

Narrative Construction, Audience Engagement, and Communication Dilemmas of Bazhong Red Cultural Tourism on Short-video Platforms

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Abstract

Short-video platforms have become a major channel for disseminating red cultural tourism and revolutionary heritage to new audiences in China's old revolutionary base areas. Bazhong, in the former Sichuan-Shaanxi Soviet area, boasts abundant red heritage sites, yet few empirical studies examine how short-video narratives shape audience responses. Drawing on media narrative theory and audience engagement theory, this study uses semi-structured interviews, content analysis, and structural equation modeling (SEM). It explores how narrative construction shapes audience engagement with Bazhong red tourism short videos and identifies their communication challenges. Interviews with 20 practitioners, creators, residents and tourists, alongside coding of 200 popular Douyin videos, yielded three narrative construction dimensions: narrative content, narrative form, and emotional narrative. SEM analysis via analysis of moment structures (AMOS) was conducted using 326 valid questionnaire responses. All three dimensions were positively associated with cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement, and emotional narrative showed the strongest association (overall standardized path coefficient=0.628). Content coding further revealed the characteristics of the sample videos. A total of 68.5% of sampled videos merely featured check-in footage of revolutionary sites. In-depth storytelling accounted for only 12.0%. These findings demonstrate several problems: homogeneous content, shallow emotional expression, insufficient youth-oriented discourse, and weak feedback loops. The findings situate the narrative-engagement relationship in a localized red tourism setting and suggest that producers prioritize emotional storytelling, differentiated local content, and two-way audience interaction.

Keywords

Digital communication, Narrative construction, Red cultural tourism, Short-video platforms



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Introduction

Research background

Short-video platforms such as Douyin (the Chinese

version of TikTok), Kuaishou, and Xiaohongshu have changed the way tourism destinations present themselves

and communicate with visitors. Traditional official media typically feature one-way, institution-centered communication. By contrast, short videos are visual, fragmented, and interactive. They reduce the temporal and spatial barriers that keep audiences geographically distant from tourism destinations. Recent empirical studies reflect this shift: Official promotion short videos influence tourist decisions through perceived authority, interactivity and interest, while perceived professionalism, interactivity, and enjoyment shape telepresence, flow experience, and tourism intention [1,2]. For regional destinations, these digital platforms now serve as an important routine tool for brand building and resource activation.

Bazhong was a key city of the Sichuan-Shaanxi Soviet Revolutionary Base. The city has 602 immovable revolutionary cultural relics. Among them are 13 national key cultural relic protection units and 38 provincial ones. These relics jointly constitute a regional red tourism system. This system centers on revolutionary sites, historical events, and the spiritual heritage of the base area. The Bazhong Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism reports that the city received 18.2 million red tourism visits in 2025, generating 14.7 billion yuan in total red tourism revenue, year-on-year increases of 12.3% and 15.6%, respectively. By June 2026, the Douyin topic #BazhongRedCulturalTourism had accumulated more than 820 million views and over 37,000 user posts. Thus, short video has become one of the main vehicles for red culture publicity and tourism promotion in the city.

The scale of this content has not been matched by its communication quality. Much of the material is highly similar across accounts, perspectives are narrow, and the spiritual connotation of red culture is often stated rather than developed, which makes emotional resonance and interaction with young viewers difficult to sustain. Existing scholarship on red tourism in the digital environment leans toward macro-level strategy

discussion and single-case content analysis; localized evidence from the Sichuan-Shaanxi Soviet area, and quantitative evidence on how narrative construction affects audience engagement, remains scarce [3]. This study therefore combines interviews, video coding, and SEM to examine how Bazhong red tourism short videos are narrated, how their narrative features relate to audience engagement, and what practical dilemmas constrain their communication effect.

Research significance

The study makes two contributions. First, from a theoretical perspective, this study tests a model. The model connects short-video narrative construction with audience engagement within the specific context of red tourism in a revolutionary base area. It extends media narrative theory and audience engagement theory to a unique setting. In this setting, political education, cultural memory, and destination marketing intersect. Second, on a practical level, it identifies which narrative features are most strongly associated with engagement and maps the communication problems reported by creators and audiences. The resulting strategies are intended to help local producers reduce content duplication, deepen emotional expression, and make audience feedback usable, and they may inform similar regional red tourism destinations.

Research methods

(1) Semi-structured interviews

Twenty participants were interviewed: five cultural tourism administrators, six short-video creators, four local residents, and five young tourists. Each one-to-one interview lasted about 45 minutes and covered narrative dimensions, content characteristics, audience demand, and perceived communication bottlenecks. The interviews supplied the qualitative basis for the measurement model.

(2) Content analysis

This study sampled 202 popular Douyin short videos

about Bazhong red cultural tourism. The videos were released from January 2025 to June 2026. Researchers coded them in three dimensions: content type, narrative perspective, and expressive form. The coding aims to characterize the current status of narrative production.

