



Mediated Dreams, Lived Realities: A Cross-Cultural Grounded Theory Study of Chongqing’s Image Construction Among German Residents

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Abstract

In an increasingly interconnected yet polarized global landscape, this study critically investigates how German residents in Chongqing, China, cognitively construct perceptions of the city’s image. Employing a constructivist grounded theory, we analyzed in-depth interview data from 17 German residents, triangulated with online public data. Findings reveal a dynamic transition from an initial, online-mediated, symbolically charged “conceptual Chongqing” to an offline, sensorially-engaged “perceived Chongqing.” Online exposure, characterized by prominent visual symbols (e.g., nightscapes, hot pot), simplifies the image, fostering initial impressions. This symbolic cognition, however, often leads to cognitive capture by aestheticized narratives, potentially reinforcing stereotypes. Conversely, offline experiences, involving multi-sensory engagement and direct social interactions, profoundly enrich perceptions, rendering the image vivid and nuanced. Critical points of cognitive dissonance arise where idealized online symbols clash with complex offline realities, prompting emotional fluctuations and perceptual recalibration. This dialectic highlights how mediated representational logics are culturally embodied and negotiated through lived experience, foregrounding active audience roles in critically re-negotiating ‘Other’ representations within a complex intercultural landscape. The study proposes a novel theoretical model of cross-cultural image construction, offering insights into how global narratives, power dynamics, and situated cultural interpretations dynamically converge in shaping place perception in the digital age.

Key words: International communication; Place branding; Cross-cultural understanding; Mediatization; Cultural studies; Power representation

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1. INTRODUCTION

In an interconnected yet often polarized global landscape, the intricate dynamics of international communication are profoundly shaped by accelerating globalization and pervasive digital media influence. While online platforms promise cross-cultural connection, they also present significant challenges: superficial representations, cognitive biases, and the reification of simplified narratives about ‘the Other’ (Couldry, 2000; Said, 1978). Amidst this, strategic city branding takes urgency for urban centers establishing global presence, grappling with opportunity and ethical responsibility. Chinese cities, exemplified by Chongqing, lead this trend, actively promoting their image and gaining organic global digital attention (Chongqing Municipal People’s Government, 2021).

“City image,” a concept explored by Lynch (1960), denotes collective mental representations of urban environments. These are not static reflections but actively constructed through experience, memory, interpersonal communication, and media exposure, profoundly influencing evaluative judgments and affective responses. As cognitive constructions are shaped by socio-cultural backgrounds (Hall, 1976), examining international sojourners offers insight into image formation across cultural boundaries.

Chongqing's growing importance attracts foreign nationals for various purposes. Their evolving perceptions are crucial for understanding its international reception. Recognizing cultural specificity's profound influence (Nisbett, 2003) and varying frameworks for interpreting 'the Other' (Said, 1978), this study focuses on German residents. Germany's long-standing trade with China, particularly Chongqing, makes its nationals pertinent, especially since robust economic ties don't always translate to nuanced national/city images (German Federal Foreign Office, 2023). Beyond economic ties, German residents offer a unique lens to explore how specific cultural predispositions and historical narratives, rooted in distinct socio-political and media landscapes, filter urban identities. German emphasis on efficiency, order, sustainability, and specific notions of "modernity" or "collectivism" may influence their "reading" of a rapidly developing Chinese metropolis, leading to unique appreciations and cognitive frictions. This approach moves beyond generic "Western" perspectives to address nuanced cultural decoding processes in international communication.

Employing a constructivist grounded theory, this study explores German residents' cognitive image construction of Chongqing by addressing:

How do German residents in Chongqing initially encounter and perceive the city's image, particularly through online mediated sources?

How do their offline, lived experiences in Chongqing influence and transform these initial perceptions?

What are the key cognitive and emotional dynamics, including potential conflicts or consonances, that arise from the interplay between online-mediated images and offline sensory experiences in their construction of Chongqing's image?

