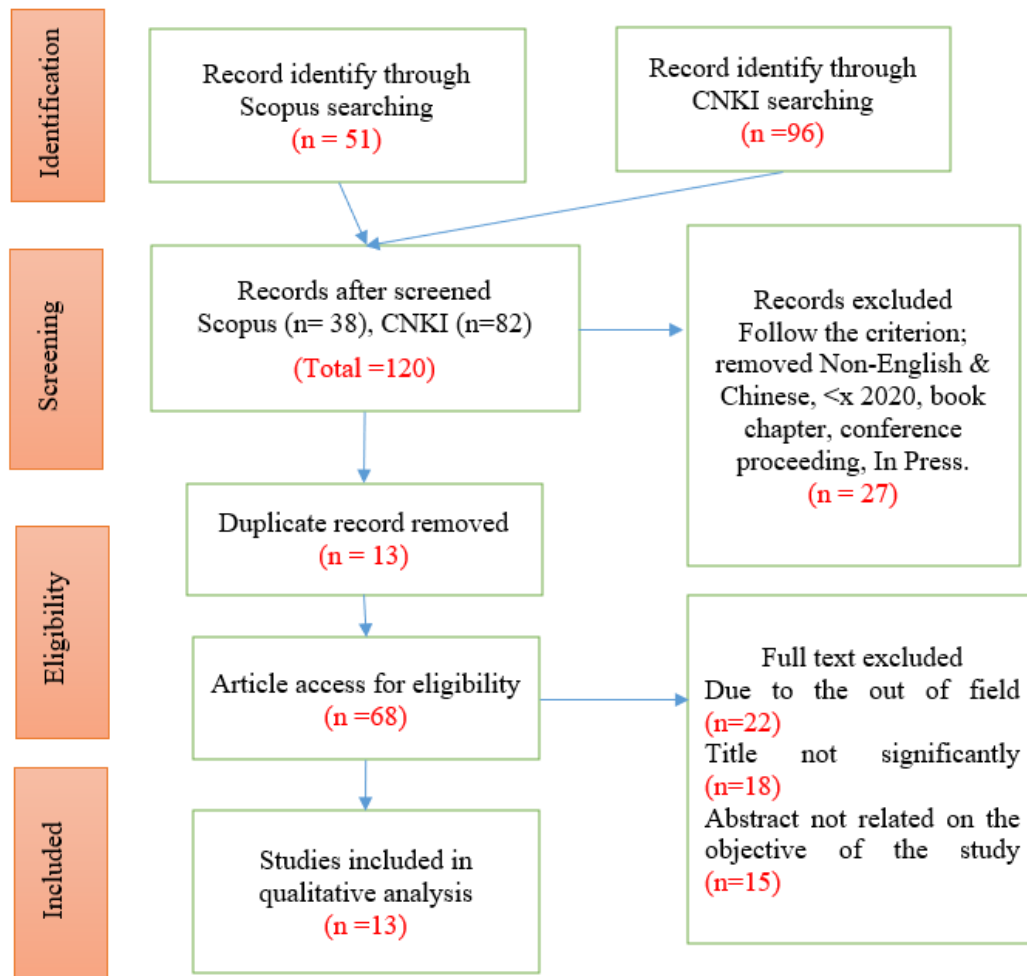
### ***Data Abstraction and Analysis***

A systematic narrative review was conducted to examine how city images are constructed, perceived, and communicated through short video platforms, with particular emphasis on Douyin. A total of 13 peer-reviewed studies were selected for full-text analysis after applying rigorous eligibility criteria. These studies span four core thematic domains: (1) city branding strategies in the digital environment, (2) models for evaluating city image on social media platforms, (3) algorithmic and participatory dynamics of platform communication, and (4) the role of user-generated content (UGC) in shaping public perception.

For each selected study, data abstraction was performed by coding key elements including research objectives, theoretical frameworks, methodological design (e.g., content analysis, case study, survey), data sources (e.g., Douyin analytics, interviews, comment analysis), and major findings. Special attention was given to how each study conceptualized city image, engaged with public perception, and addressed the implications for government-led or collaborative communication strategies.

The following is the extraction process for the 13 core articles.





