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DIFFERENTIATED BRAND COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF UNIVERSITIES ON TIKTOK SHORT- VIDEO PLATFORMS IN SHAANXI PROVINCE, CHINA

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Abstract:

With the rapid development of short-video platforms, TikTok has gradually become an important channel for brand communication in higher education. In recent years, universities have increasingly relied on short-video content to enhance public visibility, shape institutional image, and attract prospective students. While prior research has examined university short-video communication, limited empirical attention has been paid to systematic comparisons across institutional tiers within a specific regional ecosystem, particularly in the Chinese higher education context. The research addresses this gap by providing a region-based, institution-type-oriented comparative analysis of differentiated brand communication strategies on TikTok. Taking universities in Shaanxi Province as the research object, the analysis presented here the brand communication practices of official TikTok accounts of different types of higher education institutions, including Double First-Class universities, ordinary undergraduate universities, and higher vocational colleges. Drawing on Lasswell's 5W communication model, an empirical investigation is conducted to communication subjects, content types, communication channels, target audiences, and communication effects through content analysis and comparative analysis methods. The findings indicate that universities in Shaanxi exhibit significant differences in short-video brand communication strategies. Double First-Class universities tend to emphasize authoritative and academic-oriented content, focusing on institutional reputation and disciplinary strength. Ordinary undergraduate universities show a stronger tendency toward survival-oriented adaptive strategies, highlighting student life and campus activities to enhance visibility. Higher vocational colleges are more

inclined to adopt ecological niche strategies, emphasizing practical training and employment orientation to differentiate themselves from other institutions. Based on the analysis, these results argue that universities should develop differentiated short-video brand communication strategies aligned with their institutional positioning and target audiences, and suggesting a transition from visibility-driven metrics (e.g., views, likes) to engagement- and interaction-based performance indicators (e.g., comment quality, reply rate, topic continuity). The study contributes to the literature on higher education brand communication by providing a region-based comparative perspective and offers practical implications for improving the effectiveness of short-video communication in higher education.

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5W Communication Model; Differentiated Strategies; Short-Video Platforms; TikTok; University Brand Communication



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Introduction

With the rapid expansion of digital media technologies, short-video platforms have become an increasingly important arena for information dissemination and public communication. Among these platforms, TikTok has gained widespread popularity due to its low threshold for content production, strong algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, and high user engagement, particularly among young audiences. In the context of higher education, TikTok is no longer merely an entertainment platform but has gradually evolved into a strategic channel for universities to communicate institutional image and enhance brand visibility.

In recent years, intensified competition in higher education has placed growing pressure on universities in terms of student recruitment, public reputation, and social influence. Especially in regions with a dense concentration of higher education institutions, universities must actively explore effective communication approaches to differentiate themselves in the digital media environment. As a result, short-video communication has been increasingly adopted by universities as a tool to showcase campus culture, highlight educational resources, and convey institutional values.

Shaanxi Province represents a typical regional context for examining university short-video brand communication. As an important educational hub in western China, Shaanxi hosts a wide range of higher education institutions, including nationally recognized Double First-Class universities, ordinary undergraduate universities, and higher vocational colleges. These institutions differ significantly in terms of historical background, resource endowment, academic reputation, and student recruitment positioning. Such diversity provides a valuable empirical basis for analyzing differentiated brand communication strategies on short-video platforms.

While prior research has examined university short-video communication, limited empirical attention has been paid to systematic comparisons across institutional tiers within a specific regional ecosystem, particularly in the Chinese higher education context. This study addresses this empirical gap by providing a region-based, institution-type-oriented comparative analysis. It further responds to a theoretical gap regarding how institutional positioning translates into platform-specific branding logics, and a platform-specific gap concerning the operationalization of Lasswell's 5W model on TikTok.