This research aims to deepen theoretical understanding of cross-cultural city image formation in a globalized, digitally-mediated world, offering a novel model that highlights the critical interplay of online projections, embodied experiences, and culturally inflected cognitive dissonance, thus providing insights for more authentic international city branding and cross-cultural communication strategies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of city image, originating from Lynch (1960), has evolved to incorporate social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions (Govers & Go, 2009). The communication perspective examines how city images are constructed, disseminated, and received by publics across cultures (Kavaratzis, 2004), viewing city image as public perceptions shaped by information encoding and audience decoding through various channels (Thussu, 2006).

In international communication, a critical focus is external audiences' interpretation of a city's presented identity. Research has investigated various communicators, content, and channel effectiveness (Anholt, 2007). The decoding process recognizes active, culturally-schemata-shaped meaning-making by audiences (Hall, 1980). This agency is not limitless; it operates within complex representational structures and power dynamics. Said (1978) demonstrated how 'the Orient' is often constructed via a pervasive Western gaze, reinforcing pre-existing hierarchies and simplifying narratives.

Building on mediatization theories (Hjarvard, 2008), we view media as institutions and logics that fundamentally shape social interactions and reality. For city image, online representations aren't just "content"; they form a mediated reality that can pre-configure an individual's physical engagement, impacting "pre-lived" experiences. This conceives media not as conduit but as integrated into cultural practices like city branding, producing aestheticized or performative urban representations and highlighting digital communication ecologies in external identity co-construction. Visual communication studies (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) analyze visual grammar. In international contexts, cities' visual self-presentation and foreign audiences' interpretations form complex interplay between intended meaning and culturally-situated decoding. Dominant online visual tropes (e.g., futuristic skylines) risk facilitating Couldry's (2000) 'myth of the mediated center,' where digitally crafted images replace multifaceted reality, potentially leading to facile "image-driven essentialisms" in cross-cultural perception.

Furthermore, contemporary scholarship extends Said's insights into digital landscapes, exploring how platforms and algorithms can perpetuate "platform Orientalism" or "algorithmic essentialism," reducing complexities to decontextualized visual tropes (Hall, 1997). While Hall (1980) emphasized audience agency, critical acknowledgment is needed for how dominant media framings, technological affordances, and global power asymmetries can constrain or subtly direct decoding. Examining German residents' meaning-making becomes crucial to interrogating the ongoing negotiation between institutionally sanctioned narratives and culturally situated reception, highlighting both agency capacity and pervasive representational regimes' influence.

While traditional place branding often focuses on encoding desired images (Anholt, 2007; Kavaratzis, 2004), our study delves into complex, non-linear reception and negotiation. This is especially relevant in asymmetrical power contexts where global media flows, algorithmic biases, and pre-existing cultural narratives significantly influence decoding (Thussu, 2006). This

shifts analytical lens from “what is sent” to “how it is received, negotiated, and even resisted” within specific cultural interpretive communities, critically examining underlying power dynamics of global cultural flows.

Previous studies on Chongqing’s image primarily focused on media representations and technological affordances (Huang, 2020; Wang, 2021; Yang, 2020). While valuable, these content analyses by institutions or “gatekeepers” (Couldry, 2000) often fall short of capturing nuanced audience cognition. Perceptions, particularly across diverse cultural contexts, are deeply shaped by audience cultural heritage (Hofstede, 2001). This study addresses this gap by shifting analytical focus from media texts to the cognitive and affective processes of German residents, to understand how they construct their perceptions of Chongqing from an intercultural and experiential perspective. It moves beyond what is shown to how it is understood, experienced, and critically interpreted.

Table 1
Basic Information for Interviewed German Residents. Participant codes are pseudonyms. Hometown abbreviations refer to German Federal States.

No.	Age	Gender	Family Status	Occupation	Purpose	Duration in Chongqing	Previously Visited Chongqing	Hometown Abbreviation
M1	58	Male	Married	Engineer	Work	One year	No	BY
F1	83	Female	Widowed	Retired	Visiting friends	One year	Yes	NW
M2	21	Male	Unmarried	Student	Study	Two years	No	NI
M3	45	Male	Married	Teacher	Settlement	Long-term	Over ten years	HE
F2	19	Female	Unmarried	Unemployed	Travel	Two weeks	No	BY
F3	47	Female	Married	Teacher	Travel	One week	No	BB
M4	54	Male	Married	Engineer	Travel	Four days	No	SH
M5	25	Male	Unmarried	Student	Study	Six months	No	SL
M6	37	Male	Married	Worker	Work	One year	No	HB
M7	60	Male	Divorced	Lawyer	Travel	Three days	Yes	BE
F4	38	Female	Married	Executive	Work	Six months	No	HH
F5	43	Female	Married	Teacher	Travel	One week	Yes	TH
M8	55	Male	Widowed	Worker	Work	Two years	Yes	SN
F6	15	Female	Unmarried	Student	Study	One year	No	BY
F7	9	Female	Unmarried	Student	Travel	Five days	No	HH
F8	60	Female	Married	Teacher	Visiting friends	One week	No	BB
F9	63	Female	Divorced	Business	Travel	Five days	No	BY