**Figure 1: Flow Diagram of The Proposed Searching Study**

Source: (Mustafa, W. A., Alias, N. A., Jamlos, M. A., Ismail, S., & Alquran, H. (2022))

## Results

This review included 13 core studies, summarized in Table 4, which examine key aspects of city image construction and evaluation within social media contexts—particularly on Douyin. The studies collectively address three main themes: the representation of city image on Douyin (n = 5), theoretical frameworks and evaluation indicators for assessing city image (n = 6), and government strategies for image shaping via social media (n = 2). Two of the studies focus specifically on Xi'an.

Author (Year , Database)	Research Title	Research Objective	Research Method	Main Findings	Comment
Liu & Su (2021, Scopus)	Government communication in the era of short video: A study of local governments' TikTok use in China	Explore how local governments in China utilize TikTok to communicate urban narratives.	Qualitative content analysis	Governments use TikTok to humanize their image, but lack consistent strategy and evaluation.	Provides strong support for framing a government-oriented evaluation model on Douyin.
Cheng & Jiang (2020, Scopus)	The evolution of social media engagement: What motivates users to engage on TikTok?	Identify motivational factors behind TikTok user engagement.	Survey-based quantitative study	Entertainment, social interaction and information sharing are key motivations.	Helps define 'public perception' dimensions relevant to city image engagement.
Zhang & Huang (2022, Scopus)	From viewers to virtual tourists: Short video platforms and city image perception in China	Analyze how TikTok videos shape virtual tourist perception of Chinese cities.	Case-based content analysis	Short videos reshape tourist imaginations and highlight city aesthetics.	Highlights the perceptual power of visuals, important for evaluating image resonance.
Chen & Xu (2021, Scopus)	Framing Chinese cities on TikTok: A study of visual storytelling and platform logic	Explore the role of TikTok's platform features in shaping city image.	Platform analysis + semiotic analysis	Algorithmic promotion and visual aesthetics drive dominant urban narratives.	Supports the integration of algorithmic visibility into city image evaluation.
Tian & Zhao (2020, Scopus)	Public engagement and smart city image in social media: Evidence from Chinese short video platforms	Assess how short videos affect public engagement with city image.	Mixed-method: content analysis + interview	UGC enhances emotional connection and city loyalty among viewers.	Emphasizes the emotional aspect of public perception relevant to ideal city image.



Yu & Wang (2023, Scopus)	City branding and Douyin communication: A study of digital placemaking in post-pandemic China	Investigate how Douyin is used in post-pandemic city branding strategies.	Case study of Douyin campaigns	Douyin fosters creative participation and collective imagination of city identity.	Directly informs government strategy in digitally mediated placemaking for Xi' an.
Li Jing (2020, CNKI)	Research on the Communication of Urban Brand Image and Audience Perception—A Case Study of Dongguan	To explore the alignment between Dongguan' s brand communication and public perception.	Questionnaire + Content Analysis	Perception is hierarchical; visual symbols and social identity have significant impact.	Provides a perception-based framework reference for evaluating brand communication.
Huan Jia & Chen Bohan (2022, CNKI)	Discourse Co-Production Framework of Urban Image Communication in the Era of Converged Media—A Case Study of Xi' an	To analyze cooperative mechanisms among government, media, and users in shaping city image.	Case Study + Discourse Analysis	A government media user co-construction model enhances Xi' an' s communication power.	Inspires collaborative strategies especially relevant for short video platforms.
Lu Songnian (2021, CNKI)	In-depth Reflection on Shaping a Positive Urban Image of Shanghai	To reflect on Shanghai' s city image construction issues and improvement paths.	Theoretical Analysis + Case Review	City culture should integrate with contemporary expression; avoid image generalization.	Provides insight into content and emotional layers of city image construction.
Gao Hua (2020, CNKI)	Audience Evaluation of City Tourism Slogan Marketing	To assess how city slogans influence audience brand identification.	Empirical Survey + Perception Analysis	Concise, emotional slogans resonate more with the public.	Slogan and language can be part of communication content evaluation.