Against this background, the research takes universities in Shaanxi Province as the research object and focuses on their official TikTok accounts to explore differentiated short-video brand communication strategies. By applying Lasswell's 5W communication model, key dimensions of short-video communication—including communication subjects, content types, communication channels, target audiences, and communication effects—are systematically analyzed here. Through comparative analysis, the study aims to reveal both common patterns and institutional differences in short-video brand communication practices. By providing a region-based and institution-type-oriented analysis, This paper seeks to contribute to the literature on higher education brand communication and digital media studies. The findings are expected to offer practical insights for universities seeking to optimize short-video communication strategies in response to increasingly competitive and media-saturated higher education environments.

Literature Review

Brand Communication Strategies for Different Types of Universities

With the intensification of global competition in higher education systems for students, funding, and academic reputation, university branding has become an increasingly important research topic. Early studies conceptualized university branding as a mechanism for shaping institutional image and differentiating universities within the education market (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Subsequent research further emphasized that a strong university brand not only influences prospective students' enrollment decisions but also affects alumni engagement, employer perceptions, and public trust.

In the context of China's higher education system, "Double First-Class" universities represent a group of research-oriented institutions strategically designated to achieve national development goals. Shaanxi Province has eight universities included in this initiative. The defining characteristics of these institutions lie in the systematic integration of academic resources, financial investment, and policy support through administrative mechanisms, with the aim of constructing internationally competitive academic brand images (Wang et al., 2024). As a result, their communication practices and branding activities simultaneously embody academic rigor and a strong sense of political mission as representatives of national strategic capacity.

In contrast, ordinary undergraduate universities—particularly private institutions—occupy a more constrained position within the higher education market. These universities typically lack the symbolic capital and resource advantages associated with elite public institutions. Their branding strategies are therefore shaped by market-oriented pressures, policy regulation, and survival imperatives, resulting in communication practices that prioritize visibility, enrollment outcomes, and operational efficiency.

Higher vocational colleges, especially those with distinct industry orientations, present yet another branding logic. Their institutional identity is closely tied to specific industrial sectors and employment pathways. Consequently, branding efforts in such institutions often focus on professional specialization, practical training, and industry relevance, aiming to establish a clear ecological niche within the higher education landscape.

Social Media and Short-Video Platforms in University Communication

With the rise of social media, universities have increasingly adopted platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to communicate with diverse stakeholder groups. Previous studies have examined how content types, posting frequency, and interaction strategies influence audience engagement on university social media accounts (Peruta & Shields, 2018). These studies generally suggest that visual storytelling, student-centered content, and interactive formats tend to generate higher levels of engagement.

Short-video platforms represent a further evolution of social media communication by combining algorithmic recommendation systems with immersive audiovisual experiences. Compared with traditional social media posts, short videos enable universities to present campus culture and institutional values in a more vivid and emotionally engaging manner. Nevertheless, some scholars caution that universities often overemphasize entertainment-oriented content in pursuit of visibility, which may dilute brand identity and weaken long-term branding effects.

Domestic research in China has revealed several common problems in current university short-video operations. Miao Xiaoran (2020) pointed out that many official university TikTok accounts suffer from unremarkable content, low interaction rates, and rough production quality, failing to fully demonstrate their educational function and brand value. Sun Fanya (2022), based on an analysis of viral university short videos, observed that universities' self-construction of institutional image tends toward entertainment and humor. She further argued that while pursuing communication reach, universities should strengthen cultural education and value guidance in online spaces.

Demirer (2025) introduced a differentiated understanding of user engagement on social media platforms by distinguishing between varying levels of participation, such as likes, comments, and shares. She emphasized the importance of evaluating engagement quality rather than relying solely on quantitative exposure indicators. This perspective provides an important reference for understanding the effectiveness of short-video communication and for critically examining the limitations of surface-level metrics.

