

# IShowSpeed's China Tour: Analysis of Social Media Influencer Marketing Strategies and Effects in Cross-Cultural Communication

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**Abstract:** In the era of global digitalization, social-media influencer marketing has become a central tool in cross-cultural communication. However, existing research often focuses on strategy effectiveness within a single cultural context, leaving cross-cultural scenarios underexplored. This paper takes the 2025 China tour of IShowSpeed as a case study to systematically examine influencer marketing strategies and effects in cross-cultural communication. The study finds that the tour used four major strategies — content localization, sustaining an authentic persona, showcasing real scenarios, and cross-platform dissemination — and that these strategies produced mixed (both positive and negative) outcomes in a cross-cultural setting. Based on the analysis, the paper offers practical implications for tourism destinations seeking to leverage influencer marketing more effectively.

**Keywords:** Influencer marketing; Cross-cultural communication; Social media.

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## 1. Introduction

In the globalized digital communication era, influencer marketing has become a core tool for transnational cultural exchange and tourism destination promotion by relying on the immediacy and interactivity of social media. It successfully shifts information dissemination from unidirectional transmission to bidirectional co-creation through a four-dimensional linkage of "person-content-platform-audience", showing unique and important value in cultural penetration and tourism behavior guidance. However, existing research mostly focuses on single cultural contexts, lacking exploration on how to conduct influencer marketing via social media in cross-cultural communication, leaving tourism destinations and enterprises without clear theoretical guidance and reference experience in practice.

The international internet celebrity IShowSpeed's 2025 China tour provides a highly valuable case to fill this gap. Specifically, from March 24 to April 7, 2025, the top American YouTube blogger IShowSpeed (real name Darren Watkins Jr.) embarked on his first China tour, intensively visiting 8 cities including Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, and Hong Kong, China. Through high-intensity real-time live streaming, he showed global audiences an unfiltered modern face of China: experiencing high-speed rail and 5G technology, exploring cultural heritage like the Great Wall, Forbidden City, and Shaolin Temple, participating in market interactions like Chongqing hot pot and street lion dance, and breaking language barriers with his humorous style. This trip triggered phenomenal attention, with peak single-day live broadcast viewership reaching 7.15 million, and his YouTube channel subscriptions increasing from about 37 million to over 38 million (38.4 million as of April 8, 2025), adding over 1 million subscribers during the trip [1]. The live broadcast attracted global audiences, especially sparking heated discussions among Western youth. This China tour is not only an extension of IShowSpeed's personal influence in the transnational field but also formed a "global live broadcast - local secondary creation" communication chain. Overseas

audiences re-understood China through his perspective, while domestic netizens participated in the meaning production of content through secondary creation, making it a cross-cultural communication event that combines personal influence characteristics with Chinese destination cultural display.

In view of this, this paper takes IShowSpeed's China tour as a research object, aiming to achieve the following goals: sort out the key influencer marketing strategies used in IShowSpeed's China tour; analyze the dual positive and negative effects triggered by these strategies in cross-cultural communication; and based on the above analysis, provide useful references for tourism destinations to better utilize influencer marketing in the future.

## 2. Conceptual Definitions

### (1) Social Media Influencers

In this paper, social media influencers (SMIs) are defined as online personalities who develop and present personal IPs through content creation and sharing on social platforms, and who build broad influence across cultures. Their content can cover travel experiences, cultural exploration, lifestyle, and other domains. Unlike earlier literature that confined SMIs to "native social-media stars" [2], the boundary between them and traditional celebrities has blurred: an individual can simultaneously be a social-media user and a recognized public figure with persuasive power over followers' decisions [3].

In cross-cultural settings, influencers convert transnational cultural experiences and destination scenes into cross-platform content through livestreams, short videos, and similar formats. They not only showcase their exploration of foreign cultures but also reinforce an "authentic persona" via spontaneous interactions, helping establish cognitive connections with audiences from different cultural backgrounds. Beyond topical expertise, they cultivate perceived similarity through personality traits and value expressions — for example, curiosity about and respect for unfamiliar cultures — which narrows psychological distance and strengthens persuasion. From a marketing perspective,

these influencers act as “cultural intermediaries”: they operate personal IPs while translating information between cultures. Destination managers and businesses can collaborate with them to convey cultural meanings, craft destination images, and motivate attitudinal or behavioral shifts among diverse audiences. This collaboration’s core value lies in moving beyond official narratives and delivering cultural symbols in everyday, emotionally resonant ways through a personal vantage point.