Ren Dapeng (2021, CNKI)	City Brand Construction Based on Audience Perception	To investigate how public perception drives city brand formation.	Questionnaire + Factor Analysis	Perception shapes branding trajectory; interactive communication is key.	Reinforces the logic of perception-led evaluation framework.
Chen Qian (2022, CNKI)	Analysis on Destination Image Components Based on Audience Perception— A Case Study of Beijing	To identify core components of perceived city image in tourism.	Content Analysis + Interviews	Cultural depth, service experience, and visual aesthetics are key factors.	Useful for designing ‘ perceptual dimensions’ in evaluation indicators.
Song Huanying & Zhang Xuyang (2021, CNKI)	Audience Perception Evaluation of Chinese Urban Brand Image— Empirical Study on 36 Cities	To construct a national evaluation model from a public perspective.	Multi-level Regression + Survey	Identified six core factors: communication, reputation, friendliness, etc.	Key reference for building empirical, audience- oriented evaluation systems.

**Table 4 : Summary Of Studies’ Characteristics and Main Findings (N = 13)**

The findings underscore the complexity of city image communication in platform environments and the urgent need for multi-dimensional evaluation models. Public perception emerges as a central factor in shaping city image, offering practical insights for government actors aiming to enhance communication strategies through participatory and responsive approaches.

Among the 13 core Chinese and English-language studies included in this review, a total of six were identified through systematic classification and content analysis as explicitly proposing evaluation frameworks or structural dimensions related to public perception of city image. These studies offer diverse analytical perspectives and reveal how the public, through engagement with new media platforms, participates in the construction, expression, and negotiation of their understanding and preferences regarding the "ideal city image." (See summary table for reference.)

**Table 5 : Detailed Evaluation Framework Summary (6 Studies)**

Author	City Scope /	Primary Dimension	Secondary Dimension	Tertiary Indicators
Liu & Su (2021)	Local governments in China	Government Communication	Public Engagement Strategy, Content Orientation	Frequency of posts, Type of video content (e.g. policy, tourism), Use of interaction features (likes, comments, shares), Humanization techniques
Zhang & Huang (2022)	Tourism cities (e.g. Chengdu, Xi'an)	City Image Perception	Aesthetic Appeal, Tourist Intentions	Scenic visuals, Emotional tone, Local culture representation, Intention to visit
Chen & Xu (2021)	Chinese urban TikTok channels	Platform Logic & Storytelling	Visual Narrative, Algorithmic Amplification	Video format, Symbolic imagery, Hashtag use, Engagement volume (views, comments)
Song Huanying & Zhang Xuyang (2021)	36 major cities in China	Audience Perception Evaluation	Communication Power, Affinity, Recognition	Media exposure rate, Brand favorability, Urban reputation index, Public emotional connection
Ren Dapeng (2021)	Urban brand building (general)	Brand Perception	Symbol Recognition, Perceptual Consistency	City logo/image identification, Message clarity, Cultural-symbolic coherence
Chen Qian (2022)	Beijing	Tourist-Based Image Structure	Cultural Value, Service Quality, Visual Impression	Cultural heritage, Hospitality service ratings, Aesthetic of urban scenery, Tourist feedback

Source: (Constructed by the author based on the reviewed literature; not directly quoted.)

By comparing the primary, secondary, and tertiary indicators proposed across these studies, five key dimensions emerged as the core focus of current evaluative frameworks: (1) government communication and platform governance strategies, (2) visual storytelling and aesthetic representation of the city, (3) public emotional engagement and symbolic

identification, (4) symbolic dissemination and cultural signification, and (5) user- or tourist-centered perceptual experiences and value resonance.

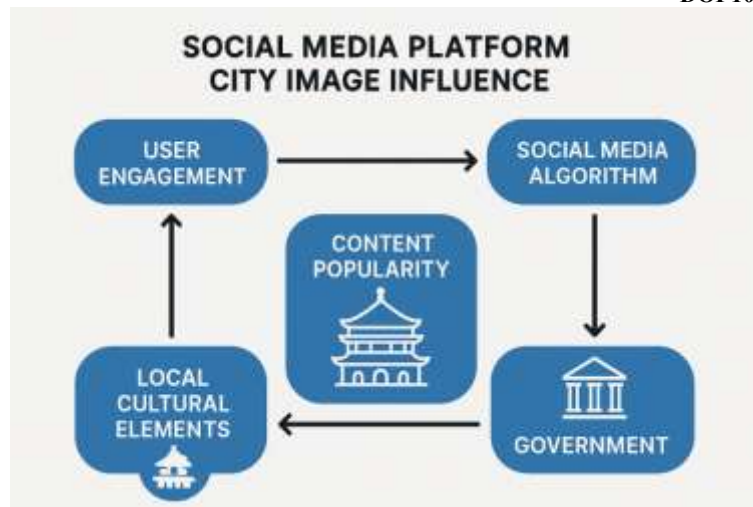
These dimensions reveal that public understanding of city image on short video platforms—such as Douyin—has shifted away from static, top-down narratives toward a dynamic co-construction process shaped by algorithmic recommendations, interactive feedback, and symbolic consumption. Accordingly, the analytical frameworks proposed in these six studies not only offer theoretical insight into how the public envisions an "ideal city image," but also provide a practical foundation for developing government-oriented models for evaluating city image influence in digital environments.

