Modeling Urban Narrative Structures and Feature Generation Pathways Driven by Korean UGC

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Abstract. This study investigates how Korean user-generated content (UGC) on Instagram constructs and communicates urban narratives of Shanghai in a cross-cultural digital context. Moving beyond state-centric communication paradigms, the study explores the bottom-up formation of city image narratives, emphasizing affective resonance, visual aesthetics, and community interaction. Utilizing semantic network analysis and content analysis on over 13,000 Korean-language comments under the hashtag #상해여행, we identify a multi-layered narrative model composed of landmark visualization, experiential storytelling, and emotional co-creation. The research further reveals how grassroots media practices contribute to an algorithm-driven visibility of urban features, ultimately informing the organic transmission of urban and national imagery. Our findings offer a methodological pathway for modeling decentralized city image construction driven by foreign audiences in the social media era.

Keywords: Urban Narrative, User-Generated Content, Semantic Network, Affective Communication, City Image, Cross-Cultural Media.

1. Introduction

Current global communication practices are undergoing fundamental shifts due to both structural changes in media ecosystems and evolving audience preferences [1] . Traditional, top-down modes of iintercultural communication have encountered significant limitations in the context of intensified geopolitical tensions and increasingly fragmented public attention [2] . As digital infrastructures evolve, the effectiveness of cross-border messaging is often constrained by technological barriers and cultural misalignment [3] In this landscape, audiences who shaped by local policy narratives and mediated imaginaries may develop divergent perceptions of foreign societies.

Meanwhile, the emergence of participatory media platforms has transformed the production and circulation of international content. In contrast to unidirectional, text-heavy messaging formats, contemporary audiences are more responsive to personalized, visual, and emotionally engaging narratives [4] The digital era thus demands innovative approaches to global communication, where diverse actors, including non-institutional users, play increasingly central roles [5]. Within this decentralized media ecology, individual users have become influential agents in shaping transnational narratives. Content that appears authentic, emotionally resonant, and grounded in everyday experience tends to foster stronger engagement [6]. Personal travel accounts and positive peer interactions not only increase content credibility but also enhance the potential for cross-cultural audiences to participate in shaping urban and national representations [7]

Among the many contextual factors shaping content production, the communicative setting is especially important. Cities have become key narrative anchors in social media environments— serving not only as tangible markers of cultural identity but also as symbolic interfaces through which everyday users engage with broader imaginaries. Existing studies have examined how Chinese cities are portrayed on global social platforms, offering insights into thematic content, distribution strategies, and audience responses [8]

In November 2024, the Chinese government announced a visa-free entry policy for South Korean citizens, which triggered a significant increase in individual travel behavior and related online content. According to industry reports, flight bookings from South Korea to Shanghai surged by over 167 percent following the policy announcement [9] Travel data from Ctrip also show that since the

implementation of the visa waiver, tourist arrivals from Korea have more than doubled compared to the previous year [10] . With convenient infrastructure, rich cultural heritage, and a cosmopolitan urban image, Shanghai has become a favored destination among Korean tourists, especially those embarking on short-term visits. On social media, such localized narratives—often casual and aesthetic—serve as ambient yet impactful contributions to the formation and circulation of a city's digital identity.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates how Korean user-generated content (UGC) on Instagram contributes to the construction of Shanghai's city image. It seeks to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Korean tourists construct the image of Shanghai on Instagram?

RQ2: What forms of cognitive alignment and meaning negotiation emerge in user comment interactions?

RQ3: How do these micro-level narratives contribute to the cross-cultural transmission of Shanghai's urban image?