#### (2) Influencer Marketing

Influencer marketing refers to promotional strategies that harness the advantages of social media influencers to endorse brands, products, or services [4]. In this study, the term specifically denotes strategies that employ influencers’ cross-cultural reach to promote cultural symbols, destination images, or cross-cultural services, thereby encouraging recognition and action among audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds. As a novel approach to cross-cultural communication in the digital age, influencer marketing has grown rapidly alongside increased interaction between transnational creators and multicultural followers. Unlike traditional broadcast media’s one-way output, influencer marketing leverages influencers’ ability to “translate” culture so that audiences receive foreign-culture information in ways consistent with their own cognitive habits.

Information flow in this model is multidirectional: audiences learn about other cultures via influencers (e.g., overseas viewers learning about China through livestreams) but also provide local perspectives back via comments and derivative creations. This interactivity reduces information asymmetry and reshapes power relations in cross-cultural communication. For tourism stakeholders, the main objective of investing in cross-cultural influencer marketing is to use the influencer as a bridge that addresses heterogeneous audience information needs — some are interested in infrastructure, others in cultural traditions — thereby enhancing perceived value and emotional connection to the destination.

#### (3) Cross-Cultural Communication

Systematic study of cross-cultural communication began with Edward T. Hall’s *The Silent Language*, where the concept was first explicitly proposed; Hall is therefore widely regarded as the founding figure in the field. In simple terms, cross-cultural communication refers to exchanges between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds that are based on differing cultural concepts and representational systems [5]. As communication scholar Guo Qingguang emphasizes, its core is not merely message transmission but the dynamic process of encoding and decoding messages within specific cultural contexts — the sender’s expression and the receiver’s interpretation are both deeply shaped by their cultural backgrounds [6]. Fundamentally, cross-cultural communication is an ancient form of cultural interaction that, in the social-media era, has evolved into an everyday survival mechanism. With mobile internet ubiquity and McLuhan’s “global village” notion becoming reality, it’s no longer limited to official exchanges between nations but has become routine interaction among people from different cultural backgrounds. For tourism destinations, cross-cultural communication is a primary channel for cultural presentation and global image building, and it plays an important role in promoting cultural diversity.

In influencer-led scenarios, cross-cultural communication shows new characteristics: influencers act as cultural

intermediaries whose words and actions are encoded as cultural symbols, and diverse audiences decode them according to their own frameworks. This bilateral process can foster resonance and combined influence, or it can produce cultural friction and conflict.

### 3. Analysis of Influencer Marketing Strategies

#### (1) Attempts at Content Localization and Local Collaboration

IShowSpeed’s China tour demonstrated multilayered attempts at localizing content. On the one hand, he actively immersed himself in traditional Chinese cultural settings: learning Shaolin kung fu, performing stunts on the Great Wall, experiencing Sichuan opera face-changing and traditional acupuncture, and sampling local foods like Chongqing hotpot and Changsha stinky tofu; he also embraced modern Chinese achievements, test-driving BYD electric cars, trying advanced concept flying cars, buying a foldable phone from Huawei, and efficiently using high-speed rail to shuttle among eight cities. These participatory interactions showcased both China’s dynamism and the authenticity of everyday life, extending cultural symbols beyond tradition to the country’s contemporary diversity.

On the other hand, he intentionally partnered with local KOLs and integrated deeply with Chinese internet culture. For example, during the Chongqing leg, a local influencer dubbed “China Trump” accompanied him to neighborhood markets and barbershops; in Changsha, he collaborated with entertainer Da Zhangwei on a variety program, sparking audience buzz about the “planetary collision” of styles. By leveraging familiar local influencers, his team used viewers’ cultural decoding capabilities to bridge communication gaps and increase relatability. Sincere, natural participation often generated positive resonance among viewers, while some staged “performative” segments were criticized as somewhat contrived. Overall, the localization efforts increased topic visibility and intimacy but also raised questions about perceived authenticity.

#### (2) Sustaining and Adjusting an Authentic Persona

IShowSpeed preserved his established online persona of high energy, excitement, and unscripted livestreaming during the China tour; long, continuous single-take live streams and unfiltered presentation were selling points that made viewers feel as if they were conversing with a friend. Chinese netizens nicknamed him “hyperthyroid guy” to describe his consistently exuberant state. This approachable atmosphere created strong empathy among fans, prompting extensive secondary editing, translation, and creative remixes on platforms such as Weibo and Douyin, which helped spread his content to local users. His perceived authenticity and down-to-earth content strengthened community belonging and fan stickiness; fans came to view his livestreams as a “real China” through their own eyes.

At the same time, the team made subtle adjustments to avoid cultural friction. In joint public settings, he appeared to intentionally reduce controversial gestures or language that had previously appeared in his streams, aligning with local expectations of public order. In short, while retaining his core style, he softened certain behaviors to balance audience acceptability. Prior research indicates that influencers’ “authentic” image often stems from their perceived similarity to ordinary people [7]; this was evident in the tour, as many

fans commented that he felt “not distant,” strengthening his influence.

