Perspectives of Communication&Media
WISDOM ACADEMIC https://doi.org/10.63808/pcm.v2i3.543 Volume 2 , Issue 3

Research Article

# From Communication Traffic to Brand Cognition: The Multilevel Effectiveness of University Brand Communication on Douyin—A Thematic Analysis of Three Types of Universities in Shaanxi Province, China

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## Abstract

Short-video platforms have become an important channel for university brand communication, yet views, likes, and follower counts provide limited explanation of why universities choose particular content, how key individuals participate in information mediation, or what forms of brand cognition audiences ultimately develop. Using three types of universities in Shaanxi Province as comparative contexts, this study employs multi-stakeholder semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis to examine the organisational logic of university brand communication on Douyin, platform adaptation, opinion-leadership mechanisms, the relationship between brand identity and audience brand image, and the ways in which communication effectiveness is assessed. The study included 21 participants, seven from each university, covering five role categories: communication decision-makers, content producers, potential opinion leaders, internal audiences, and external audiences. Interview data were managed using NVivo 14 and analysed through within-case coding and cross-case comparison following Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedure, resulting in six shared themes. The findings show that the effectiveness of university brand communication on Douyin is not a single traffic outcome but consists of four interrelated yet non-substitutable levels: platform performance, audience understanding and interaction, alignment with organisational objectives, and long-term brand value. Institutional positioning and organisational governance shape communication objectives and content production, constituting organisational antecedents of effectiveness; platform adaptation requires a balance between visibility and the integrity of brand identity and may lead to brand narrowing; key individuals, including academics, students, and alumni, supplement official communication through professional authority, humanised authenticity, and experiential mediation, constituting an

interpersonal mechanism of effectiveness; and partial misalignment between brand identity and audience brand image reveals the complexity of the audience-understanding level. This study argues that university short-video communication should be evaluated through a multilevel effectiveness framework and should develop differentiated communication logics according to institutional positioning, credible communicators, and target-audience cognition.

**Keywords**

University brand communication, Douyin short videos, Communication effectiveness, Opinion leadership, Thematic analysis

## 1. Introduction

With the development of the mobile internet, recommendation algorithms, and short-video formats, communication relationships between universities and prospective students, parents, current students, alumni, and the wider public are shifting from one-way information dissemination centred on official websites, press releases, and traditional recruitment publicity towards continuous, visual, interactive, and platform-oriented digital communication (Lasswell, 1948). Within a limited duration, short videos can simultaneously mobilise people, settings, sound, subtitles, and emotional cues, making campus culture, research achievements, disciplinary teaching, student life, and employment information easier to convert into perceptible content. For universities, this media form not only provides a new channel for recruitment communication but also serves as an important space for expressing institutional identity, maintaining social reputation, and managing stakeholder relationships.

However, platform-based communication also creates an evaluative dilemma. Short-video platforms operate fundamentally through attention competition and personalised recommendation, while views, likes, comments, and follower growth can rapidly generate visible data feedback. University brand communication, by contrast, is characterised by long-term orientation, public responsibility, and organisational constraints. High traffic for a particular video does not directly indicate that audiences have understood the core values the university intends to communicate, nor does it demonstrate that traffic has been converted into programme awareness, trust, recruitment enquiries, alumni relationships, or long-term reputation. Existing research on social media in higher education shows that content format, institutional type, and forms of interaction affect engagement (Peruta & Shields, 2017, 2018; Kethüda & Bilgin, 2025), yet an explanatory gap remains between “platform performance” and “brand cognition”. In other words, a systematic theoretical framework is still lacking for understanding what effectiveness in university short-video communication actually means.

Existing studies have largely measured communication outcomes through platform engagement indicators or explained variations in engagement from the perspective of content characteristics. Fewer studies simultaneously ask, from both organisational and audience perspectives, why universities choose particular content, how key individuals participate in information mediation, and what forms of brand cognition audiences ultimately develop. These three questions converge on communication effectiveness: effectiveness concerns not only whether content is seen, but also whether it is understood, whether it supports organisational objectives, and whether it accumulates long-term brand value. For universities, the assessment of communication effectiveness cannot remain at the platform level of exposure and interaction but should extend to a multilevel structure involving audience cognition, organisational objectives, and long-term reputation.

This study uses three types of universities in Shaanxi Province, China, as comparative contexts: one high-level research university (a higher education institution for which research innovation and postgraduate education are major missions), one private regular undergraduate university (an undergraduate degree-granting institution established by non-state social actors), and one vocational university (a higher education institution in China positioned to cultivate high-level technical and skilled talent). The three institutions are presented under the anonymous codes JT University, SY University, and QC University. The three types of universities differ substantially in reputational foundations, institutional missions, recruitment competition, disciplinary resources, and audience structures, making them suitable for comparing how communication effectiveness is realised under different institutional contexts.

Centred on communication effectiveness, this study proposes three interrelated research questions. The first asks how the effectiveness of university brand communication on Douyin should be understood and at what levels it can be assessed. The second asks how institutional positioning, organisational governance, and resource conditions in different types of universities shape communication objectives and content production, thereby constituting organisational antecedents of effectiveness. The third asks through what credibility mechanisms academics, student creators, and other key individuals participate in interpreting and redistributing brand information, how audiences understand the brand identity presented by universities, and what forms of alignment or misalignment occur between university brand identity and audience brand image. Together, these questions pursue one objective: to move beyond a single traffic indicator and establish a multilevel explanatory framework for the effectiveness of university short-video communication.

## 2. Literature Review and Analytical Perspective

### 2.1. University Brand Communication and Social Media Platforms

University brand communication differs from the marketing of ordinary consumer goods.