By examining how Korean users articulate their experiences of Shanghai on social platforms, this research provides insights into the mechanisms through which external audiences participate in shaping digital urban narratives. It further clarifies the relational dynamics between city image formation and the everyday practices of global communication. In addition to advancing conceptual understanding, this case study also offers practical guidance for tourism marketing, audience segmentation, and digital strategy design. More broadly, it provides a framework for exploring how locally situated experiences contribute to the diverse and participatory construction of urban and national representations in the global media environment.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. City Image and National Image Construction

Traditional models of global communication have largely relied on state-centered narratives driven by diplomatic objectives and strategic messaging. These efforts often utilize official media channels and diplomatic platforms to convey national policies and values to foreign audiences [11] . In this paradigm, national image construction is typically coordinated through centralized institutions, involving clearly defined positioning and systematic branding strategies [12] . The emergence of China's national image as a topic of global interest coincided with the country's rapid economic development and increased international engagement since the reform and opening-up period [13] . Accelerated flows of information have altered global perceptions and reshaped the relationship between China and the world [14] . A compelling national image is often seen as a crucial component of soft power, enhancing global recognition and expanding opportunities for cooperation on the international stage [15] .

However, in today's technologically dynamic environment, the state-led communication model faces structural challenges. Shifting ideological landscapes, cultural dissonance, and the decentralization of media production have undermined the effectiveness of top-down narratives [16] . Developmental states, including China, have encountered increasing difficulty in countering stigmatized representations and ideological biases in international discourse [17] . These challenges have created a growing need for adaptive, decentralized, and audience-responsive approaches to image construction.

In this context, the present study focuses on the mediated urban experiences of Korean tourists in Shanghai, emphasizing the perspectives of international users as active agents in communication processes. The concept of "the Other," initially a philosophical construct contrasting the self and non-self, has been widely applied in cross-cultural communication research to explore how outsiders narrate and make sense of foreign contexts [18] When users select cities based on their personal interests and preferences, they also set the affective tone for their representations [19] . These externally situated narratives demonstrate high levels of productivity and narrative agency, as users

independently create, circulate, and replicate content [20]. In doing so, they contribute to city branding from a bottom-up, experiential standpoint [21] . The everyday, localized scenes captured in these narratives often bypass official discourses and resonate more directly with peer audiences in international platforms [22]

The shift from national image to city image, and from macro-level strategy to micro-level storytelling, signifies a broader reconfiguration of communication logic. This includes the alignment of self-representation and external perception, where diverse symbols and narratives collectively shape mediated understandings of place [23]. Cities, with their unique historical, cultural, and spatial attributes, serve as tangible entry points for broader national imaginaries [24] . Through emotional, experiential, and symbolic functions, cities localize national values in ways that are accessible and relatable to international audiences. In this sense, global perception is not only shaped by a country's diplomatic efforts but also by the distinct impressions created by its cities [25] . International visibility, competitiveness, and cultural resonance are increasingly embedded within urban narratives [26]. Consequently, differentiated city identities contribute to a multidimensional and dynamic construction of national image.

This leads to a three-tiered communication structure: nation, city, and user. National-level communication provides strategic orientation, grounded in policy goals and international positioning. At the city level, macro narratives are translated into accessible stories through localized themes such as architecture, lifestyle, cuisine, and public spaces. Finally, individual users engage with these narratives through digital platforms, capturing personal impressions and circulating them to broader audiences [27] These micro-level contributions often rely on emotional resonance, perceived authenticity, and visual storytelling practices [28] This bottom-up mode of narrative construction enables a more fluid and pluralistic form of transnational representation, wherein cities function as communicative intermediaries bridging official narratives and everyday experiences [29]. By situating national identity in real-life contexts, this model supports stronger emotional engagement and cognitive recognition.

2.2. Tourism Narratives in the Context of Social Media

The evolution of media technologies has gradually shifted communication practices from text-dominated narratives to more integrated formats combining visual and semantic elements. In multimedia environments, images serve not only as carriers of information but also as expressive resources that evoke affect and convey symbolic meaning[30] In tourism contexts, visual-semantic storytelling through images and short videos enhances emotional engagement and deepens users' understanding of destination culture and atmosphere. Compared to text-based descriptions, this mode fosters greater immersion and has become particularly effective on social media platforms [31]

With the rise of global social networking platforms, users have developed preferences and behavioral patterns aligned with specific environments [32] Since its launch in 2010, Instagram has grown into one of the world's most influential platforms. By 2021, it had surpassed Twitter as a news source in terms of user base and global reach   [33]. Instagram attracts a predominantly young and visually-oriented user population, many of whom are highly active content creators [34]. The competition for visibility on the platform has raised the threshold for successful content, motivating users to produce visually appealing, well-curated, and audience-relevant posts [35] . Additionally, Instagram's tagging system facilitates the organization and discoverability of content, enabling users to locate niche topics and specific locations with ease [36] .

