



The Social-Media Breakout of Harbin's Ice-and-Snow Tourism: A Case Study of Urban Destination Branding on Short-Video Platforms

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Abstract. Harbin's ice-and-snow tourism became one of the most visible examples of urban destination branding in China's post-pandemic tourism recovery. Rather than treating the case as a simple result of online traffic, this paper analyzes how short-video platforms transformed Harbin's winter resources into a widely shared urban brand narrative. Based on literature on Douyin-based city branding, online destination communication, social-media influencer narratives, destination short videos, and tourism video persuasion, this paper develops a case framework explaining the social-media breakout of Harbin's ice-and-snow tourism. The analysis suggests that Harbin's breakout was shaped by four connected mechanisms: symbolic winter-scene construction, participatory user-generated content, affective hospitality narratives, and platform-supported action paths. These mechanisms influenced destination awareness, destination image, emotional attachment, perceived service warmth, and travel intention. The paper contributes by distinguishing short-term traffic from sustainable destination branding, clarifying the role of user participation in city image formation, and proposing managerial implications for content design, service coordination, interaction governance, and long-term urban brand renewal.

Keywords: Harbin, Ice-and-snow tourism, Urban destination branding, Short-video platform, Social media, User-generated content, Travel intention.

1 Introduction

Short-video platforms have become important infrastructures for urban destination branding. Cities are no longer presented only through official promotional videos, travel brochures, or destination websites. Instead, they are increasingly understood through fragmented but emotionally dense platform content: short videos, comments, hashtags, live broadcasts, influencer recommendations, tourist diaries, and user-generated travel guides. For urban destinations, this communication environment

changes both the speed and the structure of brand formation. A city can become visible not only because its government launches a campaign, but also because platform users collectively reproduce, reinterpret, and circulate its symbols.

Harbin's ice-and-snow tourism provides a useful case for examining this shift. Harbin has long possessed strong winter tourism resources, including ice sculptures, snow landscapes, Russian-style architecture, the Songhua River, Central Street, St. Sophia Cathedral, and the Harbin Ice-Snow World. However, the recent breakout of Harbin tourism cannot be explained only by the existence of these resources. The more important question is how these resources were translated into a platform-friendly urban destination brand. In the short-video environment, ice, snow, architecture, local food, ethnic performance, hospitality practices, and tourist reactions were not isolated attractions. They were recombined into a shareable destination narrative: Harbin as a cold city with warm service, exotic winter scenery, performative hospitality, and high emotional value.

This paper treats Harbin's ice-and-snow tourism as a case of urban destination branding on short-video platforms. The phrase "social-media breakout" refers to the rapid expansion of destination visibility through platform recommendation, user interaction, influencer participation, and cross-platform public discussion. It should not be reduced to numerical popularity. A video may receive high exposure without creating stable destination associations; a city may become temporarily viral without building sustainable brand equity. Therefore, this paper distinguishes destination awareness, destination image, emotional attachment, perceived service quality, tourist engagement, and travel intention.

The research question is: through which symbolic, participatory, affective, and action-oriented mechanisms did short-video platforms contribute to the social-media breakout of Harbin's ice-and-snow tourism? This question is addressed through a case-based conceptual analysis rather than through statistical causal testing. The purpose is not to estimate the exact contribution of each platform variable, but to build an analytical framework that can explain why Harbin's winter tourism became highly visible and how such visibility may be transformed into more durable urban destination branding.

2 Literature Review and Conceptual Basis

2.1 Online Destination Branding and Platform Communication

Destination branding refers to the process through which a place develops recognizable meanings, associations, and value propositions for potential visitors. In the digital environment, destination branding is no longer controlled only by destination marketing organizations. Fernández-Cavia et al. examined Spanish destination marketing organizations and found that online tools, including official websites, social media, and mobile applications, are important for destination communication, although they are often used more tactically than strategically^[1]. This insight is relevant to Harbin because the city's breakout shows that online destination branding requires more than

uploading attractive images. It requires coordination among official accounts, local businesses, platform creators, residents, and visitors.

