International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

Constructing City Image on Overseas Video Platforms: A Case Study of Lianyungang Videos on YouTube

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Abstract

In the context of global digital communication, city image has become an integral component of national image construction. This study focuses on videos related to Lianyungang city on the YouTube platform and employs a combination of textual analysis and comment keyword analysis to systematically investigate the dissemination of city image. The analytical framework is structured around three dimensions: digital spatial representation, cultural expression, and emotional interaction, examining the interplay between visual narrative strategies, symbol selection, and audience engagement. The findings indicate that city image dissemination is characterized by multi-stakeholder participation, dynamic generation, and a competitive process of meaning-making. This study provides theoretical insights and practical implications for evaluating and optimizing the international communication of Chinese city images in the digital platform environment.

1. Introduction

Lianyungang, located in the northeastern part of Jiangsu Province in China, borders the Yellow Sea to the east, Shandong Province to the north, Central China to the west, and the Yangtze River Delta to the south. It serves as a central hub along China's extensive coastline and a key intersection in the *Belt and Road Initiative*. As a major port city, Lianyungang occupies a strategic position in national development plans and holds potential symbolic significance in shaping China's external image. However, content related to Lianyungang on overseas platforms such as TikTok and YouTube remains limited, resulting in relatively low visibility and a need for enhanced international exposure. In the context of the accelerating transformation of global communication patterns, leveraging overseas social media and adapting to the trends of mobility, social interactivity, and video-based communication are critical strategies for enhancing the dissemination of city image internationally (Wang, 2024) [9].

Against this backdrop, it is essential to focus research on representative overseas video platforms to examine the relationship between content production and dissemination outcomes. As one of the most influential online video platforms globally, YouTube brings together diverse content producers and cross-cultural audiences, constituting a typical field for international communication (Li *et al*., 2025). Therefore, a systematic analysis of overseas content related to Lianyungang on YouTube, along with an evaluation of its dissemination effects, can reveal how city image is constructed and received in an international context, while also addressing the current limitations in Lianyungang's overseas visibility.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Research on City Image Communication

The study of city image originated in the 1960s, when Lynch (1964) proposed the concept of the city image, pioneering the theory of cognitive mapping. Anholt (2006) [1] introduced the City Brands Index, constructing a multi-dimensional framework that includes city presence, development potential, attractiveness, cultural appeal, policy environment, and investment prospects to measure city image. Govers and Go (2009) [3] argued that city image is a composite of global, virtual, and physical characteristics, and that networks and social media can influence international audiences' perceptions of city image through narrative tools such as multimedia content. He (2010) [4] developed a "pyramid strategy framework" for city image

communication, emphasizing that city image dissemination is essentially a process of constructing recognition between self and others. Furthermore, Zenker and Martin (2011) [11] noted that international practices of city image communication often lack clear evaluative standards. They proposed that city brand awareness, brand attractiveness, and brand associations are closely linked to the effectiveness of international city image communication and emphasized the need for data-driven approaches and audience research to optimize communication strategies.

However, with the global communication landscape shifting toward platformization, algorithmization, and video-based media, traditional macro-evaluation models of city image are increasingly inadequate for explaining how city image is generated and disseminated in contemporary international communication contexts. In particular, there is a lack of systematic research based on real-world data and audience feedback regarding the international dissemination of specific Chinese cities.

2.2 Communication Mechanisms of Overseas Social Media

With the evolution of media technologies, scholars have gradually extended city image research from traditional mass media to emerging mobile digital platforms. For instance, Wang and Yang (2019) [8] examined the promotion of Xi'an through Douyin (TikTok China), demonstrating that mobile short videos can reshape the perception of city image through contextualized narrative and visual expression. In overseas communication contexts, video platforms such as YouTube and TikTok, leveraging algorithmic recommendation mechanisms and participatory user structures, are reshaping the logic of cross-cultural city image dissemination. Existing studies indicate that representations of China on overseas social media are often *segmented* and exhibit agenda fragmentation (Zhang & Shao, 2019), with significant differences in topic coverage and audience engagement between official media accounts and individual creators. At the same time, research grounded

in the Cognitive–Affective–Conative (CAC) model suggests that audiences' cognitive evaluations of cities influence their behavioral intentions through affective responses (Echtner & Ritchie, 1991) [2]. Platformed communication structures and participatory culture mechanisms (Jenkins, 2008) further amplify the role of emotional interaction in shaping city image.