(3) Structural equation modeling

Latent variables for narrative content, narrative form, emotional narrative, and audience engagement were specified on the basis of the interviews and prior literature. A standardized questionnaire was administered, and 326 valid responses were analyzed in AMOS to test the hypothesized relationships.

Literature review and theoretical basis

Digital communication of red tourism

Research on tourism content in digital media has moved from describing adoption of platforms toward explaining how short-form video affects viewers. Han et al., using 487 questionnaires, found that audience involvement with short form travel videos influenced cognitive and affective destination image and, through these, travel intentions [4]. Qu et al. showed that contexts such as information acquisition and social interaction shape attitudinal and behavioral engagement with tourism short-video platforms [5]. In the specific case of government-produced content, Jiang et al. reported that authority, interactivity, and interest in official promotion videos stimulated users' perceptions and sentiments and influenced destination decisions.

Research on red tourism communication in China addresses a different content genre, one that carries explicit historical and political meaning. Domestic studies observe that short video lowers the threshold for participating in red culture communication and supports younger and more popular forms of expression. Weber examined narrative innovation in red tourism short videos and argued that red culture brands face declining value appeal and rigid and repetitive content, and called for discourse that is more contemporary, emotional, and

regionally distinctive [6]. Three limitations recur across this literature. Methodologically, most studies rely on content analysis or illustrative cases rather than quantitative tests of communication mechanisms. Geographically, evidence is concentrated on nationally prominent red sites, with little localized work on the Sichuan-Shaanxi Soviet area. Substantively, qualitative interview findings and quantitative audience data are rarely combined to trace the path from narrative construction to audience behavior. Reported problems such as homogenized content, diluted spiritual connotation, and shallow expression provide the point of departure for the present study.

Theoretical basis

(1) Media narrative theory

Narrative transportation theory proposes that viewers who become absorbed in a story integrate its content into their own beliefs and attitudes [7]. In social media settings, transportation has been linked to viral sharing of advertising, and the sequence of emotional shifts within a narrative can sustain engagement and strengthen persuasion [8,9]. Zheltukhina et al. showed how media narrative participates in constructing audience identity in relation to digital cultural heritage [10]. In short-video red tourism communication, narration is no longer produced solely by official sources: official accounts, independent creators, and user re-creation coexist.

Accordingly, this study categorizes three dimensions of narratives. They are narrative content, narrative form, and emotional narrative. Narrative content includes red historical events, revolutionary spirit, and regional red landscapes. Narrative form covers camera language, editing style, and mode of address. Emotional narrative consists of emotional resonance, value identification, and situational immersion.

(2) Audience engagement theory

Audience engagement denotes multidimensional involvement during media reception, commonly separated into cognitive, emotional, and behavioral

components. Wang and Tang, drawing on a cognitive-affective-behavioral framework, found that the empathy, immersion, and belief revision produced by narrative transportation affected positive word of mouth through pleasure and arousal [11]. Hamby et al. found that emotional engagement, rather than enjoyment alone, drove intentions to share meaningful stories [12].

In this study, cognitive engagement covers attention to and understanding of content, emotional engagement covers resonance and identification, and behavioral engagement covers liking, commenting, forwarding, and travel intention. For red tourism communication, engagement of this kind is treated as the central indicator of communication effect.

Research design and hypotheses

Variables

The independent variable was narrative construction of Bazhong red tourism short videos, specified as three latent variables: narrative content quality, narrative form diversity, and emotional narrative depth. The dependent variable was audience engagement, specified as cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and behavioral engagement.

Research hypotheses

Combining the theoretical reasoning above with the

interview findings, the study tested the following hypotheses.

H1a-H1c: Narrative content quality has a significant positive effect on cognitive engagement (H1a), emotional engagement (H1b), and behavioral engagement (H1c).

H2a-H2c: Narrative form diversity has a significant positive effect on cognitive engagement (H2a), emotional engagement (H2b), and behavioral engagement (H2c).

H3a-H3c: Emotional narrative depth has a significant positive effect on cognitive engagement (H3a), emotional engagement (H3b), and behavioral engagement (H3c).

Questionnaire design and data collection

The questionnaire adapted established scales to the Bazhong short-video setting and used five-point Likert items, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It was distributed online and at local tourist attractions. Of 352 returned questionnaires, 326 were retained after removing responses with straight-line patterns or missing key data, for an effective response rate of 92.6%.

Table 1 reports the sample profile. Respondents aged 18-35 years old predominated, matching the main user base of short-video platforms. Platform-use items allowed multiple responses.

Table 1. Demographic profile of respondents (n=326).