Publicly available online data: YouTube videos (to 2023) featuring Chongqing and user comments provided initial impressions and context on prevalent digital discourses, informing interview guide development and triangulation.

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were primary, mostly individual (n=13), with one focus group (n=4). Interviews were in English or German (participant preference), facilitated by a bilingual interviewer for nuanced

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006, 2014) to explore German residents’ nuanced image construction of Chongqing. Grounded theory, drawing explanatory theory directly from qualitative data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), is well-suited. The constructivist orientation acknowledges researchers’ active role in interpretation and co-construction of meaning (Charmaz, 2006). Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout.

3.1 Data Sources and Participant Recruitment

Data collection involved:

Semi-structured interviews: With 17 German nationals (8 male, 9 female, aged 15-83) who resided or were residing in Chongqing, recruited via purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diversity in purpose (travel, study, work, settlement) and duration (days to over ten years). Ethical approval and informed consent were obtained. (see Table 1 for anonymized details).

expression. Questions explored initial impressions, culture, environment, social life, and perception evolution. Probes explored specific cognitive and affective responses to online/offline experiences. Complementary fieldwork involved observations and informal interactions with field notes from thirty-two site visits (April 2020 - Dec 2023) enriching contextual understanding.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed iterative grounded theory procedures (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015):

Initial/Open Coding: Transcripts and selected online comments were meticulously line-by-line coded to identify concepts. NVivo organized coding. Attention during transcription/translation preserved semantic/pragmatic meaning and cultural expressions, ensuring participant voice integrity.

Focused/Axial Coding: Significant initial codes developed into broader categories, exploring relationships. Constant comparison across interviews and with online data refined categories, properties, and dimensions.

Theoretical Coding & Integration: Categories integrated into an explanatory framework. Memo-writing documented analytical decisions, theoretical insights, and emerging hypotheses. Credibility was primarily established through data triangulation, relying on both in-depth interviews and publicly available online content, which enriched analytical depth and convergence. Furthermore, researcher reflexivity was meticulously maintained through extensive memo-writing throughout the entire coding process. These detailed memos served as an internal audit trail, thoroughly documenting analytical decisions, evolving theoretical insights, and critical self-reflection on cultural positions and potential interpretive biases. The constant comparative method, intrinsic to grounded theory, continually challenged and refined emergent categories against new data, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings. To foster external accountability and confirmability, critical peer debriefing sessions were regularly conducted with an experienced qualitative researcher, providing external perspectives and probing the interpretations for coherence and bias mitigation. Theoretical saturation was continuously monitored, ceasing new data collection when no novel concepts emerged. Finally, transferability was ensured by providing thick descriptions of the research context and participants, allowing readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings. Dependability and confirmability were also sustained through these transparent coding procedures and comprehensive audit trail documentation.

The integration of YouTube data occurred primarily during the initial stages of analysis (see Appendix for details). Common themes identified from relevant videos and their associated comments helped to pinpoint prevalent online symbols of Chongqing. These symbols were then specifically explored during the interviews, facilitating a direct comparison between mediated perceptions and participants' lived experiences.

4. FINDINGS: FROM MEDIATED SYMBOLS TO LIVED REALITIES

Analysis revealed a dynamic, often contested, multi-layered process in which German residents construct Chongqing's cognitive image. This framework (Figure 1) outlines a dialectical transition from online-mediated "conceptual Chongqing" to an offline, sensorially-rich "perceived Chongqing." This journey involves negotiation, dissonance, and emotional labor to reconcile curated expectations with lived realities within a cross-cultural contact zone.

