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Cross-Cultural Communication Effects and Narrative Strategies of Yiwu Small-Commodity Videos on TikTok

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Abstract. This study examines the narrative strategies and cross-cultural communication potential of Yiwu small-commodity videos on TikTok. Short-form video has become an important channel for small suppliers, yet limited research considers how ordinary, low-cost products are communicated across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The study manually coded 15 public videos from three Yiwu-related accounts and compared narrative type, source-proximity cues, product demonstration, presenter roles, audiovisual features, views, and engagement rates. The findings indicate that visible source settings, product actions, and stable presenters may support product and seller recognition. However, repetitive price-led promotion, incomplete localisation, limited dialogue, and uneven algorithmic exposure constrain interpretation. Reach and proportional interaction also produced different account rankings, so engagement metrics cannot establish trust, understanding, sales, or causal narrative effects. The study recommends diversified problem-solution and process narratives, accurate market-specific subtitles, visible response practices, and coordinated content series. It extends short-video research to small-commodity trade and offers practical guidance for export-oriented merchants with limited translation and production resources.

Keywords: TikTok, Yiwu Small Commodities, Narrative Strategies, Cross-cultural Communication, Algorithmic Dependency

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background and significance

Short-form video and social commerce have changed how small suppliers present products overseas. Yiwu links small-commodity suppliers, traders, logistics services, and international buyers. An official reply from the Yiwu Municipal People's Government reported that the city's cross-border e-commerce transaction value reached RMB 140.093 billion in 2024, an increase of 15.63%, with more than 260,000 related business entities [1]. This establishes the setting's scale but does not isolate TikTok's contribution.

TikTok is institutionally visible within Yiwu's platform strategy. A 2025 local-government report listed TikTok among 17 global e-commerce platforms at a Yiwu industry event [2]. An earlier report documented a TikTok Shop recruitment conference in the city [3]. These records justify TikTok as a case platform without proving superior sales. The relevant question is how merchants turn

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inexpensive, visually similar commodities into narratives that overseas viewers can understand, trust, and remember.

This paper focuses on source-proximity authenticity and low-language-dependency product demonstration. Source proximity shows markets, factories, packaging, sourcing work, and seller roles; low-language dependency lets action, comparison, process, or outcome carry the message. These devices may help merchants with limited translation resources reach international audiences.

1.2. Literature review

Research on digital storytelling demonstrates that short-video meaning emerges from the interplay of viewpoint, everyday content, editing, rhythm, and cultural awareness. Luo et al. found that prize-winning videos about China combined traditional narrative competence with digital resources and balanced Chinese and international cultural awareness [4]. In a study of 471 Douyin videos on traditional craftsmanship, He et al. identified four narrative dimensions and ten elements linked to audience interaction [5]. Although cultural-heritage videos differ from commodity advertising, both studies support a multimodal framework in which objects, places, people, sounds, and pacing jointly organise meaning.

Trust research provides a second foundation for understanding audience response. Ruangkanjanases et al. reported that self-disclosure was associated with mass trust both directly and through perceived similarity among TikTok users [6]. For small merchants, showing a seller's role, workplace, and routine may therefore operate as more than background decoration: it may reduce uncertainty and create relational familiarity. Gao et al. similarly found that social presence, co-presence, and physical presence were positively related to impulse purchase intention in short-video settings, with customer inspiration acting as a mediator [7]. These results do not prove that factory footage drives purchases, but they clarify why visible access to the source and human presence can matter.

Persuasion and community studies further emphasise relational rather than purely promotional communication. Sheng et al. found that two-sided messages and emotional appeals could influence purchase intention through parasocial interaction and perceived value [8]. Ren et al. argued that language and cultural co-creation within creator communities can strengthen trust and information diffusion [9]. These findings suggest that a merchant account is more persuasive when it acknowledges audience concerns and maintains a recognisable persona rather than presenting only a catalogue.

Platform distribution complicates content-based explanations. Boeker and Urman's audit found that language, location, follows, likes, and viewing rate influenced TikTok recommendations [10]. From 347 users and 9.2 million recommendations, Zannettou et al. found that users liked videos from followed creators more [11]. Obada and Tugulea linked adapted advertising, credibility, value, and impulse buying [12]. Recent work adds an audiovisual lens. Process reveal can support engagement through authenticity and value [13]. TikTok annotation can distinguish shots, camera, transitions, written and spoken language, sound, music, filters, participants, and events [14]. Subtitle styling can also shape engagement [15]. Therefore, the video—not only its caption—is the unit of analysis, while engagement remains jointly shaped by narrative, audience relationships, and distribution.