A Study on University TikTok Short-Video Strategies Based on the 5W Communication Model

Lasswell's 5W communication model offers a systematic approach to describing, analyzing, and refining communication processes by decomposing them into five core elements: communication subject (Who), communication content (Says What), communication channel (In Which Channel), target Audience (To Whom), and communication effect (With What Effect). Although originally developed in the context of mass communication, the model has been widely applied in digital and new media research due to its conceptual clarity and analytical flexibility.

Within the context of differentiated university branding strategies, the 5W model enables researchers to examine not only the characteristics of TikTok short-video content but also organizational structures, platform selection, audience segmentation, and evaluation mechanisms. Previous studies have applied the 5W framework to analyze educational communication practices and social media strategies, demonstrating its usefulness in identifying structural imbalances and strategic gaps (Wenxiu, 2015). However, empirical applications of the 5W model in comparative analyses of university short-video branding remain limited, particularly within regional higher education contexts.

Lasswell's 5W model is operationalized as a coding framework to systematically map message producers (Who), content orientation (Says What), dissemination channels (In Which Channel), audience positioning (To Whom), and engagement outcomes (With What Effect). The research adapts the model to the digital short-video platform context by treating each "W" as an analytical dimension with specific indicators derived from TikTok's platform affordances (e.g., algorithmic recommendation as a channel characteristic, comment-live interaction as an effect indicator). Wang, Z., He, F., and Cheng, L. (2024) systematically categorized short-video content published by official university TikTok accounts into five main types: campus scenery, student life, academic achievements, enrollment services, and humanistic narratives (Sun, F.Y. 2022). This classification informed the present study's analytical framework, facilitating comparative analysis of content configurations across different types of universities and providing a structured approach to examining platform use and communication effects.

Methodology

Research Design

The research adopts a qualitative research approach to examine differentiated short-video communication strategies among universities in Shaanxi Province, China. Guided by Lasswell's 5W communication model, the study systematically analyzes communication subjects (Who), communication content (Says What), communication channel (In Which Channel), target Audience (To Whom), and communication effects (With What Effect) across different types of universities.

A case study method is employed to capture both shared characteristics and differentiated practices of university brand communication operating within the same regional context and on the same new media platform. TikTok is selected as the research platform because it occupies a dominant position in short-video consumption among young audiences in China and has become increasingly influential in university branding and student recruitment. By combining platform-based data observation with qualitative content analysis, the goal is to provide an empirically grounded understanding of how universities adopt differentiated short-video communication strategies under varying institutional conditions.

Sample Selection

To ensure institutional diversity and analytical comparability, the selection deliberately includes three universities in Shaanxi Province as research samples. The samples represent three distinct types of higher education institutions within the same regional context.

Type 1: Double First-Class University — JT University

JT University is selected due to its benchmark status and strategic completeness. As one of China's long-established top research universities, it occupies a leading position in both academic reputation and institutional resources. Its short-video communication practices are highly systematized and strategically organized. The content produced by JT University aims to translate traditional academic prestige into authoritative narratives suited to the new media environment. This case allows for an examination of how elite public universities utilize short-video platforms to maintain and elevate top-tier brand identities, as well as how they balance academic seriousness with media popularity.

Type 2: Ordinary Undergraduate University — SY University

SY University is selected due to its institutional specificity and practical constraints. As a private undergraduate university established less than thirty years ago, it represents a group of private institutions that emerged during the massification of higher education in China. Unlike Double First-Class universities, such institutions lack symbolic prestige and abundant resources, yet they also differ from public universities with relatively stable institutional positions. Their branding practices are shaped by dual pressures of market survival and policy regulation, resulting in common challenges related to resource limitations, positioning uncertainty, and constrained strategic capacity.

Type 3: Higher Vocational College — QC University

QC University is selected as a representative higher vocational institution with a strong industry orientation. Leveraging its vertical advantage within the automotive industry and its employment-oriented mission, the university concentrates its branding resources on a single, clearly defined industrial sector. This high level of strategic focus contributes to a distinct brand identity, which serves as a communication advantage in an information-saturated short-video environment. Its short-video practices demonstrate a pattern significantly different from those of the other two universities, making it a typical case for analyzing ecological niche-based branding strategies.