Universities must simultaneously address prospective students, parents, alumni, academics, government, enterprises, and the wider public, and their brands involve not only functional information but also academic reputation, educational quality, values, social responsibility, and long-term relationships. Intensified competition in higher education has made institutional positioning and differentiation important issues in university marketing and brand management (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). The brand-knowledge perspective further suggests that brands ultimately exist not only in the information released by organisations but also in the memory and associative structures of audiences (Keller, 1993). Therefore, whether university communication is effective cannot be judged solely by "what the organisation says"; it also requires examining "what the audience ultimately remembers".

Social media has expanded opportunities for direct contact between universities and audiences while increasing requirements for content frequency and interaction. University social-media content types, media formats, and institutional characteristics are associated with user engagement (Peruta & Shields, 2017, 2018). More recent research has further found that social-media activities can promote electronic word of mouth and brand advocacy through mechanisms including university image, student satisfaction, and loyalty (Kethüda & Bilgin, 2025), while the impact of social-media marketing on higher-education brand equity is also importantly moderated by brand credibility (Perera et al., 2023). Together, these studies indicate that the value of university social media goes beyond generating engagement figures; at a deeper level, it helps shape credible perceptions of universities and relationships with them. However, most of these studies take engagement or brand equity as the endpoint and rarely investigate the internal layered structure of communication outcomes.

## 2.2. Short-Video Platform Adaptation and the Balance of Institutional Brand Identity

A distinctive feature of short-video communication is that platforms influence content production through pacing, visuality, emotional expression, trending culture, and recommendation mechanisms (Akbari et al., 2022; Sidorenko Bautista et al., 2024). Through an algorithm audit, users' following, liking, and viewing behaviours were found to affect subsequent TikTok recommendations (Boeker & Urman, 2022). Although Douyin's specific recommendation mechanism cannot simply be equated with TikTok's, algorithm-driven platforms share the characteristic that "content visibility is jointly shaped by user behaviour and platform recommendation". Universities therefore cannot entirely disregard platform aesthetics and recommendation logic.

The problem is that platform adaptation may conflict with the expression of institutional identity. Higher education organisations need to ensure information accuracy, a stable public image, and long-term reputation, whereas short-video platforms place greater emphasis on rapid attraction,

emotional triggers, and high-frequency updating. Excessive accommodation to platform logic may simplify institutional identity into a small number of high-traffic labels and may even produce brand narrowing. Conversely, complete rejection of platform language may reduce comprehensibility and visibility. Accordingly, balancing platform adaptation and brand identity is an important condition for understanding the effectiveness of university short-video communication: it affects not only whether content is seen, but also whether what is seen still represents the complete identity the institution intends to express.

## 2.3. Opinion Leadership and "Institutional Authority + Personal Credibility"

Traditional opinion-leadership theory emphasises that information often does not travel directly from mass media to all audiences; instead, influential individuals may filter, interpret, and redistribute it (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). In social-media environments, opinion leaders are no longer limited to social elites or established media figures. Ordinary academics, students, alumni, professional practitioners, and content creators may all become influential within particular networks and issues. Research on university opinion leaders likewise indicates that professional identity, information activity, and network position within universities can jointly generate influence (Guo & Feng, 2024).

In university short-video communication, official accounts possess institutional credibility but often communicate in a formal and relatively distant manner. Academics can provide professional knowledge, students can offer peer experience, alumni can explain career pathways, and enterprise representatives can provide external industry judgements. Therefore, the role of key individuals may lie less in increasing view counts than in translating institutional information into content that is more specific, credible, and closer to everyday experience. On this basis, this study uses Opinion Leadership as the principal theoretical perspective for explaining interpersonal mediation beyond official communication and focuses on three credibility mechanisms: professional authority, humanised authenticity, and experiential mediation. These mechanisms affect not only the reach of information but also the depth of audience understanding and trust, and are therefore important components of communication effectiveness.

## 2.4. Communication Effectiveness: From Platform Metrics to Multilevel Outcomes

Communication effectiveness is the central analytical concept of this study. Existing research on university social media frequently uses likes, comments, shares, and engagement rates to measure participation (Peruta & Shields, 2018), and these indicators are valuable for comparing content performance. However, platform engagement is not equivalent to the achievement of brand objectives. High traffic may coexist with shallow interaction, while low exposure may generate highly relevant professional enquiries. From a brand-knowledge perspective, brands exist in audience memory and

associative structures (Keller, 1993); communication outcomes therefore cannot be judged solely from content released by the organisation but must also consider how audiences decode and remember it.

On this basis, this study understands communication effectiveness as comprising at least four interrelated yet non-substitutable levels. The first is platform performance, including exposure, likes, comments, and shares, which indicates whether content has achieved basic visibility. The second is audience understanding and interaction quality, namely whether audiences generate substantive discussion, enquiries, and trust around core information, indicating whether the information has entered a meaningful cognitive level. The third is alignment with organisational objectives, including practical value for recruitment communication, alumni relations, prejudice correction, and industry collaboration, indicating whether communication supports real organisational objectives. The fourth is long-term brand value, including the accumulation of trust, word of mouth, and reputation, indicating whether communication generates sustained influence across different timescales. Different universities assign different weights to the four levels, but none can be replaced by a single traffic indicator.

The degree of alignment between brand identity and brand image provides an important supplementary perspective for understanding the audience-understanding level. Brand identity concerns what the organisation wishes to communicate about "who we are", whereas brand image concerns the perception audiences actually form of "what it is like". The two may align, or they may become misaligned because of media selection, audience experience, and pre-existing perceptions. Content selection in university short-video communication is highly selective. Repeated displays of research achievements by research universities may strengthen perceptions of academic capability while also increasing a sense of elite distance; repeated displays of practical training skills by vocational universities may strengthen perceptions of professional capability while narrowing the image of a comprehensive university; repeated displays of campus life by private universities may increase perceived approachability while leaving professional strengths less salient. Positive cognition therefore does not necessarily equal complete cognition, and strong alignment around a core brand may still be accompanied by brand narrowing. This study treats brand identity–image misalignment as a supplementary diagnostic perspective at the audience-understanding level rather than as the sole criterion of effectiveness.

