

Original Research Article

Constructing cultural heritage narratives for global audiences: A multimodal critical discourse analysis of Xi'an museums on TikTok

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Abstract: With the rapid development of social media, museums are increasingly engaging in digital heritage communication beyond traditional exhibition spaces. This study examines how Xi'an museums communicate cultural heritage on TikTok through a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) approach. Based on museum short videos, it analyzes how visual, linguistic, and audio modes construct meanings of historical authenticity, urban identity, and cultural representation. Findings show that museums employ multimodal strategies combining iconic artifacts, evaluative language, and cinematic visuals to construct cultural continuity and position Xi'an as both a historical and contemporary cultural city. TikTok's platform affordances further shape this communication through short-form storytelling, algorithmic visibility, and multilingual presentation, expanding audience engagement and transnational reach.

Keywords: cultural heritage narratives; multimodal critical discourse analysis; Xi'an museums; short-video media

1. Introduction

Museums play an important role in preserving, interpreting, and communicating cultural heritage by shaping public understanding through curated narratives of history, culture, and identity. In China, museums have increasingly been positioned as key institutions for cultural communication and national image construction. Among Chinese cities, Xi'an occupies a distinctive position as an ancient capital with rich historical resources and a well-developed museum system, making it an ideal site for examining digital heritage communication.

With the rise of short-video platforms such as TikTok, museums have expanded heritage communication beyond physical exhibition spaces. Through dynamic visuals, subtitles, music, and interactive features, TikTok enables museums to repackage cultural heritage into more accessible and engaging forms for global audiences. Although previous studies have applied Critical Discourse Analysis to museum communication and city branding, most focus on traditional media such as exhibitions, brochures, and publicity films (Francesconi, 2011; Jones & Silviya, 2017). Relatively limited attention has been paid to museums' short-video practices on social media, particularly how heritage narratives are constructed multimodally in digital contexts.

Therefore, this study investigates how Xi'an museums construct and disseminate cultural heritage narratives on TikTok. By examining museum short videos, the study contributes to research on digital heritage communication, museum branding, and multimodal discourse in social media environments.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Museums and digital heritage communication

Museums are important institutions for preserving, interpreting, and communicating cultural heritage. Beyond safeguarding material and intangible heritage, they increasingly function as cultural mediators that shape collective memory, identity, and public understanding through curated narratives and symbolic representation (Guo, 2021). With digital transformation, museum communication has expanded from physical spaces to online platforms, including websites, virtual exhibitions, and social media.

Previous studies suggest that social media has transformed museum communication from one-way dissemination to more interactive and participatory models (Claes & Deltell, 2014; Capriotti & Losada-Díaz, 2018). In China, museums have also become strategic actors in international communication

and cultural soft power construction (Wang, 2024). However, existing research mainly focuses on communication strategies and audience engagement, paying limited attention to multimodal heritage narrative construction.

2.2. TikTok, short videos, and digital cultural representation

As a short-video platform characterized by multimodality, algorithmic dissemination, and user interaction, TikTok has reshaped digital communication. By integrating video, subtitles, music, hashtags, and editing techniques, it enables institutions to present cultural content in more engaging ways.

Research has increasingly explored TikTok in urban branding and cultural representation. Wang and Feng (2023) found that Xi'an's official TikTok videos construct a dual urban identity as both a historical city and a modern metropolis. However, while these studies provide insight into city branding, museums as digital heritage narrators remain underexplored.

2.3. Multimodal critical discourse analysis and heritage narrative construction

According to Fairclough (2013), discourse is a form of social practice through which identities, meanings, and power relations are constructed. Building on CDA, multimodal approaches extend analysis beyond language to include visual, auditory, and spatial semiotic resources.

In museum and heritage studies, multimodal analysis has been applied to exhibitions, tourism discourse, and digital communication (Zhang, 2016; Song, 2021). Given TikTok's integration of linguistic, visual, and auditory modes, Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis provides an appropriate framework for examining museum short-video discourse.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative case study design and employs Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) (Machin & Mayr, 2023) to examine how Xi'an museums construct and disseminate cultural heritage narratives on TikTok. Data were collected from official TikTok accounts of representative museums in Xi'an. Videos were retrieved using keywords including "Xi'an museums," "Shaanxi History Museum," and "Terracotta Warriors." The search was limited to videos published between March 2025 and March 2026.