Table 1: Basic Characteristics of the Sample Universities

Type of University	Ownership	Sample University	Ranking (QS / Year BCUR)	Year Established
Double First-Class University	Public	JT University	295 / 10	1896
Ordinary Undergraduate University	Private	SY University	— / 67 (only private)	1998
Higher Vocational College	Private	QC University	— / 21 (only Vocational)	1987

Source: QS World University Rankings2025; Best Chinese Universities Ranking (BCUR) 2025. ShanghaiRanking Consultancy

Table 2: Overview of Official TikTok Accounts of the Sample Universities

Sample University	Followers (Official Account)	Account Establishment Date	Highest Likes for a Single Video
JT University	1,357,000	April 8, 2018	387,000
SY University	40,000	March 25, 2018	317,000
QC University	22,000	April 27, 2018	46,000

Source: Xinhua Zhiyun MCNDATA Short-Video Analytics Platform (October 1 to December 31, 2025) [DB/OL].

All three sample universities operate officially verified TikTok accounts managed by communication-related departments such as publicity offices or media centers. As TikTok accounts serve as the primary channels for short-video dissemination, they constitute appropriate units of analysis. The diversity of university types within a single province allows the study to control for regional policy and cultural factors while focusing on operational differences in short-video branding practices.

Database Construction and Data Collection

The database was constructed based on a continuous three-month observation period of the official TikTok accounts of the three universities. This time frame was selected to capture relatively stable operational patterns while minimizing the influence of short-term fluctuations caused by exceptional events.

The original database includes the following components:

- Account information: account establishment date, number of followers, and overall posting frequency during the observation period;
- Video data: classification statistics of video content, topic records centered on core works, and engagement metrics of viral videos, including views, likes, comments, and shares;
- Interaction information: observations of comment sections, live-streaming activities initiated by the accounts, interactive tasks, and topic participation mechanisms.

All data were obtained through manual observation of publicly accessible TikTok interface information, supplemented by platform analytics tools. To ensure data accuracy, repeated checks were conducted at different time points, and extreme outliers caused by abnormal promotional events were recorded during the analysis process.

The study analyzed a total of 212 short videos published by the three official TikTok accounts during the three-month observation period (October 1 to December 31, 2025). Communication effects were measured using four engagement metrics: views, likes, comments, and shares, with particular attention to the comment-to-like ratio and qualitative analysis of comment content.

Framework for Data Organization and Analysis

Based on the 5W communication model and prior research on social media branding and engagement, a structured analytical scheme was developed. Separate folders were established for each sample university account, and raw databases were constructed according to five analytical dimensions. Videos published between October 1 and December 31, 2025, were systematically observed, collected, categorized, and analyzed as follows:

- Who (operating subjects of official TikTok accounts): through field investigation and compilation of publicly available information, the institutional nature of operating entities and the composition of short-video production teams within university publicity departments were summarized;
- Says What (short-video content published by official TikTok accounts): content types were examined with reference to the classification proposed by the authors in [2], and were categorized into five types: campus scenery, student life, academic achievements, enrollment services, and humanistic narratives;
- In Which Channel (multiple short-video distribution channels including TikTok): publishing strategies and operational conditions of official TikTok accounts and other short-video platforms were observed and recorded;
- To Whom (target audiences of official TikTok accounts): based on stated audience positioning, comment sections were analyzed to assess whether actual participants aligned with intended target audiences, and whether published content, formats, and operational strategies met audience needs;
- With What Effect (communication effects of published videos): key engagement indicators of pinned and highly liked videos were extracted, with particular attention to the ratio of comments to likes and the extent of account responses. Interaction quality was further evaluated by observing live-stream participation, fan tasks, and topic-building activities.