## 2.5. Research Gaps and Contributions of This Study

Although existing research has extensively discussed university social-media content, interaction, and marketing value, three limitations remain. First, most studies begin with platform content or survey results and pay insufficient attention to how internal communication decisions, review mechanisms, and resource conditions shape university short-video content. Second, official accounts

are often assumed to be the main communicators, while the interpretive role of key individuals such as academics and students between organisational communication and audiences has not been sufficiently revealed. Third, studies of communication outcomes still tend to conflate platform interaction with brand effectiveness and lack a systematic explanation of the internal levels of communication effectiveness.

The incremental contribution of this study lies in examining, within the same provincial setting in one country and on the same Douyin platform, three types of universities and participants from five role categories, thereby placing organisational objectives, content production, platform adaptation, opinion leadership, audience brand cognition, and communication effectiveness within a single thematic-analysis framework. The study highlights two theoretical concerns in particular. First, communication effectiveness should be expanded from a single traffic indicator to multilevel outcomes comprising platform performance, audience understanding and interaction, alignment with organisational objectives, and long-term brand value. Second, key individuals such as academics, students, and alumni supplement official communication through credibility mechanisms, forming a hybrid communication structure of "institutional authority + personal credibility" that constitutes an important interpersonal mechanism of effectiveness.

## 3. Research Design and Methods

### 3.1. Research Design and Case Context

This study adopts an interpretivist, multiple-case qualitative research design and uses three universities with different institutional orientations in Shaanxi Province as comparative contexts. The three universities are presented under the anonymous codes JT University, SY University, and QC University. JT University represents a high-level research university; SY University represents a private regular undergraduate university; and QC University represents a vocational university (a higher education institution in China positioned to cultivate high-level technical and skilled talent). The three universities are located in the same province and all use Douyin for official communication, but they differ substantially in reputational foundations, institutional missions, recruitment competition, disciplinary resources, and audience structures. They are therefore suitable for comparing how communication effectiveness is realised under different institutional contexts.

The interviews focused on universities' communication objectives for using Douyin, content decision-making and production processes, platform adaptation, audience positioning, participation by key individuals, audience cognition, and effectiveness evaluation. Interview data constitute the core dataset of this study. Account-content classification is not treated as the primary outcome; instead, the interviews are used to explain content selection, role allocation, interpersonal mediation, brand cognition, and communication effectiveness.

## 3.2. Participants and Sampling

A total of 21 participants were included, with seven from each university. The sample covered five role categories: communication decision-makers, operations and content producers, potential opinion leaders, ordinary internal audiences, and external target audiences. This role composition enabled the study to obtain evidence simultaneously from organisational, production, mediation, and audience perspectives and to reduce bias arising from any single-role narrative through comparison across different positions.

**Table 1**

*Composition of the Interview Sample*

| Participant category | JT University | SY University | QC University | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Communication decision-makers | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Operations and content producers | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Potential opinion leaders | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 |
| Ordinary internal audiences | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 |
| External target audiences | 2 | 2 | 2 | 6 |
| Total | 7 | 7 | 7 | 21 |

Participant codes combine case and role. For example, JT-DM01 denotes a communication decision-maker at JT University, while SY-OP01 denotes an operations and content producer at SY University. To avoid misidentification, this study uses direct quotations only when the role code could be confirmed. Individual excerpts for which role codes remained uncertain during data organisation are not used as direct quotation evidence in this article.

## 3.3. Interview Implementation and Data Processing

Two pilot interviews were conducted before the formal interviews to check question wording, probing logic, and interview duration. Formal interviews were conducted face to face or via online video methods permitted by the research procedure, with each interview lasting approximately 30 minutes. Participant recruitment was guided by information saturation and ceased when successive interviews were no longer generating important new themes, resulting in 21 valid interview records. After transcription, NVivo 14 was used for data management. It should be emphasised that NVivo served only as a tool for organising and retrieving data; the themes themselves were not generated

automatically by the software. The researcher developed codes, clustered subthemes, and formed higher-order themes through repeated reading, comparison, and interpretation. No second coder was used; coding and theme review were completed independently by the researcher. This limitation is discussed further in the conclusion.

## 3.4. Thematic Analysis Process

The thematic analysis followed the six-phase procedure for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), including familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, development of candidate themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and construction of the analytic narrative. The analysis combined deductive and inductive approaches. At the deductive level, attention was given to concepts directly related to the research questions, including institutional positioning, communication actors, platform adaptation, opinion leadership, audience cognition, and communication outcomes. At the inductive level, concepts such as "content boundaries", "brand narrowing", "the balance between empowerment and control", and "data-chain discontinuity" were allowed to emerge from participants' accounts.

Within-case coding was first conducted separately for the three universities. JT University generated 96 initial concepts, while SY University and QC University each generated 99 initial concepts. Each of the three cases was then further organised into 24 subthemes, which converged into six shared themes after cross-case comparison. Code counts are used only to indicate the breadth of analytical coverage and are not treated as frequency weights for theme importance. Theme importance was determined primarily by explanatory power in relation to the research questions, consistency of evidence across roles, and value for cross-case comparison.