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1.3. Research gap

Existing studies explain general mechanisms of digital storytelling, trust, presence, persuasion, and recommendation. However, limited work examines source merchants in industrial clusters who use short videos to communicate about ordinary, low-cost products across cultures. Research also tends to rely on surveys, large platform datasets, cultural creators, or influencer marketing. Less attention is given to comparative account-level evidence showing how market tours, factory processes, product demonstrations, and seller personas appear within a small Yiwu sample. A second gap concerns limits: easily understood visuals may reduce language dependence while still lacking local context, audience dialogue, or cultural adaptation.

1.4. Research framework

To address these gaps, the paper describes 15 videos from three Yiwu-related TikTok accounts. It codes narrative type, source authenticity, functional demonstration, persona, interaction invitation, language dependency, localisation, cultural risk, and audiovisual form. Views and engagement rate represent observable performance: likes, comments, and shares divided by views. The comparison is descriptive, not causal, and evaluates positive effects alongside narrative homogenisation, contextual mismatch, and algorithm-dependent one-way communication.

2. Case description

2.1. Case selection and data scope

The sample contains 15 public TikTok videos, five from each of three Yiwu-related accounts: @yiwu_small_commodities, @letsgoremi, and @frank_chinasourcing. The accounts represent contrasting product and sourcing-service narratives. The sample supports case comparison rather than statistical representation.

All videos were manually coded on September 1, 2026, and public metrics were recorded during the same session. Engagement rate was calculated as likes, comments, and shares divided by views. Coding examined the opening, presenter, language, subtitles, audiovisual form, source setting, product demonstration, and interaction invitation. Promotional claims were not independently verified.

Equal account samples allow direct comparison but do not control for follower count, posting time, product category, paid promotion, or recommendation exposure. Account averages, therefore, describe only the selected posts.

2.2. Account profiles and content characteristics

The accounts use distinct narrative formats. @yiwu_small_commodities relies on low-price claims and catalogue-style displays. @letsgoremi combines product demonstrations, market settings, contact invitations, and a sourcing-guide persona. @frank_chinasourcing uses a stable presenter and subtitled English explanations of sourcing services. Table 1 links each account's dominant narrative format with its mean views and engagement rate, providing the basis for Section 2.3.

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Table 1. Descriptive comparison of the three sampled TikTok accounts

Account	Videos	Main Narrative Pattern	Average Views	Average Engagement Rate
@yiwu_small_commodities	5	Repeated low-price product display	230,280	2.01%
@letsgoremi	5	Product demonstration and sourcing guide persona	442,557	5.45%
@frank_chinasourcing	5	Direct-to-camera service and trust narrative	143,360	4.06%

Source: Author-coded sample of 15 public TikTok videos; metrics captured on September 1 2026. Engagement Rate = (Likes + Comments + Shares) / Views.

2.3. Observable communication performance

Mean engagement rates differed across the three narrative formats. Demonstration-led @letsgoremi recorded 5.45%, presenter-led @frank_chinasourcing recorded 4.06%, and catalogue-oriented @yiwu_small_commodities recorded 2.01%. Product demonstrations make it easier for viewers to understand how an item works. A regular presenter can also make the seller easier to recognise. These features may partly explain why the two person-led accounts received stronger engagement in this sample. These results do not mean that the narrative format alone caused the difference. Product appeal, existing audience relationships, posting conditions, and TikTok's recommendation system may also have affected engagement [10, 11].

Reach followed a different pattern: @yiwu_small_commodities averaged more views than @frank_chinasourcing despite lower engagement. Exposure and proportional interaction are therefore separate outcomes.

Comments and audience locations were not analysed, so the figures indicate observable engagement rather than verified trust, purchasing, or cross-cultural understanding. Table 2 grounds the narrative interpretation in V007's audiovisual features.