To date, discussions regarding the interactions among platform algorithms, content presentation, and dissemination effects remain fragmented, and no integrated analytical framework has been established. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a case study of a specific city, systematically examining content presentation features, dissemination effects, and influencing factors on international video platforms, in order to deepen understanding of the mechanisms underlying city image formation in a global communication context.

3. Research Design

This study adopts a content analysis approach to systematically examine the dissemination characteristics of Lianyungang-related videos on the YouTube platform. Using the keyword *lianyungang*, videos uploaded between January 1, 2020, and January 1, 2026, were retrieved as the research sample. This period represents a phase of rapid development in global short-video production and mobile communication, which is conducive to investigating the dissemination features of city image in a platformized media context.

To ensure sample validity and relevance, the retrieved videos were manually screened to exclude content unrelated to Lianyungang's city image. Videos with fewer than 1,000 views (as of January 30, 2026) were also excluded. Ultimately, six videos meeting the criteria were selected for in-depth analysis (Table 1). Key indicators including video titles, view counts, likes, and comments were systematically collected and analyzed to assess both content characteristics and audience engagement.

Table 1

	Video Title	Views Counts	Likes	Comments
1	Dark Cuisine in Lianyungang, Jiangsu: Giant Caterpillar Selling for Over 3,000 yuan, Outsiders Dread It (江苏连云港黑暗料理大青虫，一盆能卖 3000 多，外地人闻风丧胆)	540K	3130	415
2	Lianyungang, Jiangsu: ¿Waterway Road – Do You Dare to Take the Challenge? (江苏连云港，水上公路，你敢来挑战吗？)	8.34K	116	8
3	CCTV Discovery Channel – "Discover China": Lianyungang. (CCTV 发现之旅频道-《发现中国》之连云港)	7.36K	56	22
4	"Lianyungang Huaguo Mountain": The Hometown of Sun Wukong – Explore the Monkey King and the Water Curtain Cave from Journey to the West (《连云港花果山》这是孙大圣的老家，看看美猴王，看看西游记中的水帘洞！)	5.22K	0	1
5	Cycling Across China: Leaving Shandong and Entering Lianyungang, Jiangsu – Camping in Hutou Town Yesterday (环华骑行，离开山东进入江苏连云港，昨天在虎头镇露营)	3.02K	64	2
6	Three-Wheeled RV Finally Arrives in Lianyungang: Hungry, Have Some Food, and Turn on the AC in the RV [Da Hai Travels China (三轮房车终于来到连云港，饿了吃点饭，在房车打开空调见周公去了【大海游中国】)	1.298K	24	2

In the keyword analysis section, this study employed Python to crawl the comment data of the six selected videos, yielding a total of 450 comments. After data cleaning, 435 valid comments were retained for analysis. During the text processing stage, the comments were tokenized and subjected to high-frequency word analysis. Using semantic categorization, the comments were further classified along the dimensions. This approach allowed for an examination of the structure of overseas audiences' attitudes toward Lianyungang's city image, as well as their interaction patterns.

4. Research Findings

Analysis of both content and interaction data of Lianyungang-related videos on YouTube indicates that the overall quantity of overseas short videos about Lianyungang is relatively low. Within the specified time frame, only six representative high-view videos were identified, confirming that the city's visibility on international video platforms remains limited. In terms of dissemination metrics, there is a significant disparity in view counts among the sample videos, with the top-ranked video reaching 540,000 views, while the remaining videos did not surpass 10,000 views. Building on this observation, the study examines the dissemination effects and influencing factors from three dimensions: urban space, cultural space, and emotional space.

4.1 Digital Construction of Urban Space

Under the digital-age communication paradigm, city images have evolved from static visual representations of reality to dynamic constructions grounded in embodied practices. Leveraging its unique geographical structure, Lianyungang's urban space on YouTube transcends traditional promotional videos that merely showcase landmark architecture. Instead, it establishes an immersive and extensible digital perception system. Through the integration of embodied experiences and visual storytelling, the video content enhances audiences' spatial perception, guiding overseas viewers to engage in imaginative digital navigation and affective experiences of the city's geography.