**Table 2**

*Six Themes and Their Subtheme Structure*

| Theme | Subthemes | Position in the effectiveness framework |
|---|---|---|
| Institutional positioning shapes communication objectives | Identity anchors; communication objectives; content boundaries; audience expectations | Organisational starting point of effectiveness |
| Organisational governance and resource conditions shape content production | Production process; resource constraints; review and risk control; collaborative support | Production foundation of effectiveness |
| Balance between platform adaptation and brand identity | Platform logic; adaptation strategies; mismatched content; brand narrowing | Balance between visibility and integrity in effectiveness |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Three credibility mechanisms and mediating functions of opinion leaders | Professional authority; humanised authenticity; experiential mediation; official/individual complementarity and boundaries | Interpersonal mechanism of effectiveness |
| Alignment and misalignment between brand identity and audience brand image | Official brand; audience perception; alignment/misalignment; audience differentiation and gaps | Audience-understanding level of effectiveness |
| Multilevel understanding of communication effectiveness | Beyond traffic-only evaluation; outcome levels; measurement and tracking; long-term outcomes | Integrative framework of effectiveness |

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Institutional Positioning and Communication Objectives: The Organisational Starting Point of Effectiveness

The interview data show that institutional positioning is not merely background information for short-video communication; it is the logical starting point from which communication objectives are formed and the organisational starting point for understanding communication effectiveness. All three universities use their institutional characteristics as identity anchors in brand expression, but differences in core identity, practical needs, and primary stakeholders produce different content priorities and communication boundaries, as well as different criteria for judging effectiveness.

JT University's identity anchors consist primarily of the Westward Relocation Spirit (a historical narrative referring to the relocation of the university's faculty and students from Shanghai to Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, in the 1950s in order to strengthen education in western China), commitment to the nation, research capability, and the educational mission. Communication decision-makers regard the university's long history of taking root in western China and serving national strategies as an important spiritual resource and emphasise that research achievements should not be detached from the value narrative developed by the university over time.

"Based on the traditions and foundations of our university, we have three core characteristics. The first is a commitment to serving the nation. This is the university's most fundamental spiritual core and the foundation of more than 70 years of taking root in western China and serving national strategies." (JT-DM01)

On this identity basis, JT University's communication objectives are not directed solely towards recruitment conversion; they also encompass public brand maintenance, value communication, alumni relations, and recruitment support. Some content is still regarded as meaningful communication even when it has little obvious potential to become viral, provided that it continuously communicates

academic capability and educational values. This indicates that the university's judgement of effectiveness is oriented more towards the long-term brand-value level than towards short-term platform performance.

SY University's communication objectives show a more explicit demand for recruitment communication and visibility while also emphasising long-term brand building. Its identity anchors centre on its status as a private undergraduate institution, a youthful campus, distinctive programmes, and employment outcomes. The university monitors practical leads such as platform direct messages, telephone enquiries, and offline visits, but operators repeatedly emphasise that the purpose of continuous content output is not to turn the account into a pure recruitment advertisement; rather, it is to develop a more complete understanding of the university.

"Through a continuous series of short-video content, we hope audiences can see a more complete and multidimensional university." (SY-OP01)

QC University's identity anchors centre on the cultivation of high-level technical and skilled talent, practical-training capacity, and career development. Short-video communication serves not only recruitment but also the tasks of explaining the identity of a vocational university, correcting social prejudice, and demonstrating industry-collaboration capacity. Its content selection relies more heavily on observable skill-based settings and practical-training outcomes. However, recruitment pressure does not eliminate boundaries related to long-term reputation.

"No matter how great the recruitment pressure is, we would still give something up; we cannot sacrifice the university's future social evaluation for immediate student numbers." (QC-DM01)

Across the three cases, there is neither a uniform objective for Douyin communication nor a uniform standard of communication effectiveness. JT University places greater emphasis on public branding and long-term reputation; SY University must balance visibility, recruitment communication, and long-term branding; and QC University simultaneously addresses vocational-identity explanation, recruitment, and industry connections. Differences in communication objectives therefore arise first from institutional mission, reputational resources, and stakeholder needs rather than simply from platform-operating capability. These differences further determine the different weights each university assigns to the four levels of effectiveness.

## 4.2. Organisational Governance and Resource Conditions: The Production Foundation of Effectiveness

The second theme shows that short-video content is not determined directly by the personal preferences of account operators but is formed under the combined constraints of organisational governance, staffing, material sources, and review systems. These conditions constitute the production foundation of communication effectiveness: they determine whether content can be produced

continuously, whether professional accuracy can be maintained, and whether the university can respond quickly to the pace of the platform.

JT University has developed a relatively institutionalised production process. Faculties and relevant units provide initial leads or materials, while the new-media team is responsible for planning, filming, editing, and secondary production. When content involves research or professional information, factual and professional verification is also required.

“Faculties submit materials, or after we identify a potential event or story, our new-media team develops the plan and then carries out filming and editing. If the content involves research or professional information, we also conduct professional verification.” (JT-OP01)

This governance approach helps maintain academic accuracy and institutional consistency, but it also increases the cost of content production. In-depth research content requires repeated verification and is not suitable for rapid pursuit of trends. When staffing is limited, a practical conflict emerges between professional verification and high-frequency updating.

SY University is more strongly affected by its small team and shortage of staff with multiple skill sets. Concepts that repeatedly appeared in the coding included “one person holding multiple roles”, “full-process planning, filming, and editing”, “support from student assistants”, and “high costs of cross-departmental collaboration”. Although small teams have more flexible decision chains, they are easily constrained by the timeliness of materials, manpower, and professional understanding. They therefore depend more heavily on specialist academics, student creators, and student assistants to supplement content resources.

“Professional academics within the university, as well as student creators with outstanding skills, play an irreplaceable role in the communication of our account content. The first thing they do is establish the authority and credibility of the content.” (SY-OP01)

QC University has more dispersed sources of material. Secondary schools or faculties, practical-training centres, and partner enterprises may all provide content, while the publicity department coordinates, selects, and transforms it. Because skills and practical-training content involves equipment specifications, safety risks, and professional standards, review is not only a matter of communication compliance but also requires the participation of specialist academics. High-risk practical-operation scenarios are explicitly classified as unsuitable for communication.