Table 2. Manual audiovisual coding example: Video V007

Variable	Observed Feature	Interpretive Boundary
Format	English; no subtitles, on-screen text, or background music; one continuous take	Records the observed audiovisual form
Opening composition	Remy, the backpack, and a crowded market stall are visible together	Provides an observable combination of product, presenter, and source setting
Early action	Carrying mode changes within the first four seconds	Functions as an observable product hook
On-screen text	No subtitles or on-screen text	Manually observed across the video.
Audio	English speech; no background music	Speech and the absence of music were manually coded

Source: Author-coded observation of V007 on September 1 2026. Creator claims were not independently verified.

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3. Analysis of communication effects and identified problems

3.1. Observed positive communication effects

3.1.1. Source proximity as contextual evidence

Source proximity appears in two forms in the sample: visually shown market settings and verbally stated seller identities or locations. V007 places Remy, a backpack, and a crowded stall in a single frame, while V009 shows him guiding viewers through a machinery- or electrical-products market. These videos visually connect the presenter and products to a recognisable sourcing environment. By contrast, V011-V014 rely mainly on Frank's direct-to-camera statements about his name, Yiwu location, identity checking, importing, and cooperation services.

Research on TikTok self-disclosure indicates that identity and context can support trust formation through perceived similarity [6]. Presence research suggests that social and physical presence can influence purchase-related intentions [7]. The account comparison is consistent with the possibility that a stable presenter and source of information give viewers more reasons to interact: @frank_chinasourcing recorded a mean engagement rate of 4.06%, compared with 2.01% for the catalogue-oriented @yiwu_small_commodities. However, the sample is too small to attribute this difference solely to source proximity.

The evidence concerns recognizability, not verified authenticity. V009 does not show completed procurement or quality inspection, and V011-V014 do not document real orders, warehouse work, or service outcomes. These features may make the commercial source more recognisable, but they do not verify product quality, service performance, or the trustworthiness of transactions.

3.1.2. Visual demonstration and partial cross-cultural intelligibility

Visible product action supplies the clearest low-language-dependency evidence in the sample. V007 shows the backpack, two carrying forms, and strap details. V008 depicts a phone-flashlight test in which no light is visible through the curtain in the recorded shot. V010 depicts spray passing through a shoe upper and compares shoe weights. These actions make the basic product-feature relationship partially understandable before all spoken details are processed.

The demonstrations illustrate how a recurring guide persona can combine visible product action with source context. Digital storytelling research emphasises that image, viewpoint, editing, and rhythm work together [4]. Narrative elements can correspond to different interaction behaviours [5]. A TikTok-specific framework similarly supports separate analysis of framing, speech, sound, written text, and transitions [14].

The demonstrations also have evidential limits. The curtain test is informal rather than standardised, and the shoe actions do not certify breathability, comfort, or durability. Videos without subtitles may communicate a visible feature while leaving service details, standards, units, and contact instructions unclear. Subtitle research indicates that text design can affect accessibility and engagement [15]. Visual demonstration may therefore support potential cross-cultural intelligibility, but accurate, audience-specific subtitles remain necessary.

3.1.3. Persona and interaction as relationship-building cues

Person-led narration gives otherwise interchangeable products and services a stable social identity. Remy appears as a sourcing guide who demonstrates products, visits markets, and invites contact.

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Frank repeatedly introduces himself as a business partner in China and discusses identity checks, importing, product searching, and long-term cooperation. These recurring roles make the accounts more recognisable than an anonymous catalogue.

This interpretation is consistent with research connecting persuasive messages, parasocial interaction, and perceived value [8]. Research also identifies potential for trust in creator-community communication [9]. However, calls to contact the seller serve as invitations to interact; they do not indicate sustained dialogue or successful customer relationships. In V013, Frank claims to have helped approximately 200 customers, but the sample provides no independent evidence to verify this number. Because comments were not analysed, the videos demonstrate stable personas and relationship cues, not verified trust, customer satisfaction, or successful cooperation.

Taken together, the person-led and demonstrative examples suggest that a recognisable presenter, visible product action, and clearer source information may provide stronger relationship cues than repeated catalogue-style promotion. This remains an interpretation of the sampled content rather than evidence of a causal effect on audience response.