A total of 354 videos were initially identified. The final dataset was determined through a purposive sampling process based on three criteria: (1) videos published by official or affiliated museum accounts; (2) videos focusing on museum collections, historical interpretation, or heritage promotion; and (3) videos demonstrating relatively high visibility in terms of views, likes, comments, or shares. After applying these criteria, 225 videos were retained for analysis.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Constructing historical authenticity and cultural heritage

A key discourse strategy in Xi'an museums' TikTok videos is the multimodal construction of historical authenticity and cultural continuity. Rather than simply displaying artifacts, the videos actively produce "authenticity" through coordinated visual and linguistic resources, consistent with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2020) multimodal discourse theory.

Iconic objects such as the Terracotta Warriors and Tang Dynasty relics function as symbolic anchors of civilizational authority. Their repeated visual foregrounding constructs Xi'an as a site of deep historical legitimacy, aligning with Fairclough's (2013) notion of naturalized discourse.

Linguistically, evaluative terms such as *ancient civilization* and *heritage* reinforce institutional authority, functioning as legitimation strategies (van Leeuwen, 2008). Visually, slow camera movement, symmetrical framing, and warm lighting enhance affective solemnity and produce a "reality effect" (Barthes, 1977). Together, these multimodal choices construct history not as interpretation, but as an embodied and authoritative experience.

4.2. Reinforcing Xi'an's urban identity

The videos also contribute to Xi'an's urban identity construction through integration of museum discourse with city branding. In line with Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2005), museums operate as intermediaries between heritage and urban image-making.

Urban landmarks such as the Ancient City Wall and Bell Tower are frequently interwoven with museum content, extending heritage meaning into the urban landscape. This reflects Lefebvre's (2003) concept of the social production of space, where urban identity is continuously constructed through representation.

Captions such as *Discover Xi'an and Journey through ancient China* function as discursive invitations, positioning viewers as participants in an experiential city narrative (Ning, 2017). Xi'an is thus constructed as a dual-temporal city combining historical depth and modern cultural consumption (Wang & Feng, 2023), with museums acting as symbolic nodes within this branding system.

4.3. Adapting heritage narratives to TikTok

Xi'an museums strategically adapt heritage communication to TikTok's platform logic, reflecting the platformization of cultural discourse (van Dijck et al., 2018). Content is shaped by algorithmic visibility and attention economy constraints, resulting in short-form, high-impact narratives.

Fast editing, trending music, hashtags, and concise subtitles enhance circulation potential, aligning with Jenkins' (2006) concept of spreadable media. Traditional heritage elements are recontextualized through digital aesthetics, producing a hybrid form that balances authenticity with entertainment value.

The use of English subtitles and simplified explanations indicates an orientation toward global audiences, supporting Nye's (2004) concept of soft power. Consequently, Xi'an museums function not only as heritage institutions but also as digital mediators of Chinese cultural visibility in transnational communication.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how Xi'an museums engage in digital heritage communication on TikTok through a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) perspective. The findings show that museum short videos construct cultural heritage through integrated multimodal resources, reflecting a shift from traditional exhibition practices to platform-mediated digital communication. Heritage is thus reconfigured as a dynamic, visually and discursively constructed experience within short-video environments.

Theoretically, the study extends MCDA to TikTok-based museum discourse and contributes to digital heritage research by illustrating how multimodal strategies construct authenticity, urban identity, and cultural visibility. It also highlights museums' role in urban branding and transnational cultural communication within platformized media ecologies. Practically, the study suggests that museums should balance cultural authenticity with platform logic by adopting concise storytelling, multimodal design, and multilingual strategies to enhance accessibility and global reach.

This study is limited by its focus on a selective sample of Xi'an museum videos within a restricted timeframe. Future research could broaden datasets, conduct cross-platform and cross-city comparisons, and incorporate audience reception analysis to better evaluate the effectiveness of digital heritage communication.

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