Characteristic	Category	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	42.3
	Female	57.7
Age (years old)	18-25	41.7
	26-35	36.5
	36-45	14.4
	≥46	7.4
Education	Junior college or below	18.7
	Bachelor's degree	62.9
	Master's degree or above	18.4
Platform used ^a	Douyin	89.6
	Xiaohongshu	51.2
	Kuaishou	34.7

Note: ^aMultiple responses allowed.

Empirical analysis

Descriptive statistics

Respondents aged 18-35 years old accounted for 78.2% of the sample, consistent with the dominant age group on short-video platforms and among red tourism visitors. This demographic group is more receptive to online visual content and represents the primary target audience for red tourism short video promotion. In total, 93.5% of respondents had watched red tourism short videos and 67.8% had interacted with such content through actions like liking and commenting, indicating that the sample was familiar with the topic and that the data were suitable for empirical analysis. The overall mean of audience engagement was 3.27 on the five-point scale, a moderate level that suggests substantial room for improvement in communication effect and deeper emotional resonance between audiences and red tourism narratives.

Reliability and validity

Cronbach's alpha for the overall scale was 0.896, and the alpha values of the four constructs ranged from 0.817 to 0.876 (in Table 2), indicating acceptable internal consistency and reliable stability of the designed measurement items. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was 0.872, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($p < 0.001$), supporting the suitability of the dataset for conducting factor analysis. All measurement items loaded above 0.7 on their intended factors.

Composite reliability exceeded 0.85 and average variance extracted exceeded 0.50 for every construct, providing solid evidence of convergent validity. Discriminant validity was supported because the square root of each average variance extracted (AVE) value exceeded the corresponding inter-construct correlations, which proves good distinction between different latent variables.

Table 2. Reliability and convergent validity of the measurement scales.

Construct	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Narrative content	0.842	0.885	0.562
Narrative form	0.817	0.861	0.518
Emotional narrative	0.853	0.892	0.579
Audience engagement	0.876	0.904	0.603
Overall scale	0.896	/	/

Note: CR=composite reliability; AVE=average variance extracted. KMO=0.872; Bartlett sphericity test $p < 0.001$; all standardized factor loadings > 0.70 .

Structural equation model and hypothesis testing

The structural model fit the data adequately: $\chi^2/df=1.825$, RMSEA=0.042, CFI=0.958, TLI=0.946, and SRMR=0.038, all within commonly accepted thresholds. Table 3 reports the standardized path coefficients estimated from the structural model.

All nine hypothesized paths were positive and statistically significant. At the aggregate level, emotional narrative had the strongest path to audience engagement ($\beta=0.628$, $p < 0.001$), followed by narrative content ($\beta=0.456$, $p < 0.01$) and narrative form ($\beta=0.382$, $p < 0.05$).

The results indicate that authentic and distinctive content provides a solid basis for audience engagement, while varied and youthful forms effectively raise viewers' willingness to participate and encourage them to actively receive and spread information related to red tourism short videos.

Emotional resonance is the strongest correlate of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. It suggests that emotional appeals occupy a central position in shaping audiences' multi-dimensional responses to red tourism short videos. Such appeals also help viewers build close connections with the historical and cultural values embedded in these short-video works.

Table 3. Standardized path coefficients of the structural model.

Hypothesis	Path	β	p	Result
H1a	NC→ cognitive engagement	0.482	<0.001	Supported
H1b	NC→ emotional engagement	0.413	<0.01	Supported
H1c	NC→ behavioral engagement	0.397	<0.01	Supported
H2a	NF→ cognitive engagement	0.356	<0.01	Supported
H2b	NF→ emotional engagement	0.321	<0.05	Supported
H2c	NF→ behavioral engagement	0.378	<0.01	Supported
H3a	EN→ cognitive engagement	0.594	<0.001	Supported
H3b	EN→ emotional engagement	0.652	<0.001	Supported
H3c	EN→ behavioral engagement	0.587	<0.001	Supported

Note: NC=narrative content; NF=narrative form; EN=emotional narrative. Aggregate paths to overall audience engagement: NC β =0.456 (p <0.01); NF β =0.382 (p <0.05); EN β =0.628 (p <0.001). Model fit: χ^2/df =1.825; RMSEA=0.042; CFI=0.958; TLI=0.946; SRMR=0.038.

Communication dilemmas of Bazhong red tourism short videos

Triangulating the interviews, the video coding, and the survey, the study found that although Bazhong red tourism short-video communication has reached considerable scale, four interrelated dilemmas constrain its effect.

Homogeneous content and weak local distinctiveness

Among the 200 coded videos, 137 (68.5%) were check-in recordings of revolutionary sites, 39 (19.5%) offered popular-science summaries of historical events, and only 24 (12.0%) involved in-depth forms such as red story interpretation or character interviews. Most videos therefore stayed at the level of displaying sites and restating familiar events, with limited exploration of the specific spiritual connotation of the Sichuan-Shaanxi Soviet base or of localized cultural features that could distinguish these clips from generic red tourism short videos.