Instagram has also emerged as a central stage for urban storytelling. Previous research shows that users selectively frame and recompose urban spaces, often highlighting visually distinctive or culturally trendy locations while marginalizing less photogenic ones [37] Through these curatorial practices, users contribute to the construction of mediated city images that align with broader aesthetic preferences and consumption patterns. These selective representations stabilize into recognizable symbolic codes that reinforce a city's appeal [38]

User-generated content (UGC), grounded in first-hand experience, has become a powerful tool for place-based storytelling. In the context of national representation, UGC offers diverse and decentralized alternatives to institutional messaging [39] . One notable example is the rise of foreign influencers in China. These individuals, often non-Chinese nationals who generate significant attention on domestic platforms, draw on their everyday life experiences in China to create personalized and culturally embedded content [40]. Their grassroots status lends credibility, while their creative output reflects hybrid perspectives that integrate foreign sensibilities with local engagement [41].

Scholars have emphasized that compelling international narratives require culturally intelligible storytelling grounded in lived experience. The work of these influencers often emphasizes positive emotional tone, diverse subject matter, and cultural curiosity, enabling more authentic cross-cultural exchange [42] By combining large-scale narratives such as policy developments with intimate portrayals of daily life, these users humanize national discourse and render it more accessible to global audiences [43] Their communication strategies help bridge cultural distance and mitigate the risks of misinterpretation, establishing themselves as effective mediators of transnational experience [44] .

Together, these developments highlight the significance of urban storytelling in global communication. Cities offer fertile ground for the articulation of audience-driven, affectively charged, and socially relevant narratives. Through user-generated content and context-specific storytelling, urban imagery becomes a medium through which multi-vocal, emotionally resonant representations of national identity are formed. Although the academic literature has recognized these trends, most research remains focused on Western audiences and top-down communication models. There remains a gap in understanding how East Asian users—particularly South Korean audiences—engage in cross-border urban representation. Additionally, while many studies prioritize theoretical models, few offer empirical accounts of situated, user-led communication practices. This research addresses these gaps by examining the narrative logic, affective structure, and communicative impact of Korean-language UGC about Shanghai.

3. Methods

This study focuses on Korean-language user-generated content (UGC) related to travel experiences in Shanghai, collected from Instagram under the hashtag #상해여행 (Shanghai Travel). The dataset covers the period from December 2024 to June 2025. Initially, approximately 2,000 original posts and 20,000 associated comments were gathered. After removing advertisements, repetitive content, and irrelevant entries, the final dataset comprised 1,635 main posts and 13,532 comments.

All Korean-language texts were translated and processed using KH Coder3, a tool for computational linguistic analysis. Prior to analysis, the data underwent language cleaning, including vocabulary normalization and the removal of low-frequency terms, to improve accuracy in subsequent clustering and network construction [45] Both the post content and the comment sections were analyzed for high-frequency keywords and co-occurrence patterns. Semantic networks and hierarchical cluster graphs were generated to visualize narrative structures and thematic relationships.

In addition to automated analysis, qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes and affective tones. The posts were manually coded to classify their primary communicative focus, such as visual representation of landmarks, food culture, or personal reflections. Comments were evaluated to determine dominant emotional orientations and modes of peer interaction. This mixed-method approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both content production and user engagement in shaping the mediated image of Shanghai.

4. Results

4.1. From Landmark Presentation to Aesthetic Template

Through semantic network analysis and content classification of 1,635 Instagram posts under the hashtag #상해여행 (#ShanghaiTravel), this study identified four primary dimensions in Korean users' UGC representations of Shanghai: urban landscapes, local food culture, shopping and leisure experiences, and travel guides. Examples include captions such as "상해 추천 호텔 두곳!" (Recommended Shanghai hotels!) and "사진 찍기 좋고 맛은 있다" (Great for photos, and tastes good too). High-frequency keywords include "The Bund," "Oriental Pearl Tower," "food," and "Disneyland," reflecting the city's core appeal through iconic landmarks and cultural consumption. Additionally, common expressions such as "recommend," "good," and "like" suggest a positive emotional orientation and value affirmation embedded in the sharing process.