The authors in [6], engagement indicators were understood as reflecting different levels of participation: low-level approval (likes), medium-level interaction (comments), and high-level endorsement (shares). However, since share counts alone do not indicate whether sharers belong to target audiences, greater emphasis is placed on the ratio of comments to likes and qualitative examination of comment content. This approach enables a more nuanced assessment of communication effectiveness beyond surface-level exposure metrics.

To enhance the reliability of analytical results, the official TikTok accounts of the three universities were subjected to rigorous examination, and ambiguous cases were repeatedly reviewed. Classification schemes were refined during the analysis process to ensure clarity and consistency.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two stages. First, descriptive analysis was employed to identify general patterns in posting frequency, content distribution, and engagement performance across different types of universities. This stage provides an overview of institutional differences in short-video branding practices.

Second, comparative analysis was applied to examine how variations in communication subjects, content strategies, channel use, and audience positioning are associated with differences in engagement outcomes. Rather than relying solely on absolute engagement metrics, the analysis emphasizes relative patterns and organizational characteristics, such as consistency in interaction levels and alignment between content themes and target audiences. Throughout the analysis, empirical observations were interpreted in relation to existing literature on university branding strategies and social media engagement, allowing the findings to be situated within broader theoretical discussions.

Ethical Considerations

All data used in the research were obtained from publicly accessible TikTok accounts and did not involve private user information or direct interaction with platform users. For analytical clarity, institutional names were retained, as the analyzed accounts represent official communication channels rather than individual users. The study adheres to widely accepted ethical standards for social media research and does not pose foreseeable risks to institutions or individuals.

Results

Communication Subject (Who): Organizational Structure and Professionalization

The communication subject (Who) refers to the organizations and individuals responsible for carrying out communication practices. The degree of professionalization of the communication subject profoundly influences both the mode of content construction and overall communication effectiveness. An analysis of the three official TikTok accounts shows that the communication subjects are primarily institutional media teams affiliated with university publicity departments or media centers.

JT University -“in-system professional team” . The core operating subject of JT University’s TikTok account is the university Party Committee Publicity Department, which is led by a full-time teaching staff with professional backgrounds in communication and media-related fields. A standardized management and training system has been established, extending from the university level to individual faculties and departments. The team not only possesses professional equipment but is also able to mobilize core internal and external resources through its administrative authority and academic status. This enables the production of high-quality and high-cost content, systematically shaping an authoritative brand image of the university as a “national strategic scientific and technological force.”

SY University - “market-oriented and functionalized”. The operating subject of SY University’s TikTok account is a university-affiliated news and publicity center, where communication tasks are implemented through clearly defined full-time administrative positions. Due to limited financial resources typical of private universities, investments in equipment and personnel are relatively insufficient. The professional level of recruited personnel is generally low, resulting in video content with limited depth and uneven quality. This situation reflects a direct pursuit of communication effectiveness under conditions of resource constraints.

QC University- “vertically specialized path rooted in industrial genes.” The operating subject of QC University’s TikTok account is a teacher–student professional team serving the university’s overall new media communication system. Its core advantage lies in deep vertical expertise embedded within the automotive industry. The team is capable of integrating industrial ecosystem resources both inside and outside the university, continuously producing high-quality content within a vertical domain that highlights technical strength and resonates with specific audience circles. In this way, the university’s industrial affiliation advantages are transformed into tangible brand attractiveness.

The analysis reveals clear differences in the professionalization paths of communication subjects across the three sample universities, reflecting variations in institutional positioning, resource endowments, and strategic objectives. JT University adopts an administrative–professional logic with strong resource support, SY University follows a market–efficiency logic emphasizing functional fulfillment, while QC University applies an industry–ecology logic by integrating communication with specialized industrial knowledge. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of university new media communication depends on achieving an appropriate balance between organizational formalization and operational flexibility in accordance with institutional characteristics.