In this process, urban space in overseas video dissemination exhibits multi-layered visual features, with distinctive geographic structures and natural landscapes serving as key carriers for constructing the city's image. For instance, the video *Jiangsu Lianyungang: Water Highway, Dare to Challenge?* positions the viewpoint along the waterway spanning the port and inner rivers. Reflections of the blue sky on the water, low-lying fishing port buildings on both sides, and distant rolling hills create a clear sense of spatial layering, allowing viewers to perceive the city's interwoven aquatic and terrestrial structure. The video *"Lianyungang Huaguo Mountain"* centers on Mountain and the Water Curtain Cave, showcasing the natural topography and reinforcing the connection between mountains, water, and urban space, thus generating a sense of spatial immersion. Another high-view video, *Jiangsu Lianyungang Dark Cuisine* uses table experiences and market scenes as entry points, incorporating urban living spaces, local markets, and everyday neighborhoods into the frame. By highlighting detailed aspects of social space, viewers can perceive the city's urban character through quotidian scenarios. Overall, these videos organically integrate landmark geographical spaces, natural landscapes, and living spaces, constructing a dynamic urban space that is both visually perceivable and experientially tangible, enabling overseas audiences to form a multi-dimensional understanding of Lianyungang's urban environment.

Building on this urban space construction, keyword analysis of 435 valid comments further reveals overseas audiences' perceptions of Lianyungang's spatial features. High-frequency words such as *beautiful, scenic, mountains, river,* and *adventure* correspond directly to spatial elements presented in the videos, including Huaguo Mountain, port waterways, and the water highway. This indicates that viewers not only attend to the visual characteristics of landmarks but also show strong engagement with embodied and adventurous experiences. Moreover, terms such as *unusual* and *experience* reflect audiences' curiosity and willingness to participate in urban life spaces, resonating with video depictions of dining experiences and neighborhood scenes. Through their comments, overseas viewers cognitively annotate urban space, and their attention and interactive behaviors directly reflect the impact of visual presentation and embodied experiences on the dissemination of city image, thereby linking the spatial construction in the videos closely with audience perception.

4.2 Symbolic Narratives of Cultural Space

Culture lies at the core of urban image construction. In the context of cross-cultural communication, culture should not merely be treated as a heritage to be observed or a text to be interpreted, as this approach is prone to cultural misinterpretation. On overseas video platforms, Lianyungang's cultural space is concretized through specific cultural symbols.

Huaguo Mountain embodies mythological elements from the classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West* (《西游记》), including figures such as the Monkey King and the Water Curtain Cave. These elements not only represent tangible geographical landmarks but also serve as highly recognizable cultural symbols, forming visual anchors for Lianyungang's cultural space. Within video narratives, these symbols function both as signifiers of natural landscapes and as signified references to Chinese mythological traditions and national cultural memory, granting urban space a symbolic significance that extends beyond its geographic dimensions. Local culinary practices, such as the giant caterpillar dish, are presented through embodied scenes in markets, dining tables, and individual reactions, transforming regional food traditions into perceptible cultural symbols. The heterogeneity of these elements enhances the dramatic and discussion-worthy aspects of cross-cultural viewing. The *Cycling Across China* video series embeds natural landscapes and local lifestyles into creators' travel experiences, allowing Lianyungang's cultural symbols to be re-encoded along mobile spatial trajectories. Similarly, the *CCTV program Discover China: Lianyungang* showcases local theatrical performances, costumes, and stage arts, transforming traditional art into visual cultural representations and making regional performing arts a key symbol of the city's cultural identity.

These cultural symbols not only carry historical traditions and local memory but are also redefined through creators' narrative practices, becoming meaningful resources for cross-cultural communication. By presenting mythological imagery, culinary practices, folk arts, and local lifestyles,

the videos transform abstract cultural content into concrete, visible, and experiential symbolic systems, reinforcing audiences' cognitive structures of Lianyungang's cultural space. During viewing, audiences recognize, interpret, and comment on these cultural symbols, constructing meaning and projecting emotions onto the city's culture, thereby enabling cultural space to shift from static display to dynamic narrative in cross-cultural dissemination.