Therefore, content differences among the three universities cannot simply be understood as differences in communication capability. JT University’s advantage lies in institutionalised processes and professional verification; SY University’s advantage lies in flexibility, although it is constrained by limited manpower and a shortage of multi-skilled staff; QC University’s advantage lies in rich professional settings and content contributions from multiple actors. Organisational governance and resource conditions constitute the structural foundation of short-video content and also determine the

levels of effectiveness in which each university is able to invest resources.

### 4.3. Platform Adaptation and Brand Narrowing: Balancing Visibility and Integrity in Effectiveness

The third theme reflects universities' continuous balancing of Douyin's platform logic and institutional brand identity. Participants generally acknowledged that universities cannot entirely ignore short-video requirements concerning pace, visuals, trends, and interaction, but they also opposed replacing institutional values with traffic logic. Platform adaptation is closer to "media translation": it converts existing professional and organisational information into short-video expressions that audiences can understand, rather than changing the informational core. This balance directly affects how communication effectiveness is realised: excessive orientation towards platform logic can improve visibility but may damage brand integrity, whereas complete rejection of platform language can reduce comprehensibility and visibility.

JT University's principal balance arises from the conflict between academic rigour and accessible expression. Highly theoretical content or content requiring lengthy explanation is shifted to long-form channels such as WeChat Official Accounts, while Douyin more often serves as an information entry point and a channel for lightweight explanation. Its coding included concepts such as "resistance to over-entertainment", "data anxiety", "moderate adaptation", and "translating academic content into stories", indicating that the operating team does not reject the platform but sets boundaries for platform-oriented expression.

For SY University, the conflict is most directly expressed as a balance between visibility and differentiation. Popular background music, hashtags, and youthful campus scenes help attract attention, but campus-life content is easier to produce and more likely to generate interaction, and it may also crowd out substantive educational information about programmes, practical training, and academic staff. The university therefore sets boundaries such as "no excessive entertainment", "avoid vulgar or deliberately absurd content", and "stop curiosity-driven content even when it generates high traffic".

QC University's adaptation advantage derives from the inherent visuality of skills-related content. Practical operations, competition settings, equipment use, and before-and-after comparisons can directly generate visual information. However, the university does not treat external trends as the core of content production; instead, it tends to identify "internally generated campus trends", such as new-student registration, graduation season, and campus sports events.

"We no longer passively chase fleeting external trends. Instead, we actively identify naturally emerging trends within the campus… We use platform trends as a supplementary tool rather than as the core logic of content production." (QC-OP01)

More importantly, different forms of brand narrowing appeared in all three universities. JT

University's research highlights may reinforce the perception that it is "academically strong" while increasing a sense of elite distance; SY University's campus-life content may create an impression of "a good environment and many activities" while leaving professional advantages unclear; QC University's skill and automotive labels may obscure non-dominant programmes, progression pathways, and students' long-term development. Brand narrowing shows that the problem created by platform adaptation is not limited to entertainment; it also involves compression of institutional complexity into frequently repeated labels. For communication effectiveness, this means that success at the platform-performance level may be accompanied by narrowing at the audience-understanding level: the content is seen, but what is seen represents only part of the institution's identity.

### 4.4. Three Opinion-Leader Mechanisms: An Interpersonal Supplement to Effectiveness

The fourth theme directly addresses the research question concerning interpersonal mediation. The interviews show that academics, student creators, alumni, and other key individuals do not replace official accounts; rather, through different means they transform institutional information into experiences that can be understood, believed, and acted upon. These mechanisms constitute an interpersonal supplement to communication effectiveness: they not only expand information reach but also deepen audience understanding and trust.

First, professional authority derives from creators' knowledge, professional identity, and frontline practice. Professor-type opinion leaders at JT University translate abstract university reputation into concrete settings through laboratory details and research processes.

"Many people from other regions had previously only heard of our university from rankings. After seeing concrete details from the laboratories and authentic clips of academics and students working together on major research projects, they could genuinely feel that this university is seriously and steadily engaged in scholarship." (JT-OL01)

SY University relies mainly on frontline specialist academics to explain curricula, programme development, and industry needs, thereby compensating for the more formal and written style of official publicity materials. At QC University, professional authority comes more often from frontline practical-training instructors. Their credibility is built on equipment operation, industry standards, competition rules, and skills-training experience.

Second, humanised authenticity derives from personal identity, details of everyday life, and imperfect expression. Professors at the research university reduce the distance created by grand institutional narratives through authentic research routines; skilled students at the vocational university strengthen peer identification by showing failure, repeated practice, and growth; and student creators at the private undergraduate university provide authentic study experiences through everyday filming

and less scripted expression. The value of humanised authenticity does not lie in "looking like an influencer", but in reducing audiences' defensiveness towards institutional publicity and thereby improving audience understanding and interaction quality.

Third, experiential mediation extends communication from information exposure to enquiry and decision-making. Academics answer questions about programme choice, students explain learning experiences, alumni provide workplace experience, and enterprise representatives explain job requirements. Different actors therefore produce a division of trust. Formal policies and recruitment rules rely more strongly on official accounts; professional questions are more readily entrusted to academics; campus life is more readily trusted when explained by students; and employment and career development require alumni or enterprise experience to a greater extent.

This structure indicates that Opinion Leadership in digital environments has shifted from a single influencer towards hybrid communication based on "institutional authority + personal credibility". Official accounts are responsible for institutional facts and the overall brand, while individual actors supplement them with professional detail, authentic experience, and experiential explanation. For communication effectiveness, the value of opinion-leadership mechanisms lies not in replacing official communication but in converting visibility at the platform-performance level into trust, enquiries, and relationships at the audience-understanding level. At the same time, individual communication also creates boundary-governance issues. Universities need to balance fact verification, privacy, risk, and creator autonomy; individual creators cannot be fully officialised, because doing so may remove the authenticity that gives them an advantage.