3.2. Identified problems and limitations

3.2.1. Narrative homogenisation and weak differentiation

The first limitation is repetition without narrative development. V001-V005 repeatedly use low-price claims, general-merchandise images, and similar contact endings. V001-V003 use the "twenty cents" format, while V004 and V005 promise opportunities to make one million dollars in 2026. On-screen numbers claiming 3,000, 10,000, or 18,000 product types, together with the claim of no middleman, remain promotional statements rather than independently verified facts.

The numerical pattern adds an important qualification. @yiwu_small_commodities averaged 230,280 views, exceeding @frank_chinasourcing's 143,360 average, yet its 2.01% engagement rate was about half of Frank's 4.06%. V001 received 512,600 views, whereas V004 received 99,300; V005 received 270,900 views and 464 likes. The variation indicates that reach alone does not equal proportional interaction. The lower mean engagement rate coincides with a repetitive low-price format, but the small sample does not establish that repetition was responsible for the lower rate. Product appeal, timing, and algorithmic distribution may also contribute [10, 11].

3.2.2. Cultural context and localisation gaps

The second limitation is incomplete localisation. The sampled videos rarely identify a target country or clarify local units, shipping expectations, minimum order quantities, compliance information, or market-specific use. English may increase accessibility for some viewers, but it does not by itself constitute localisation. Videos without subtitles create an additional gap: a viewer may understand a curtain or shoe test while missing qualifications, service conditions, or spoken contact information.

Digital storytelling about China is more effective when cultural awareness is balanced across domestic and international perspectives [4]. Adapted advertising is also associated with more positive attitudes, greater credibility, and greater perceived value in TikTok research [12]. In the sample, grammatically awkward phrases and unsupported price or quality statements may weaken professional credibility for buyers considering larger orders.

The analytical problem is not simply too much or too little language. Visual action can reduce linguistic dependence, but wholesale terms and risk-sensitive information cannot always be shown. Effective cross-cultural narration should keep product actions visually simple while using accurate

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subtitles to clarify units, minimum order quantities, materials, certification, delivery conditions, and target-market terminology.

3.2.3. One-way communication and algorithm dependence

The third limitation is the distance between an invitation and sustained interaction. Several videos ask viewers to choose a product or contact the seller, but the dataset cannot confirm whether the questions received timely or useful responses. Without visible reply practices, frequently asked questions, or audience-led follow-up videos, communication can stop after initial exposure. This matters for buyers who may need clarification about customisation, minimum orders, payment, shipping, or standards.

Algorithmic dependence further restricts interpretation. TikTok recommendations respond to language, location, follows, likes, and viewing behaviour [10]. Engagement also differs for followed and non-followed creators [11]. Therefore, observed reach cannot be attributed to the narrative format alone.

One outlier makes this limitation especially clear: V006 generated approximately 95% of the views in the @letsgoremi subsample. Its performance may reflect product appeal, follower relationships, posting conditions, paid exposure, recommendation distribution, and narrative choices. The account comparison should therefore not be interpreted as a stable ranking of account quality.

Engagement rate should therefore remain descriptive. A useful interpretation separates three stages: platform distribution produces exposure, narrative features may help viewers recognise the product or source, and responsive communication may sustain a relationship. The current dataset measures the first stage and observes features relevant to the second, but it does not verify the third. Recurring presenters, consistent source information, multilingual frequently asked questions, and audience-led follow-up posts could create continuity across algorithmic fluctuations. The main risk is allowing temporary algorithmic exposure to substitute for a direct, recognisable, and culturally responsive relationship with potential buyers.

4. Strategic recommendations for narrative optimization and cross-cultural engagemen

The problems identified in Section 3 require changes to content design as well as account management. The following recommendations address repetitive promotion, incomplete localisation, one-way communication, and dependence on uneven recommendation exposure. They retain the sample's useful features, especially visible product action and recognisable presenters, while adding information that international viewers need to evaluate products and sourcing services.

4.1. Diversifying narrative repertoires: from price-led promotion to problem-solution architectures

Merchants should replace repeated price claims and catalogue-style displays with a wider range of narrative structures. A problem-solution video can begin with a specific use difficulty and then show how the product addresses it. A process video can follow material checking, packaging, order preparation, or handover to a logistics provider, provided that each stage is actually visible rather than merely claimed. This approach would extend the source-proximity cues identified in V007 and V009 and make product differences easier to recognise. Process-oriented presentation has been associated with stronger consumer engagement in short-video marketing [13]. Merchants could also

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create linked series, such as a product's movement from supplier selection to port delivery. A series gives each post a distinct function while preserving a consistent account identity.