Closer examination reveals that these posts are not merely casual travel logs but follow an aesthetic structure and communication strategy. As a platform centered on visual storytelling, Instagram enables users to reinforce textual narratives with high-quality images. In Korean-language UGC, posts commonly feature visually cohesive styles with uniform framing, soft tones, and deliberate compositions, creating an immersive visual ambiance. Users tend to adopt similar angles when photographing iconic city spots such as Nanjing Road or Sinan Road, often accompanied by concise personal commentary. This approach enhances aesthetic appeal and contributes to the formation of standardized visual templates and shared urban imaginaries.

Of the top 50 keywords extracted, urban landscape terms constituted 32 percent (e.g., Bund: 324 mentions; Oriental Pearl: 308), culinary culture 24 percent (e.g., food: 514; lamb skewers: 158), and shopping or leisure 18 percent (e.g., Disneyland: 280; shopping: 75). Among the top 150 most frequent terms, emotionally positive expressions like "recommend" (328 mentions) reflect favorable evaluations of Shanghai. Keyword pairings such as "food and recommendation" or "atmosphere and recommendation" reveal users' appreciation for the city's culinary scene and ambiance, indicating recognition of Shanghai's infrastructure and cultural vibrancy.

Analysis of the semantic network shows that certain users' posts occupy central positions in the content ecosystem and function as opinion leaders. Posts with detailed itineraries and authentic experience sharing tend to receive higher engagement and serve as references for other users. These posts generally follow two narrative patterns. The first includes comprehensive travel guides covering airport arrival, hotel stays, and attractions, often supported by photo-text correspondence and location tagging. These entries serve as practical travel templates and showcase Shanghai's maturity as an international tourist destination. The second type focuses on specific aspects such as culinary experiences, sightseeing tips, or shopping guides. These posts are more specialized, often featuring photos of multiple venues under a single theme and offering detailed information tailored to viewer interests.

This type of content influences travel planning and contributes to the platform's internal content ranking and visibility algorithms. The consistent portrayal of Shanghai as fun, visually appealing, and cost-effective helps to reinforce a user-driven narrative about the city's identity.

In summary, content creators take on dual roles as both producers and disseminators. Their combined use of visuals and text transforms personal experiences into emotionally engaging narratives. The repeated reproduction and distribution of these narratives support a culturally accessible and apolitical portrayal of Shanghai. This aesthetic approach to everyday storytelling enhances the appeal of user-generated content while contributing to the grassroots diffusion of national image communication.

4.2. Meaning Negotiation and Emotional Resonance in the Community of Others

Based on the semantic analysis of 13,532 comments written in Korean, the comment sections are found to be more than supplementary spaces to UGC posts. They serve as crucial platforms for meaning negotiation, emotional resonance, and re-narration of the city. Manual coding revealed that

emotionally positive terms like "like," "pretty," and "beautiful" occurred far more frequently than negative ones, forming an affective weighting mechanism within the construction of the city's image. Neutral terms such as "want to go" and "photo" suggest an aspirational stance by users. Even without firsthand experience, commenters engage in the reproduction of urban meaning through viewing, resonance, and interaction. These frequent emotional expressions reflect general features of social media interaction and more deeply resonate with the Korean cultural concept of "jeong" (정), which emphasizes emotional bonding, empathy, and group belonging [46].

In this cultural context, interpersonal relationships are grounded in emotional connectedness, and this tendency extends to digital platforms. User interactions go beyond rational information exchange to become sustained emotional resonance.