Communication Content (Says What): Content Types and Structural Characteristics

The communication content (Says What) refers to the specific information, symbols, and narratives conveyed through short-video communication. Content type and structural configuration directly affect how institutional brand images are constructed and perceived in short-video platforms. Based on content analysis of the official TikTok accounts of JT University, SY University, and QC University, short-video content can be categorized into five main types: campus scenery, student life, academic achievements, enrollment services, and humanistic narratives. This classification provides an analytical foundation for examining differences in content orientation among the sample universities.

The TikTok content of JT University is dominated by videos related to academic achievements, institutional ceremonies, and research highlights. Videos showcasing major scientific projects, faculty accomplishments, and national-level events account for a substantial proportion of total output. Campus scenery and historical narratives are also frequently used to reinforce institutional prestige and continuity. Entertainment-oriented student life content appears less frequently and is usually embedded within formal institutional narratives.

SY University, by contrast, places strong emphasis on student life–oriented content. Videos depicting campus activities, student performances, dormitory life, and everyday experiences constitute the majority of its output. These videos often adopt humorous or emotionally appealing presentation styles. Academic achievements and institutional narratives are less prominent, resulting in a content structure centered on visibility and approachability rather than academic authority.

The content strategy of QC University is highly concentrated on practical training and vocational skills. Videos frequently feature workshop operations, laboratory practices, skills demonstrations, and cooperation with industry partners. Employment-related information and internship experiences are also recurrent themes. This content configuration reflects a clear

vocational orientation and distinguishes QC University from both JT University and SY University.

Overall, differences in content configuration among the three sample universities indicate that short-video content selection is closely linked to institutional positioning, resource conditions, and branding objectives rather than random creative choices.

Communication Channel (In Which Channel): Platform Use and Operational Logic

The communication channel (In Which Channel) refers to the media platforms and technical environments through which communication activities are conducted. In the context of short-video communication, platform mechanisms and operational logic exert a significant influence on content dissemination and audience reach. All three sample universities primarily use TikTok as their core short-video communication channel. However, differences exist in platform integration strategies and operational depth.

For JT University, the intended target audience appears to include academically oriented prospective students, alumni, and members of the general public interested in higher education and scientific development. However, comment section analysis shows that actual engagement often comes from a diverse audience, including casual viewers. Interaction levels remain relatively low, and many comments are short expressions of approval rather than substantive discussion.

SY University demonstrates ambiguous audience positioning. While some videos are clearly aimed at prospective students and parents, particularly during enrollment periods, entertainment-oriented content attracts a broader and less defined audience. As a result, interaction patterns are fragmented, and follower engagement lacks continuity across content themes.

In contrast, QC University shows a clearer alignment between content themes and audience needs. Comment sections frequently include specific questions related to majors, training conditions, certification, and employment prospects. Interaction is more focused and functional, indicating closer correspondence between content production and audience expectations. These differences indicate that platform use is not uniform across universities but shaped by institutional strategies and operational capacities.

Target Audience (To Whom): Audience Orientation and Interaction Characteristics

The target audience (To Whom) refers to the groups that communication activities intend to reach and influence. Audience orientation is reflected not only in content themes but also in interaction patterns and participation behaviors. Engagement performance varies significantly among the three sample universities when measured through views, likes, comments, and shares.

JT University primarily targets academically oriented prospective students, alumni, and members of the general public interested in higher education development. However, analysis of comment sections shows that actual interactions are often shallow, with most comments consisting of brief expressions of approval or admiration. Sustained dialogue and in-depth discussion are relatively limited.

SY University exhibits ambiguous audience orientation. While enrollment-related videos target prospective students and parents, entertainment-oriented content attracts a broader and less defined audience. As a result, interaction patterns are fragmented, and audience engagement lacks continuity across different content types.

In contrast, QC University demonstrates clearer audience targeting. Comment sections frequently contain specific inquiries related to majors, training conditions, certification requirements, and employment prospects. Interaction is more functional and information-oriented, indicating closer alignment between content output and audience needs.

The comparison suggests that clarity of audience orientation plays an important role in shaping interaction quality and communication effectiveness.