Short-video platforms intensify this transformation because they combine visual compression, algorithmic distribution, emotional narration, and low-cost sharing. Huang's study of tourism public relations strategies on the Chinese Douyin platform identifies content marketing, influencer marketing, targeted marketing, user-generated content, and two-way communication as important strategies shaping urban brand reputation^[2]. In the Harbin case, these elements can be observed in the circulation of ice-snow scenes, official service responses, local hospitality videos, creator travel guides, and tourist-generated experience content. Therefore, Harbin's branding process should be understood as a platform-based co-construction rather than a one-way advertising campaign.

Social media also introduces the issue of narrative plurality. Nazir's study of Pakistan tourism branding through social media shows that influencer narratives and official destination presentations may produce different, sometimes inconsistent, meanings^[3]. This is important for Harbin because tourist videos, influencer videos, official videos, and media reports do not necessarily communicate the same image. Some emphasize spectacular ice-snow landscapes; some emphasize hospitality and emotional warmth; others emphasize travel cost, crowding, service details, or "internet-famous" experiences. Destination branding on short-video platforms therefore depends on how diverse narratives are coordinated, corrected, and transformed into credible public meaning.

2.2 Short-Video Persuasion and Travel Intention

Short-video persuasion works through both content characteristics and psychological mechanisms. Cao et al. show that destination short videos can influence customer attitude through narrative transportation, sense of presence, and reduced psychological reactance^[4]. For Harbin, this means that short videos are persuasive not only because they show attractive scenery, but because they allow viewers to imagine themselves entering a winter scene. Videos of snow-covered streets, ice castles, hot local food, reindeer encounters, airport greetings, and tourists' emotional reactions create a sense of presence. The viewer is not only informed about Harbin; the viewer is invited into a compact narrative of winter experience.

Gan et al. further demonstrate that tourism short-video marketing is affected by the interaction between visual perspective, visual content, and narration appeal^[5]. This provides a useful basis for analyzing why some Harbin videos became more persuasive than ordinary destination advertisements. First-person travel videos, activity-centered scenes, practical narration, and emotionally warm commentary can make the destination more imaginable and actionable. A short video that shows a tourist entering Ice-Snow World, eating frozen pears, walking on Central Street, or receiving local help may produce stronger travel intention than a purely panoramic promotional clip.

Based on these studies, this paper classifies the short-video branding mechanisms in the Harbin case into four categories. First, symbolic winter-scene construction transforms ice, snow, architecture, and local food into recognizable city symbols. Second,

participatory user-generated content expands destination visibility and strengthens perceived authenticity. Third, affective hospitality narratives convert service details into emotional brand associations. Fourth, platform-supported action paths connect favorable destination attitude with actual travel planning, including searching, saving, booking, route design, and sharing.

3 Case Background: Harbin's Ice-and-Snow Tourism Breakout

Harbin has long been known as China's "Ice City." Its winter tourism resources include ice-snow festivals, urban snow landscapes, Russian-style architecture, food culture, and northern ethnic cultural elements. These resources provided the material basis for destination branding, but material resources alone do not guarantee platform-level visibility. The recent breakout occurred because these resources were translated into short-video symbols that could be repeatedly viewed, imitated, and discussed.

The first feature of the case is strong visual distinctiveness. Ice castles, snow sculptures, frozen rivers, winter clothing, cathedral squares, and night-light scenes are highly suitable for short-video presentation. They provide visual contrast with the daily environment of many southern Chinese tourists. This contrast made Harbin especially suitable for "scene-based destination imagination," in which potential visitors form travel desire through vivid images rather than through detailed information search.

The second feature is the transformation of coldness into warmth. Harbin's climatic coldness was not presented only as a physical condition. Through platform narratives, the cold city was reframed as emotionally warm. Videos about local residents welcoming tourists, businesses improving services, transportation support, food sharing, and humorous interactions between local people and visitors helped build an affective destination image. This narrative was important because winter tourism may involve perceived risks such as cold weather, unfamiliar routes, high travel cost, and crowding. Warm service narratives reduced these perceived barriers.