Two distinct interaction patterns were observed. First, affirmation responses repeat or echo the sentiment of original posts, such as "나도 여기 갔었는데 진짜 맛있어요" (I also went here, it was really delicious) or "보는 것만으로도 힐링 되네요 분위기 너무 이뻐요." (Just looking at it is healing... the vibe is beautiful). Second, extending responses express future intent or build on the post, like "여기 포토존 가보고 싶네요." (I want to visit this photo zone) or "와 진짜 싹싹김치..이거들고 상해 한번 더 갑니다" (Wow, that kimchi... I'm going to Shanghai again with this). These comments form a discourse of "travel extensibility" beyond the original UGC.

These interactions reinforce socially shared urban impressions and blur the boundary between "been there" and "want to go." Emotional engagement fosters a sense of cognitive belonging to the city. Moreover, high-frequency words like "photo zone," "ambience," and "cost-effectiveness" suggest micro-level and everyday cultural imaginings of Shanghai as a destination. The semantic trajectory of "photo—memory—imagination" indicates a shift from geographic space to cultural perception. In other words, the comment section reveals both the emotional geography of the city and the algorithmic circulation of its image in cross-cultural contexts. The patterns of likes and replies mirror user preferences and cognitive tendencies in cultural information processing.

These seemingly mundane discursive practices exemplify what Michel de Certeau terms "tactical use."[47] Tourists, as non-institutional actors, utilize digital spaces outside of official narratives to perform situated, personal reinterpretations of urban meaning. Compared with top-down city branding strategies, this user-driven mode of emotional and experiential communication aligns with a "narrative of the Other"—a form of situated communication grounded in sensory experience, cultural coordinates, and emotional structures.

In conclusion, these Korean-language UGC comment practices represent a decentralized pathway of global communication. Without reliance on state-led narratives, the generation and circulation of city imagery depend more on individual experiences, emotional resonance, and platform dynamics. The comment section thus emerges as a vital arena for meaning-making, where users collaboratively construct, reproduce, and disseminate city images. This highlights the underlying mechanics and evolving dynamics of cross-cultural communication in the era of social media.

5. Discussion

This study analyzed a large volume of Korean-language comments related to Shanghai and uncovered how cultural characteristics such as collective emotional resonance, aesthetic preferences, and grassroots digital participation contribute to the construction of Shanghai's urban image in a cross-cultural context. The comment sections reflected not only the Korean cultural value of jeong (정), which emphasizes emotional connectedness, but also revealed aesthetic expectations rooted in concepts such as "ambience" (분위기) and "cost-effectiveness" (가성비). These patterns of collective evaluation within native-language communities go beyond individual perspectives commonly examined in previous studies and instead highlight how foreign user communities participate in the co-creation and negotiation of city and national imagery.

Shanghai, as a highly globalized metropolis, emerged in Korean UGC as a richly imagined and emotionally charged urban space, serving as a key medium through which users experience and project their impressions of China. Localized sensory experiences were transformed into emotional associations with the national image. This process illustrates a dynamic pathway from "local experiences" to "national impressions." Policy-driven tags such as visa exemptions, in tandem with organically generated hashtags like #상해여행, facilitated the semantic convergence of Shanghai's city image and China's national image within digital platforms. This dynamic created a decentralized and grassroots-based mechanism of global communication.

This research contributes to the understanding of how national imagery can be constructed through everyday urban storytelling in cross-cultural contexts. It provides an empirical case of how individuals, rather than institutions, participate in shaping city and national images in digital environments. The findings offer both theoretical insights and practical implications for understanding the mechanisms of multi-actor engagement in international communication.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. Due to the large dataset and the colloquial nature of Korean expressions, some degree of semantic ambiguity may remain in the translation and interpretation processes. Further improvements in language processing accuracy are needed. In addition, this study focused primarily on textual analysis and did not systematically examine the visual dimension of Instagram content. Future research could integrate computer vision techniques to analyze image content and explore the visual-semantic synergy in constructing urban imagery. Lastly, while Shanghai provides a representative case, future research could adopt this framework in studying other cities. By incorporating diverse cultural preferences and user-generated expressions from various national contexts, researchers may uncover a broader spectrum of urban communication strategies that collectively contribute to the pluralistic construction and global dissemination of China's national image below.

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