Keyword analysis of comments further reveals audience engagement with cultural symbols. Terms related to *food* appear most frequently, confirming that culinary practices serve as a primary entry point for YouTube users to understand Lianyungang's culture. Evaluation words such as *interesting, unique,* and *scary* also appear repeatedly, indicating that cultural distinctiveness and symbolic features are important factors stimulating interaction and discussion. In sum, comment keywords not only reflect audiences' recognition of specific cultural content but also highlight the guiding function of visualized urban culture in overseas platforms' cross-cultural dissemination.

4.3 Interactive Generation of Emotional Space

Nowadays, urban image is increasingly regarded as an imaginative construction of an emotional community. Within the context of digital platforms, such emotional engagement is no longer a unidirectional value output from official narratives, but rather a socially generated meaning structure emerging through interactions between creators and audiences. Unlike physical and cultural spaces, emotional space relies heavily on authentic experiences, individual expression, and interactive feedback, forming a dynamic flow of affect. On YouTube, Lianyungang's emotional space is generated through creators' embodied narratives and audience participatory engagement.

In some videos, filming adopts a first-person perspective, embedding bodily perception into the spatial presentation. The movement of the camera, the rhythmic pacing akin to breathing, and the synchronized subjective voiceover together create a presence-oriented viewing structure, in which urban landscapes are no longer distant objects of observation but spaces permeated by bodily perception and emotional experience. Under this narrative strategy, Lianyungang's natural landscapes and urban streetscapes are transformed into spaces that can be experienced rather than merely displayed. Simultaneously, voiceover texts further reinforce this sense of presence. As a medium connecting space and emotion, these voiceovers emphasize personal experience and subjective feeling rather than objective, descriptive commentary. Phrases such as *I see, I walk along,* or *this reminds me of transform* space into a site of emotional flow. Sound thus ceases to be a subsidiary element of the visual frame and becomes an active constructor of emotional meaning.

Analysis of the comment texts reveals a pronounced clustering of words related to home, such as *hometown*, *miss home*, and *family.* These terms go beyond simple emotional expression, pointing to deeper mechanisms of emotional attachment and identity projection. Through shared semantic convergence, they indicate place attachment to Lianyungang. Comments connect the city's physical spaces with individual memories, reconstructing an emotional space. Audiences do not merely observe the city as outsiders; rather, they incorporate natural landscapes and everyday urban scenes into their personal experiential

frameworks, achieving emotional self-mapping. This semantic network, centered on the concept of home, recodes Lianyungang on digital platforms as an urban image carrying universal emotional symbolism.

Consequently, in this process, urban image ceases to be a passive visual object and becomes a symbolic carrier of shared emotional experience. Emotional space is continuously generated, reinforced, and circulated through comment interactions, transforming Lianyungang's city image from a geographic entity into an affective symbol that can be projected onto and recognized by audiences.

5. Conclusion

City image is not a simple assemblage of urban resources, but a meaning structure generated through the interweaving of cultural expression, media circulation, and emotional interaction across multiple spatial dimensions. Particularly within the context of global digital platforms, cities are no longer merely physical entities defined by geographic coordinates; rather, through visual narration, algorithmic distribution, and cross-cultural comment interaction, they are continuously reconstructed as symbolic spaces open to viewing and interpretation.

Taking videos related to Lianyungang on YouTube as the research object, this study combines textual analysis with a content analysis of 435 valid comments to systematically examine the generative pathways of Lianyungang's urban image from three dimensions: digital space, cultural symbolism, and emotional identification. The findings indicate that the communication of urban image is not a single-dimensional visual display, but a process of meaning construction shaped by the intersection of multiple spaces.

In essence, urban image communication constitutes a field of meaning competition involving multiple actors. The image of Lianyungang presented within the global digital platform environment results from the interaction among cultural resources, media structures, and audience engagement. Its communication effectiveness depends on whether the symbols are recognizable, whether the narrative is coherent, and whether interaction can evoke emotional resonance. For future urban image communication practices, it is essential to strengthen the integrative narrative capacity of local symbols at the cultural level, forming a clear line of meaning that connects natural landscapes with historical heritage; to optimize visual presentation and title strategies at the media level, enhancing compatibility between content and platform algorithms; and to emphasize everyday life scenes and authentic experiences at the emotional level, thereby increasing participatory engagement and affective warmth. Through a transformation from promotional logic to narrative logic, and from resource display to value experience, Lianyungang's urban image can achieve a hierarchical shift within the global visual flow—from being seen, to being understood, and ultimately to being recognized.

6. References

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