## 4.5. Misalignment Between Brand Identity and Audience Brand Image: The Audience-Understanding Level of Effectiveness

The fifth theme compares the brand identity that the organisational side wishes to express with the brand image actually formed by audiences. The results show that all three universities achieved a degree of brand recognition, but this recognition was not a complete reproduction of the intended identity. The selective presentation of short-video content amplifies some brand dimensions while obscuring others. In this study, this theme is used mainly as a supplementary analysis for understanding the audience-understanding level of communication effectiveness.

JT University seeks to express a core identity comprising academic strength, research innovation, the Westward Relocation Spirit, and a commitment to education. Audience perceptions of "strong research" and "high academic standards" broadly align with organisational expression, but audiences also form additional impressions of being "formal", "difficult to access", and "distant". Its communication therefore shows relatively strong alignment around the core identity but insufficient perceptions of approachability and ordinary campus life.

SY University seeks to present youthful vitality, campus culture, distinctive programmes, and employment outcomes. Audiences readily form impressions of "an attractive campus", "many activities", and "a youthful atmosphere", resulting in relatively strong alignment on the student-life dimension. However, professional curricula, academic staff, practical training, and distinctive programmes remain relatively vague in audience cognition, producing a structural misalignment of "strong recognition of student experience but weak recognition of professional differentiation".

QC University's labels related to skills, practical training, employment, and industry collaboration show relatively high recognisability. Audiences can directly perceive its automotive characteristics, hands-on practice, and equipment conditions, which strongly align with the positioning of a vocational university. However, information about degree recognition, progression pathways, non-dominant programmes, and long-term career development is relatively insufficient, producing a result of "strong alignment in skills cognition but a narrowed image of the university as a whole".

**Table 3**

*Alignment Between Brand Identity and Audience Brand Image Across the Three Types of Universities*

| Case | Core brand identity the organisation seeks to express | Main audience perceptions | Alignment and principal gaps |
|---|---|---|---|
| JT University | Academic strength; research innovation; Westward Relocation Spirit; commitment to education | Strong research; high academic standards; formal; difficult to access | Relatively strong alignment around core identity; insufficient visibility of ordinary campus life and approachability |
| SY University | Youthful vitality; campus culture; distinctive programmes; employment outcomes | Attractive campus; many activities; youthful atmosphere; professional advantages unclear | Alignment in lifestyle image; insufficient recognition of professional and educational value |
| QC University | Skills; practical training; employment; automotive characteristics; industry collaboration | Strong emphasis on practice; prominent equipment conditions; distinctive automotive characteristics | Relatively strong alignment in skills identity; insufficient information on comprehensive education and long-term development |

The comparison between brand identity and brand image shows that communication effectiveness cannot be judged solely by whether audiences form a positive impression. A highly positive but overly narrow impression can still constitute brand narrowing. Partial alignment does not equal communication failure; rather, it indicates that some dimensions have been amplified while others have been obscured by the structure of platform content. Within the multilevel effectiveness framework, this theme shows that the audience-understanding level is not entirely under organisational

control but results from the combined influence of organisational expression, platform selection, individual interpretation, and audiences' prior experience.

### 4.6. Multilevel Understanding of Communication Effectiveness: An Integrative Framework

The sixth theme shows that communication decision-makers and content producers at all three universities reject the direct definition of university brand-communication effectiveness on Douyin in terms of surface indicators such as views and likes. Platform data remain important, but their primary function is to indicate whether content has achieved basic visibility. Deeper communication value also requires examining whether audiences understand core brand information, whether meaningful enquiries, discussion, and trust occur, and whether communication supports recruitment communication, relationship building, industry collaboration, or long-term reputation.

JT University stated most explicitly that "traffic cannot be equated with brand communication". If a video obtains traffic but audiences discuss only entertainment-related fragments without engaging with the university, research, or talent development, the communication may still be considered ineffective from an institutional-communication perspective.

"You may have traffic, but if almost nobody is talking about the university, research, or talent development, then the brand communication has failed." (JT-OP01)

SY University focuses more strongly on connections among platform exposure, cognitive outcomes, and organisational utility. During the recruitment season in particular, application enquiries generated directly by short videos are treated as an important indicator, although the university also acknowledges a data-chain discontinuity between a single video and final enrolment.

"Especially during the annual recruitment season, application enquiries directly generated by short-video content are an effectiveness indicator that we value highly." (SY-OP01)

QC University more readily connects effectiveness judgements with practical operational leads. In-depth questions in comment sections, direct-message enquiries, campus visits, recruitment enquiries, and records of enterprise collaboration provide evidence beyond the platform. Operators attempt to guide platform interest further towards recruitment enquiries by using pinned comments and enquiry links on the account homepage.

"We place enquiry links in pinned comments and on the homepage to guide interested users towards further consultation with recruitment staff." (QC-OP01)

Across the three universities, communication effectiveness can be understood as four interrelated but non-substitutable levels. The first is platform performance, including exposure, likes, comments, and shares. The second is audience understanding and interaction quality, namely whether audiences engage in substantive discussion and enquiries around core information. The third is alignment with

organisational objectives, including practical value for recruitment communication, alumni relations, prejudice correction, and industry collaboration. The fourth is long-term brand value, including the accumulation of trust, word of mouth, and reputation. Different universities assign different weights to the four levels, but none can be replaced by a single traffic indicator. Communication outcomes also have a clear temporal dimension. Recruitment enquiries can be observed in the short term, while brand trust and social reputation are slow-changing variables. If universities evaluate all communication work through weekly or monthly back-end figures, they will systematically underestimate the value of long-term brand building.