### (3) Presenting and Experiencing Realistic Scenes

IShowSpeed’s livestreams transformed everyday Chinese scenes into spectacles for overseas audiences. Unscripted broadcasts showcased modern elements like high-speed rail and urban nightscapes — for instance, riding high-speed trains in Chongqing and enjoying the two-river night view from a sightseeing boat — presenting a “cyberpunk” modern urban aesthetic to foreign viewers. The Chongqing streams featured large-scale lighting on both sides of the Yangtze River and a “Welcome to Chongqing” projection, using nightscapes as visual symbols of Chinese modern cities. He also engaged deeply with local cultural practices: training with a Shaolin master for a day, asking about Sichuan cuisine preparation in restaurants, and dancing with street performers — all of which enhanced participation and credibility. Media reports noted that one teaching interaction at Shaolin Temple resonated strongly with viewers, with related Instagram videos surpassing 150 million views. Overall, immersive presentation of authentic scenes combined with high-saturation visuals converted viewers’ cognitive attention into interest and emotional engagement.

### (4) Cross-Platform Dissemination and Interaction

The tour followed a hub-and-spoke cross-platform dissemination pattern. YouTube livestreams served as the primary vehicle, generating tens of millions of views and subscriber growth due to the platform’s global reach. Chinese fans then widely reposted and reworked clips on platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu, adding Chinese subtitles, humorous commentary, or edited highlights, which helped the content spread rapidly among domestic youth. Significantly, Chinese state and mainstream media also covered and redistributed segments: CCTV, Xinhua News Agency, and Global Times produced reports and clips — for example, CCTV created an eight-minute special on his visit. This combination of grassroots buzz and official attention increased credibility and elevated the topic from entertainment to cultural exchange, attracting audiences (including older demographics) who typically do not follow influencer content. Moreover, other Western media figures and opinion leaders praised the tour for showing American audiences a seldom-seen side of China. In short, the process exemplified true bidirectional flow: a Western influencer’s content was locally reworked and re-contextualized, and Chinese content then reached global fans through online channels, jointly amplifying the cultural exchange’s impact.

## 4. Effects in Cross-Cultural Communication

### 4.1. Positive Effects: From Cognition to Behavior Change

#### (1) Cognitive Reframing: Breaking Stereotypes and Building a More Nuanced Image of China

IShowSpeed’s live broadcasts, with their unvarnished authenticity and immersive quality, effectively challenged and partially corrected overseas viewers’ stereotypes about China. By showing clean, modern streets, efficient high-speed rail, warm everyday interactions, and vibrant urban life — scenes often overlooked or misrepresented by Western media narratives — he presented a more prosperous, ordinary, and multifaceted China. This visual shock prompted many Western viewers to express surprise and curiosity, with

comment threads full of “I want to visit China” remarks, indicating a shift from entrenched biases to a more objective and diverse image. This demonstrates the power of vivid, personalized content to break information barriers and reshape international perceptions.

#### (2) Cultural Co-interpretation: Grassroots Collaboration That Narrows the Understanding Gap

The tour unexpectedly fostered “cultural co-interpretation” among international and Chinese netizens. Viewers from different backgrounds formed ad hoc collaborative communities in comment sections to translate, explain cultural references, slang, and local customs, jointly interpreting complex content. This decentralized, audience-driven collaboration greatly reduced information loss due to language and cultural differences, creating a real-time, mutually supportive cross-cultural dialogue space. It not only helped diverse viewers understand the content more accurately but also built bridges for cultural exchange.

#### (3) Behavioral Triggering: Stimulating Curiosity and Travel Intentions

Crucially, IShowSpeed’s content had tangible effects on audience behavior. Analyses show that at peak livestream times and during subsequent circulation, global searches for “China travel” on Google Trends rose significantly and correlated with his itinerary. For example, after he experienced BYD vehicles and Huawei foldable phones, searches related to those tech products spiked, indicating that viewers began to include “technology experiences” in their travel expectations. Even before IShowSpeed’s tour, visa facilitation reforms had quietly spurred new global travel trends to China; an increasing number of foreign creators were documenting China’s multidimensional appeal, showing classical gardens alongside smart tech and clean streets with ubiquitous mobile payments. These vivid images and experiences are reshaping global perceptions and strongly driving potential tourists’ intentions. Many viewers converted their immersion into genuine interest in traveling to China, demonstrating that the tour’s influence extended beyond cognition to actual behavioral intention, yielding concrete benefits for international promotion of Chinese destinations.

### 4.2. Negative Effects: Cultural Clash and Risks

On the negative side, IShowSpeed’s spontaneous interaction style sometimes provoked clashes in cultural values. For instance, his exaggerated reactions at Shaolin Temple were criticized by some Chinese viewers as “commodifying” or trivializing traditional culture. This reflects a divergence between Western norms that prioritize individual expression and Chinese norms that emphasize reverence for tradition. While energetic expressiveness is part of his personal brand and appeals to fans in a Western social-media context, it can appear disrespectful in certain cultural sites. This value conflict underscores the need for heightened cultural sensitivity in cross-cultural marketing.