Communication Effect (With What Effect): Engagement Performance and Evaluation Practices

The communication effect (With What Effect) refers to the observable outcomes of communication activities, typically measured through engagement indicators on social media platforms.

Across the three sample universities, communication effects are primarily evaluated using quantitative indicators such as views, likes, comments, and shares. These indicators are widely regarded as direct measures of communication performance.

JT University consistently achieves high exposure levels, particularly for videos related to academic achievements and major institutional events. However, the ratio of comments to likes remains relatively low, suggesting limited depth of audience engagement.

SY University occasionally produces viral videos that generate sharp increases in views and likes. These viral effects are often associated with entertaining or emotionally appealing student life content. However, such effects are typically short-lived and difficult to sustain, and they do not necessarily translate into long-term audience retention.

QC University records lower overall exposure metrics compared with the other two universities. Nevertheless, its engagement patterns show higher-quality interaction, with comments reflecting practical information needs rather than passive content consumption.

Overall, reliance on surface-level indicators dominates current evaluation practices across all three sample universities. Qualitative dimensions of communication effects, such as interaction depth and audience relevance, receive comparatively limited attention.

Conclusion

Reinterpreting the Findings Through the 5W Communication Model

The empirical findings presented in Chapter 4 can be systematically reinterpreted through Lasswell's 5W communication model, which provides a structured lens for understanding differentiated short-video branding strategies among the three sample universities.

From the perspective of “Who”, the operating subjects of the official TikTok accounts differ significantly across the samples. JT University benefits from a well-established organizational structure supported by a dedicated publicity department and professional media teams. This institutional capacity enables stable content planning and consistent output. In contrast, SY University relies on comparatively limited operational resources, often depending on temporary teams or student participation, which contributes to irregular posting patterns and fragmented content strategies. QC University, while also operating with constrained resources, demonstrates a higher level of internal coordination due to its narrow institutional focus and close alignment with industry partners.

Regarding “Says What”, the content configurations observed across the three universities reflect their respective institutional positions. JT University emphasizes academic achievements, research milestones, and formal institutional narratives, reinforcing an authoritative brand image rooted in academic prestige. SY University prioritizes student life-oriented and entertainment-driven content, aiming to enhance visibility and emotional proximity to audiences. QC University, by contrast, concentrates on vocational training, skills demonstrations, and employment-related information, forming a content structure centered on practical value. These findings suggest that content selection is not arbitrary but deeply shaped by institutional identity and strategic constraints.

In terms of “In Which Channel”, all three universities rely primarily on TikTok as the core short-video dissemination platform. However, differences emerge in cross-platform integration and operational depth. JT University demonstrates relatively systematic platform use, occasionally coordinating TikTok content with other official media channels. SY University shows limited cross-platform coordination, often reposting identical content without platform-specific adaptation. QC University adopts a more focused platform strategy, concentrating its efforts on TikTok while embedding content within offline training and recruitment activities.

The dimension of “To Whom” further highlights contrast in audience orientation. JT University targets academically oriented prospective students and the general public but encounters challenges in sustaining deep interaction due to the broad and heterogeneous nature of its audience base. SY University exhibits ambiguous audience positioning, oscillating between recruitment-oriented messaging and entertainment content, which attracts diverse but unstable audiences. QC University demonstrates clearer audience targeting, primarily addressing prospective students concerned with skills acquisition and employment outcomes, resulting in more focused and functionally oriented engagement.

Finally, “With What Effect” reveals common limitations across the samples. While JT University and SY University achieve high exposure through views and likes, interaction depth remains limited. QC University, despite lower exposure metrics, exhibits higher-quality interaction characterized by substantive inquiries and follow-up questions. These patterns underscore the inadequacy of relying solely on surface-level engagement indicators to assess communication effectiveness.

Differentiated Short-Video Branding Strategies Across the Sample Universities

Building on the case-based findings, the communication practices of the three sample universities can be conceptualized as distinct short-video branding strategies shaped by institutional positioning.