## Discussion

This study uses Douyin as a research platform to examine how the public constructs an “ideal city image” through short video content and to propose an evaluation model that aligns public perception with governmental communication goals. A systematic narrative review of 13 empirical studies identified six with explicit frameworks for assessing city image from a public perspective, forming the theoretical basis for this analysis.

Douyin’s algorithm-driven environment has transformed city communication from a linear model to a dynamic cycle of content, interaction, recommendation, and reproduction. As Chen & Xu (2021) note, city image formation now relies more on visual appeal, emotional resonance, and algorithmic fit than on the coherence of official narratives. This poses a key challenge for governments: translating strategic messages into content that resonates within platform logic.

From the audience perspective, research by Cheng & Jiang (2020) and Zhang & Huang (2022) shows that urban perception is increasingly shaped by individualized visual experiences and emotional engagement, rather than functional or policy-oriented narratives. In Xi’an’s case, although its image has long emphasized cultural heritage and national symbolism, Douyin users prefer localized, distinctive, and often entertaining content—highlighting the rising role of cultural identity and affective connection in digital-era city branding. Synthesizing the frameworks proposed across the six studies, this paper argues that constructing a government-oriented, public-perception-based model for evaluating city image influence is both necessary and feasible. Such a model should incorporate: (1) the city’s strategic branding objectives; (2) the public’s perceptual schema as expressed on digital platforms; (3) the interventionist logic of Douyin’s algorithms and interaction design; and (4) the need for narrative consistency and symbolic coherence in long-term brand building. This framework not only supports governmental evaluation of platform-based communication efforts but also provides an empirical foundation for policy design—enabling a closed-loop evaluation system that integrates city image construction, platform strategies, and public feedback.



**Figure 2: City Image Influence on Social Media Platform**

Source: (Researchers compiled and drew based on literature)

## Conclusion

In the context of platform-mediated urban communication, understanding how the public constructs and negotiates the concept of an “ideal city image” has become a strategic priority for local governments. This process is particularly relevant on short video platforms such as Douyin, where city narratives are no longer produced solely through official channels but emerge from the interplay between institutional actors, algorithmic systems, and user-generated content. As cities compete for visibility, investment, and cultural influence in an increasingly digital public sphere, the ability to measure and respond to public perceptions of urban image becomes a critical aspect of governance.

To address this challenge, the present study conducted a systematic narrative review of recent literature on city image evaluation models. This review identified multiple dimensions that are applicable to the context of social video platforms. These dimensions include both conventional criteria—such as institutional reputation, symbolic representation, and the coherence of official discourse—and emerging platform-specific indicators, including user interaction metrics (likes, shares, comments), visual and narrative aesthetics favored by algorithmic logics, and patterns of viral dissemination.

Based on these insights, the study proposes an integrated evaluation framework designed to support government-led urban communication in the age of social media. The framework operates on two analytical levels. The first level consists of strategic indicators rooted in traditional urban branding theory, which prioritize message consistency, cultural authenticity, and reputational continuity. The second level is grounded in platform dynamics and incorporates user-centered measures that reflect public engagement, affective resonance, and algorithm-driven visibility. Together, these levels allow for a more holistic assessment of city image performance on digital platforms.

When applied to the case of Xi’an, the framework offers both diagnostic and strategic value. It enables municipal communication teams to assess whether the city’s digital representations align with public expectations and emotional perceptions. Moreover, by highlighting which elements of local heritage, architecture, and contemporary culture are most frequently

amplified and emotionally endorsed by users, the model can guide content optimization and adaptive narrative strategies. This alignment between government messaging and public sentiment not only enhances the city's cultural relevance but also contributes to more democratic and resonant forms of urban storytelling in the platform environment.

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