Table 2 has shown the position of the six themes within the effectiveness framework. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 explain the organisational starting point of effectiveness: institutional positioning determines communication objectives, while organisational governance and resource conditions determine how content is produced. Section 4.3 explains the balance between visibility and integrity in effectiveness: platform adaptation can increase visibility but can also produce brand narrowing. Section 4.4 explains the interpersonal mechanism of effectiveness: opinion leaders supplement official communication through three credibility mechanisms, strengthening audience understanding and trust. Section 4.5 explains the audience-understanding level of effectiveness: partial misalignment exists between brand identity and brand image. Section 4.6 integrates the preceding findings and proposes a four-level effectiveness framework. The six themes are therefore not simply parallel categories but form a sequence of conditions—mechanisms—dimensions—integrative framework around the formation of communication effectiveness.

# 5. Discussion

## 5.1. Why Communication Effectiveness Cannot Be Equated with Traffic

The central judgement of this study is that the effectiveness of university brand communication on Douyin cannot be equated with platform traffic. Evidence from both the organisational and audience sides of the three universities shows that high traffic may coexist with shallow interaction, while low exposure may generate highly relevant professional enquiries. JT University explicitly stated that “traffic cannot be equated with brand communication”; QC University pays greater attention to in-depth questions in comments, direct-message enquiries, and enterprise-collaboration leads; and SY University acknowledges a data-chain discontinuity between a single video and final enrolment. These findings show that platform performance is only the first level of effectiveness and cannot substitute for audience understanding, organisational objectives, or long-term brand value.

This judgement engages with existing research on university social media. Likes, comments, and engagement rates have been used to measure participation, and these indicators are valuable for comparing content performance (Peruta & Shields, 2018). Social-media activity has also been linked

to university image, loyalty, and brand equity (Kethüda & Bilgin, 2025; Perera et al., 2023). Building on this work, the present study further argues that communication effectiveness contains internal level differences and that different levels cannot substitute for one another. Success at the platform-performance level does not necessarily translate into depth at the audience-understanding level, and positive impressions at the audience-understanding level do not necessarily mean alignment with organisational objectives or accumulation of long-term brand value.

## 5.2. How Organisational and Platform Conditions Shape Effectiveness

The findings show stable differences among the three types of universities, but these differences should not be interpreted as "university type directly determines short-video strategy". More precisely, university type and institutional history jointly shape mission positioning, reputational foundations, recruitment environment, disciplinary resources, and risk sensitivity. These organisational conditions then influence communication objectives, content sources, review mechanisms, and audience priorities, thereby shaping the way effectiveness is realised.

JT University has a strong academic reputation and therefore places greater emphasis on public branding, research value, and long-term reputation; its assessment of effectiveness is more oriented towards the long-term brand-value level. SY University faces more direct recruitment competition and pressure for differentiation; consequently, exposure, enquiries, and student experience carry greater practical weight, and its assessment of effectiveness is more oriented towards the platform-performance level and alignment with organisational objectives. QC University needs to explain the value of vocational education and strengthen industry connections; skills, practical training, employment, and prejudice correction therefore become central, and its assessment of effectiveness is more oriented towards alignment with organisational objectives. These results are consistent with prior findings that different institutional characteristics generate different social-media content and engagement patterns (Peruta & Shields, 2017, 2018), but this study further reveals the organisational-governance and resource mechanisms underlying those differences and how they influence the weighting of effectiveness levels.

Platform adaptation, meanwhile, constitutes a balance between visibility and integrity in effectiveness. Short-video research often understands platform adaptation in terms of youth orientation, trending content, or entertainment, but the present study shows that universities face a more fundamental task: "how to translate complex organisational information into forms that can be understood in short-video communication". JT University lowers barriers to research understanding through storytelling, SY University creates approachability through campus life, and QC University visualises skills through practical-training actions. These practices represent media translation rather than simple accommodation to the platform. However, media translation inevitably involves selectivity.

Platforms more readily amplify content with strong visual qualities, clear emotions, and simple narratives, which can compress complex university identities into frequently repeated labels and generate brand narrowing. For effectiveness, brand narrowing means that success at the platform-performance level may be accompanied by narrowing at the audience-understanding level. University short-video strategies therefore need to incorporate checks on brand integrity. Whether a topic should continue to be amplified should be judged not only by whether it generates high traffic, but also by whether it continues to represent the full range of values by which the university wishes to be known.

## 5.3. How Opinion Leaders Supplement the Effectiveness of Official Communication

Traditional two-step flow theory emphasises opinion leaders' reinterpretation of media information. This study observed a similar mechanism in university organisational communication, but digital platforms make the relevant roles more diverse. Academics, students, alumni, and enterprise representatives do not necessarily possess formal communication authority, yet they may gain audience trust through professional identity, everyday proximity, and accumulated experience. The three credibility mechanisms have clear functions. Professional authority answers "Is this professionally reliable?"; humanised authenticity answers "Is this a real person and real life?"; and experiential mediation answers "What does this have to do with my choices and future?". The three mechanisms are not mutually exclusive, and effective opinion leaders often possess two or all three sources of credibility simultaneously.

For communication effectiveness, the value of opinion-leadership mechanisms lies not in replacing official communication but in converting visibility at the platform-performance level into trust, enquiries, and relationships at the audience-understanding level. Audiences display a division of trust: official accounts are better suited to policies, recruitment rules, and formal facts; academics are better suited to professional knowledge; students are better suited to campus experience; and alumni and enterprises are better suited to career development. This suggests that university digital communication should not place all information on a single official account but should develop a collaborative network of "institutional authority + personal credibility". However, such collaboration does not mean unlimited authorisation. Organisations must still address factual accuracy, privacy, public-opinion risk, and boundaries around personal positions. This study therefore extends the function of opinion leaders in the university context from "information diffusion" to "credible interpretation, experiential mediation, and boundary negotiation" and positions it as an interpersonal mechanism within the multilevel effectiveness framework. This finding complements research on the diversification of opinion-leader roles in the digital era (Guo & Feng, 2024).