The third feature is intense user participation. Tourists did not merely consume official messages; they produced travel notes, comparison videos, recommendation clips, complaint videos, and humorous memes. User-generated content increased destination visibility and provided experience-specific information. Compared with official advertising, user content often appeared more authentic because it included concrete details such as queues, clothing advice, prices, route suggestions, food recommendations, and emotional reactions.

The fourth feature is the linkage between social visibility and travel action. Short-video platforms do not only display destination images. They also guide users toward search, saving, booking, group discussion, map navigation, restaurant discovery, and itinerary planning. In this sense, the platform does not merely create attention; it also shortens the path from attention to travel intention. Harbin's breakout therefore should be analyzed as a communication-to-action process.

4 Short-Video Branding Framework for the Harbin Case

This section explains how short-video platforms helped Harbin's ice-and-snow tourism become a widely discussed urban destination brand. The process can be understood through four main stages: exposure, meaning formation, trust building, and travel response.

First, short videos increased Harbin's destination exposure. Ice castles, snow-covered streets, Central Street, St. Sophia Cathedral, local food, and winter activities created strong visual impressions. These scenes made Harbin easy to recognize and remember. For many potential tourists, short videos became the first channel through which they noticed Harbin's winter tourism image.

Second, short videos helped shape the meaning of Harbin as a destination. Harbin was not presented only as a cold northern city. Through tourist stories, local cultural symbols, and service-related videos, the city was gradually associated with both beautiful winter scenery and warm hospitality. The contrast between cold weather and friendly service made the destination image more emotional and attractive.

Third, user-generated content strengthened trust and engagement. Videos made by tourists, influencers, residents, and local businesses provided more practical and detailed information than traditional promotion. These videos showed real travel experiences, food recommendations, clothing suggestions, transportation tips, and ticket information. Comments and discussions also helped potential tourists reduce uncertainty before making travel plans.

Fourth, platform functions helped transform interest into travel intention. Location tags, travel guides, booking information, transport routes, food maps, and event schedules made travel planning more convenient. A viewer who is interested in Harbin can quickly search for more information, save useful videos, compare routes, and prepare for a possible trip.

Therefore, Harbin's social-media breakout was not caused by visual exposure alone. Its popularity came from the combination of recognizable winter symbols, emotional storytelling, user participation, trust building, and convenient travel information. This case shows that successful short-video destination branding requires both attractive content and practical support for tourists' decision-making.

5 Managerial Implications and Conclusion

Harbin's social-media breakout shows that short-video popularity can support urban destination branding, but online attention alone is not enough. To build sustainable brand value, destination managers should combine attractive content, reliable service, user participation, and practical travel information.

First, Harbin should maintain a clear and recognizable city image. Ice-snow landscapes, historical architecture, local food, winter activities, and hospitality stories can be used as core brand symbols. These symbols should be presented consistently, but they should not be repeated in a single or stereotyped way.

Second, short-video content should provide both visual appeal and useful information. Videos should not only show beautiful winter scenes, but also explain location, transport, ticketing, clothing suggestions, food choices, and travel routes. This can help potential tourists move from interest to actual travel planning.

Third, user-generated content should be properly guided. Tourist videos, comments, and influencer recommendations can increase authenticity and trust. However, destination managers should also correct misinformation, respond to complaints, and encourage useful travel guides. In this way, online interaction can become a form of social proof.

Finally, Harbin should extend its brand value beyond the winter season. Although ice-and-snow tourism is its strongest symbol, long-term destination branding also needs to include music, architecture, food culture, summer tourism, and local history. The key challenge is not only how to become popular online, but how to turn short-term visibility into long-term urban brand equity.

In conclusion, Harbin's case shows that successful destination branding on short-video platforms depends on the combination of visual symbols, emotional storytelling, user participation, service quality, and convenient action paths. Future research can further examine this case through interviews, content analysis, sentiment analysis, or comparisons with other internet-famous cities.

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