Creators tended to reuse a fixed template in which scenic footage was overlaid with historical text, a pattern that several interviewees associated with audience fatigue. In the survey, 85.0% of respondents agreed that the videos were highly similar and lacked novelty.

Shallow emotional narrative and limited value resonance

Although emotional narratives showed the strongest empirical association with engagement, most coded works relied on expository narration of historical facts and offered little situational reconstruction or emotional rendering. Fifteen of the 20 interviewees described the typical video as “scenic spots with narration, nothing that lingers in memory.” Some works, oriented toward traffic metrics, fragmented red stories and diluted their spiritual content, separating the message from the viewer’s emotional identification. Only 28.0% of respondents aged 18-25 reported that the content had produced emotional resonance for them.

Uniform form and limited youth-oriented discourse

Most videos followed a single “picture plus voice-over” pattern with static camera work and monotonous editing; 73.0% of the coded works used official documentary narration, and only 11.0% used forms such as situational drama or vlog experience. The mode of address remained close to a traditional official register, with little of the networked language and participatory expression familiar to Generation Z. In the survey, 68.0% of respondents aged 18-35 years old said the language felt too official for their viewing habits, a response consistent

with weak content stickiness and low rates of secondary dissemination.

One-way output and weak feedback conversion

Digital communication around Bazhong red tourism was dominated by one-way output from official platforms, and two-way feedback mechanisms were under-developed. Creators concentrated on publication volume and gave limited attention to comments, interaction requests, or preferences expressed, so production and demand were not connected in a creation-dissemination-feedback-optimization loop.

Only 22.0% of survey respondents said they had commented and received a response, and most of the six creators interviewed acknowledged that they rarely adjusted content in response to audience feedback. Without this conversion channel, the dilemmas above tend to reproduce themselves.

Optimization strategies

Because emotional narrative carried the strongest path coefficient, strategies are presented in an order that reflects the empirical weighting of the three narrative dimensions.

Deepening emotional narrative and value communication

The results support shifting from expository indoctrination toward narration built around emotional resonance. Producers may reconstruct historical scenes via situational dramatization and cross-time dialogue. This approach reduces the gap between revolutionary history and modern life.

Furthermore, creators can link the choices of revolutionary figures to dilemmas encountered by young audiences. Formats including dialogues between young people and revolutionary martyrs and situational interpretation of red stories serve as concrete carriers. Still, emotional rendering must be rooted in verified historical facts instead of sensationalized adaptation.

Developing differentiated local content

The coding results show that 68.5% of sampled videos adopt a simple check-in template. To address this issue, content should tap into unique resources of Bazhong and the Sichuan-Shaanxi Soviet base. These resources include civilian red stories, local spiritual heritage, and the interplay between red memory and local folk culture. Themed columns such as “Red Stories of Bazhong” can organize this material into a recognizable cultural identity, while authenticity checks and fuller storytelling guard against the superficial and fragmented treatment noted in the interviews.

Diversifying form and renewing the mode of address

Producers can expand beyond picture-plus-voice-over into short drama, live scenic broadcasting, popular-science animation, and user-generated creation, and can invite vloggers, cultural creators, and young users into production. In parallel, the register can move from unmodified official language toward expression that remains accurate while using the conversational forms young audiences adopt. Themed challenges and red culture short plays offer structured ways to raise participation and secondary sharing.

Building a two-way interaction and feedback loop

Official accounts and creators can institutionalize attention to comments and interaction data, analyze audience demand on a regular schedule, and adjust content in response. Incentives for secondary creation, such as curated topics and recognition for high-quality user works, support ongoing co-production between creators and audiences and close the creation-dissemination-feedback-optimization loop that current practice lacks.

Conclusion

This study examines Bazhong red cultural tourism short

videos through interviews, content coding, and SEM. Three conclusions follow. First, narrative content quality, narrative form diversity, and emotional narrative depth are each positively associated with cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement, and emotional narrative was the strongest correlate ($\beta=0.628$). Second, current communication faces four dilemmas: homogeneous content (68.5% check-in videos), shallow emotional expression, uniform form with limited youth-oriented discourse, and a one-way communication mechanism, against a background of only moderate overall engagement ($M=3.27$). Third, improvement depends most heavily on emotionally resonant narration, supported by differentiated local content, renewed youth-oriented expression, and functioning feedback loops. The study has several limitations. The sample is concentrated among young viewers and underrepresents middle-aged and older audiences. Only short-video platforms are examined and cross-sectional survey data support the fitted model but do not establish causal direction. Future work can broaden the sample, integrate data across platforms and time points, and use longitudinal or experimental designs to trace how red tourism narratives and audience responses evolve.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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