JT University exemplifies an authoritative branding strategy, in which short-video communication functions as an extension of traditional academic authority. The emphasis on research achievements and formal institutional narratives reinforces existing prestige but also constrains interaction depth. This strategy aligns with the university's stable position within the higher education hierarchy but risks limiting audience participation and emotional engagement in the short-video environment.

SY University's strategy can be understood through the lens of resource dependence theory. Facing constrained institutional resources and competitive enrollment pressures, it adopts a market-adaptive branding logic that prioritizes visibility and short-term engagement over long-term brand coherence. This survival-oriented approach reflects a reactive rather than proactive communication posture. While such content may temporarily enhance visibility and generate viral effects, it often lacks strategic continuity and fails to consolidate long-term brand identity. The findings suggest that adaptive strategies driven primarily by exposure imperatives may struggle to achieve sustainable branding outcomes.

QC University's approach aligns with niche theory in organizational ecology. By concentrating on a distinct vocational domain (automotive industry), it carves out a specialized audience segment, thereby reducing direct competition with academically oriented institutions. This ecological niche strategy enables meaningful interaction within a smaller but more engaged audience base. By concentrating on practical training and employment-related content, QC University establishes a clear and recognizable brand niche. This strategy, although operating within a smaller audience base, enables more meaningful interaction and aligns communication practices with institutional mission.

These differentiated strategies indicate that short-video branding effectiveness is closely tied to institutional self-positioning rather than platform-specific tactics alone.

Implications for University Brand Communication Practice

These results offer several implications for understanding university brand communication in the short-video era.

First, institutional positioning should serve as the primary reference point for content strategy development. The contrast between JT University and SY University illustrates that strategies effective for elite research universities may not be transferable to institutions facing market-oriented pressures. Similarly, the experience of QC University suggests that smaller institutions can achieve communication effectiveness by focusing on niche differentiation rather than exposure maximization.

Second, evaluation practices require conceptual refinement. Across all three samples, performance assessment relies heavily on quantitative indicators such as views and likes. This exposure-oriented logic obscures meaningful distinctions between passive attention and

substantive engagement. Integrating qualitative indicators—such as comment content, interaction continuity, and audience relevance—can provide a more comprehensive understanding of communication effectiveness.

Third, the findings highlight the importance of aligning short-video communication with institutional missions. When content strategies diverge from core educational objectives, branding efforts risk becoming fragmented and unsustainable. Conversely, alignment between communication practices and institutional identity enhances coherence and credibility.

Methodological Reflections and Research Limitations

Several methodological considerations warrant reflection. First, the study adopts a qualitative case-based design focused on three universities within a single province. While this approach enables in-depth analysis of differentiated practices, it limits the generalizability of findings to other regions or national contexts.

Second, data collection relies on publicly available TikTok information, which constrains access to backend analytics and internal decision-making processes. As a result, interpretations of operational strategies are based on observable outputs rather than organizational intentions.

Third, engagement indicators are interpreted as proxies for communication effects. Although this approach aligns with existing social media research, it does not capture long-term branding outcomes such as reputation change or enrollment decisions. Future studies may integrate survey data or longitudinal enrollment statistics to address this limitation.

Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

The study advances research on digital higher education branding in three ways. First, it extends branding theory to platformized communication by demonstrating how institutional hierarchy and regional ecosystem jointly shape platform-specific strategies. Second, it refines existing strategic differentiation models by identifying three empirically grounded strategy types—authoritative, market-adaptive, and niche-focused—within a single regional context. Third, it challenges exposure-centric evaluation logics by showing that high engagement quality can occur even with low quantitative reach.

Future research may extend this analysis to other regions, incorporate quantitative modeling, or examine the long-term impacts of short-video communication on university reputation and enrollment outcomes. Such efforts would further advance understanding of digital media's role in higher education branding.

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