Additionally, IShowSpeed’s controversial history posed reputation risks. Past episodes involving racial slurs led to problematic fan behaviors during this tour — some fans presented bananas and racist comments — which garnered global attention and created embarrassment for official organizers. Such incidents highlight entrenched biases in cross-cultural interactions and show that only prolonged engagement can gradually mitigate these issues. Furthermore, disorganization at the Hong Kong stop became a cautionary example: local media and officials criticized chaotic

arrangements, noting a lack of iconic events and ongoing fan disruptions. Reports suggested “poor coordination” and warned that the livestream might harm Hong Kong’s image. These negative episodes illustrate that overlooking cultural and management differences can lead influencer activities to backfire. Overall, the tour’s mixed effects reflect the structural tension between IShowSpeed’s flamboyant personal style and the cultural norms prevalent in China: his authenticity attracts audiences seeking personalized content but also increases the chance of cross-cultural conflict and risk.

## 5. Conclusions and Implications

### 5.1. Conclusions

IShowSpeed’s China tour demonstrated the “double-edged” nature of influencer-led tourism promotion in cross-cultural communication. On the positive side, through content localization, sustained authenticity, realistic scene presentation, and cross-platform dissemination, the team broke cultural barriers and generated curiosity and favorable perceptions among overseas audiences. On the negative side, influencer marketing strategies also carried cultural risks, such as racial incidents and unfavorable image interpretations. Fundamentally, these dual outcomes stem from the tension between IShowSpeed’s highly charged personal expression and Chinese cultural values; his striking yet authentic personal IP can attract attention but may not fully align with cultural expectations that prize modesty and order.

Importantly, the tour produced far more positive than negative effects. This advantage is due in large part to influencer marketing’s distinctive “two-way co-creation” mechanism in cross-cultural contexts: influencers build cultural communication scenarios through content, while followers participate in meaning-making via likes, shares, and debates. Together they form a stakeholder system and emergent norms around the influencer’s content — for example, the interpretive exchanges among Chinese and foreign netizens over IShowSpeed’s livestreams. Within this mechanism, an influencer’s cultural adaptation strategies (such as localized expression adjustments) and followers’ cross-cultural feedback (acceptance or critique) interact to shape attitude and behavioral shifts among diverse audiences, influencing destination image correction and tourism intent formation.

### 5.2. Practical Implications

Based on the above analysis, this paper offers suggestions for practitioners:

For influencers: When entering overseas markets, influencers should adapt at the symbolic level (using local languages, presenting local scenes) and adjust interaction styles and content tone to match local communication habits. More deeply, influencers must respect cultural taboos and value systems to avoid sensitive missteps. Practically, they should find a balance between maintaining an authentic persona and demonstrating cultural respect. Authenticity fuels an influencer’s vitality, but cultural respect is equally essential to win new audiences without alienating existing followers.

For tourism brands and companies: When selecting international influencers, establish a comprehensive evaluation and governance framework. Assess candidates on audience overlap with the brand’s target market, cultural fit

of the influencer’s image and style, and prior risk history. Avoid relying solely on follower counts to minimize partnership risks. Contracts can include “cultural compliance clauses” that define content boundaries and responsibilities — for example, forbid certain topics or behaviors and stipulate remedies for inappropriate content. Such clauses help guide creative output and reduce the likelihood of public crises.

For destinations: To leverage influencers for cross-cultural communication, destinations should combine “official guidance + grassroots participation.” Official bodies can anchor campaign narratives through curated themes, experiential routes, and background materials to help influencers accurately present core destination values. Official guidance ensures alignment with desired images and reduces deviation. At the grassroots level, encourage diverse content creation and participation so that different creators and ordinary users can share authentic perspectives. In the social-media era, audiences often trust peer-level sharing more than official messaging. Destinations should therefore cultivate an open and inclusive environment that encourages engaging, informative content to emerge organically. By complementing serious narratives with entertaining expressions, official authority and grassroots vitality can jointly ensure depth, accuracy, appeal, and approachability.

In conclusion, The IShowSpeed China tour shows that the goal of influencer marketing in cross-cultural communication is not to erase differences but to manage them. In an age when social media is reshaping global communication, understanding the deep logic of cultural differences and turning that understanding into content innovation is key to effective destination promotion. As more international influencers visit China and more Chinese creators go global, cross-cultural marketing will become routine. We must keep summarizing lessons, improving professional capacity in cross-cultural communication, and, under the premise of respecting cultural diversity, fully exploiting influencer marketing to tell China’s stories well and let the world better understand China.

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