### 5.4. heoretical Meaning of the Multilevel Effectiveness Framework

Brands exist in audience memory and associations (Keller, 1993). In university short-video communication, the brand identity projected by an institution does not enter audience cognition unchanged; it is reconstructed through platform content selection, individual interpretation, and audiences' prior experience. The comparison of the three universities clearly shows that the more common state of brand communication is neither complete consistency nor complete failure, but rather "core alignment + partial misalignment". JT University's core academic identity is correctly recognised, but approachability is insufficient. SY University has a clear campus-experience image, but insufficient differentiation in educational value. QC University's skills brand is strongly aligned, but its overall university image is too narrow. This structure indicates that brand evaluation should not ask only "Do audiences like it?" but also "Are the impressions formed by audiences aligned with the institution's core identity, and are they sufficiently complete?". Nevertheless, this study treats brand identity–brand image comparison primarily as a supplementary diagnostic tool rather than as the sole criterion of effectiveness.

Accordingly, this study proposes a multilevel effectiveness framework as an evaluative tool for university short-video communication. Platform performance is the first level and indicates whether content gains attention. Audience understanding and interaction quality constitute the second level and indicate whether information enters meaningful cognition and discussion. Alignment with organisational objectives is the third level and indicates whether communication supports recruitment, relationships, collaboration, or public branding. Long-term brand value is the fourth level and indicates whether trust, word of mouth, and reputation continue to accumulate. This layered logic connects with higher-education social-media research concerning university image, loyalty, and brand advocacy (Kethüda & Bilgin, 2025; Perera et al., 2023), but the present study further emphasises that different universities should assign different weights to indicators according to organisational objectives. Research universities should not dismiss academic communication simply because it receives fewer comments, and vocational universities should not underestimate the value of functional enquiries simply because they have smaller follower bases. The central contribution of the multilevel effectiveness framework is that it extends communication outcomes from a single platform metric to multilevel outcomes of the organisational communication process and provides differentiated evaluative criteria for different institutional types.

## 6. Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

### 6.1. Theoretical Implications

This study offers three main theoretical implications. First, the findings show that institutional

positioning is not merely a background variable but influences short-video communication objectives and content selection through institutional mission, reputation, competitive environment, resource conditions, and risk preferences. Differences in communication among different types of universities therefore need to be interpreted in relation to their specific organisational contexts.

Second, this study applies Opinion Leadership to the context of university brand communication. The findings show that academics, students, and alumni can strengthen communication credibility through professional authority, humanised authenticity, and experiential sharing, thereby creating a communication approach in which institutional and individual communication complement one another. The role of opinion leaders is reflected not only in extending communication reach but also in translating professional information into content that audiences can understand more readily.

Finally, this study identifies the phenomenon of "brand narrowing", whereby the continued amplification of a particular advantageous brand characteristic on a short-video platform may weaken audiences' awareness of other brand characteristics of the university. University short-video communication therefore needs to maintain a balance between brand recognisability and brand integrity. At the same time, evaluation of communication outcomes should not be limited to platform indicators such as views and likes but should also consider audience understanding, interaction quality, organisational objectives, and long-term brand cognition.

## 6.2. Practical Implications

Different types of universities should develop short-video communication strategies according to their own positioning. Research universities can maintain research- and academic-authority content while using academics, students, and authentic research processes to make such content easier to understand and more approachable. Private regular undergraduate universities can connect campus-life content with programmes, curricula, academic staff, practical training, employment, and progression information, thereby avoiding brand communication that remains overly focused on campus image. Vocational universities can continue to use the visual advantages of practical training, skills, and industry settings while strengthening the presentation of programme systems, student development, and long-term career progression.

In addition, universities should evaluate short-video outcomes according to different communication objectives rather than applying a uniform traffic standard. Research communication, for example, may focus on reach and sharing; recruitment content may focus on enquiries and information needs; alumni content may focus on sustained interaction; and university–industry collaboration content may focus on potential collaboration feedback. Universities should also periodically examine whether content is excessively reinforcing a single brand characteristic and whether individual creators remain aligned with the university's overall brand positioning.

## 7. Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

Based on a thematic analysis of 21 multi-stakeholder participants from three types of universities in Shaanxi Province, this study examined the relationships among organisational context, platform characteristics, communication actors, and audience cognition in university brand communication on Douyin. The findings show that university short-video communication is not merely a matter of account operation or traffic acquisition; rather, it is a brand-communication process jointly influenced by institutional positioning, organisational governance, platform communication characteristics, key individuals, and audience understanding. Different types of universities differ clearly in communication objectives, content selection, and credible communicators, while all need to maintain a balance between platform visibility and brand integrity.

The study further finds that academics, students, and alumni can supplement official communication through professional authority, authentic experience, and experiential sharing, while high traffic does not necessarily indicate greater brand-communication effectiveness. University short-video communication outcomes should therefore be evaluated comprehensively in relation to platform performance, audience understanding, organisational objectives, and long-term brand cognition.

This study also has limitations. The sample comprises three universities in Shaanxi Province, and the findings are intended primarily to explain communication characteristics across university types rather than to claim statistical representativeness. Interview data may be affected by participants' recall and subjective judgement. In addition, this study did not directly test opinion-leader effects or long-term brand change through social network analysis or longitudinal data. Future research could expand the geographical scope and university sample and combine surveys, experiments, social network analysis, and longitudinal data to further test the credibility mechanisms, "brand narrowing", and multilevel communication effectiveness identified in this study.

### Acknowledgments

The authors declare that no specific acknowledgments are required.

### Author contributions

Not applicable.

### Funding

This research received no external funding.

### Data availability

No data availability statement is required.

## Declarations

### Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

### Ethics approval

Not applicable.

### Consent to participate

Not applicable.

### Consent for publication

Not applicable.

## Additional information

**Received:** 28 September 2026

**Accepted:** 29 September 2026

**Published online:** 30 September 2026

### Publisher's Note

Wisdom Academic Press Ltd. remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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