4.2. Enhancing cultural-linguistic accessibility through precision subtitling and contextual adaptation

Localisation should extend beyond the use of spoken English. Videos should provide accurate subtitles and on-screen details for units, minimum order quantities, materials, certification, delivery conditions, and other terms that affect a purchasing decision. Where relevant, metric measurements should be paired with the units commonly used in the target market. A video should also identify its intended country or use context when regulations, customs procedures, or product expectations differ. TikTok's audiovisual form requires coordinated analysis of speech, written text, sound, framing, and transitions, while subtitle design can influence accessibility and engagement [14, 15]. Risk-sensitive information should therefore appear in readable text or a pinned clarification instead of being left to a brief visual demonstration. A review by a bilingual creator or translator would further reduce grammatical errors and culturally inappropriate wording.

4.3. Cultivating relational continuity: mitigating algorithmic dependency via visible responsiveness

Accounts should make their response practices visible. Creators can answer recurring questions through video replies, develop multilingual frequently asked question posts, and publish follow-ups on customisation, payment, shipping, or standards. These actions would provide evidence of continued communication beyond a closing invitation to make contact. A consistent presenter can also help viewers recognise who is responsible for the account, while questions gathered from different markets can guide later videos. Research on persuasive communication and creator communities indicates that parasocial interaction and sustained community communication may support audience relationships [8, 9]. Because follows, language, location, and viewing behaviour can affect recommendations [10, 11], a sequence of connected responses is more useful than relying on one unusually successful post. Customer-generated unboxing or product-use videos may be invited, but permission and the commercial relationship should be stated clearly.

4.4. Integrating multimodal narratives with platform-specific governance logic

These changes should operate as one production process. Before posting, a merchant can check whether the opening shows a clear problem or product action, whether the source and presenter are identifiable, whether essential trade information is available in accurate text, and whether the post creates a specific opportunity for follow-up. Resource-limited merchants can begin by adding subtitles and clarifying trade terms in existing videos with high view counts, then develop recurring problem-solution or process series. Performance should be reviewed through both reach and engagement rate because the present sample shows that these indicators can diverge. This coordinated approach may improve consistency and cultural responsiveness without treating platform exposure as evidence of trust, understanding, or sales.

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5. Conclusion

5.1. Key findings

This study examined how source proximity, visual product demonstration, and presenter roles operate in TikTok videos about Yiwu small commodities. The 15-video comparison found three distinct account profiles. The demonstrative and person-led accounts recorded higher sampled engagement rates than the repetitive catalogue-oriented account, while the account with higher average reach did not always achieve stronger proportional interaction. The findings, therefore, separate exposure from engagement and show why platform metrics cannot confirm trust, understanding, or purchase behaviour. Visible markets and product actions may make a seller or product feature easier to recognise across language differences, but informal tests, promotional claims, incomplete localisation, limited dialogue, and algorithmic distribution restrict that potential. The proposed response is to diversify narrative formats, clarify market-specific information through accurate subtitles, build visible reply practices, and coordinate these elements across a continuing series of posts.

5.2. Research significance

The study extends the discussion of short-video storytelling beyond influencers and cultural-heritage communication to the everyday trade of inexpensive products within an industrial cluster. For Yiwu merchants and similar export-oriented small businesses, it offers a practical distinction between attracting views and communicating enough context for an international buyer to evaluate a product or service. The framework also provides a manageable way to review audiovisual evidence, language demands, presenter identity, and interaction cues when translation and production resources are limited.

5.3. Limitations and future research

The study remains limited by its small, purposive sample and descriptive design. Manual coding of public videos cannot control for follower count, posting time, product category, paid exposure, or recommendation conditions. Comment content, audience location, completed transactions, customer satisfaction, and actual cross-cultural understanding were not measured. Future research could combine a larger video sample with surveys or interviews involving viewers from several markets. Controlled comparisons could test subtitle, presenter, and demonstration formats over time. Such methods would help distinguish narrative effects from algorithmic exposure and provide stronger evidence about trust, purchase intention, and audience understanding.

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