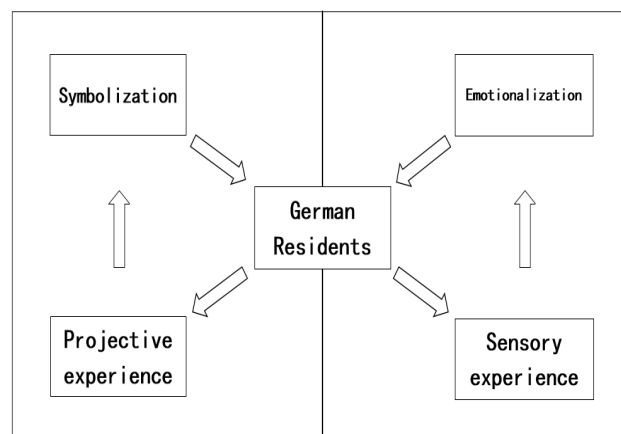


Figure 1
 Multidimensional Interactive Framework of Online Projective and Offline Sensory Experiences

Table 2
 Overview of Emergent Categories from Grounded Theory Analysis

Illustrative Data Themes/Initial Observations (Examples)	Conceptual Labels	Main Categories (Axial Codes)	Core Theoretical Constructs
"Saw amazing night views on YouTube"; "Skyscrapers everywhere, so modern"; "Hongya Cave looked magical in videos"; "3D city"	Visual icons, mediated awe, modern aesthetic, unique topography online	Online Projection of Urban Imagery; Symbolic Simplification	The Mediated Genesis of Image: Online Projective Experiences
"Hot pot smells amazing, so lively"; "Felt the heat, the crowds"; "Talking with locals, they are so warm"; "The city feels alive"	Sensory richness, embodied experience, social interaction, emotional connection	Multi-sensory Immersion; Deepening of Perceptual Nuance; Affective Engagement	Embodied Re-Cognition: The Transformation through Offline Sensory Engagement
"Different from what I saw online"; "Some parts not so new"; "Pace of life is intense"; "Expected X, found Y"	Discrepancy, reality check, cognitive adjustment, emotional responses	Online-Offline Disjuncture; Re-evaluation of Symbols; Affective Responses to Dissonance	Navigating Dissonance: Cognitive and Emotional Conflicts

The development of this framework involved the systematic analysis of participant data through initial, focused, and theoretical coding, leading to the emergence

of several core analytical categories that describe the key stages and dynamics of this image construction process. Table 2 provides an overview of these emergent main

categories and their relationship to the initial conceptual labels derived from the data.

The core categories emerging from the data, and thus forming the main components of the framework depicted in Figure 1, are: (1) The Mediated Genesis of Image: Online Projective Experiences shaping “Conceptual Chongqing”; (2) Embodied Re-Cognition: The Transformation through Offline Sensory Engagement; and (3) Navigating Dissonance: Cognitive and Emotional Conflicts. These will be elaborated below, detailing how elements such as “Symbolization” and “Projective experience” in the online sphere, and “Sensory experience” leading to “Emotionalization” in the offline sphere (as illustrated in Figure 1), manifest within these broader categories.

4.1 The Mediated Genesis of Image: Online Projective Experiences shaping “Conceptual Chongqing”

Initial encounters were largely shaped by online platforms, fostering a “conceptual Chongqing”—an image from stylized visuals and cultural symbols, performing significant framing (Entman, 1993) and often exerting cognitive capture before arrival.

4.1.1 Visual Symbols and the “Prosperous Metropolis” Narrative

Dominant visual symbols encountered online, such as Chongqing’s dramatic nightscapes, ubiquitous skyscrapers, and intricate network of bridges spanning rivers, consistently shaped an initial impression of a “prosperous, modern metropolis.” These potent visual narratives, often presented in short, hyper-real, and captivating video formats, not only simplify the city’s complexity but actively construct a particular imaginary of rapid development and architectural grandeur, often occluding other urban realities. As M2, a student, recalled: “Before I came, all I saw were these incredible videos of the lights at night and the massive buildings. It looked like a futuristic city, super advanced.” This concentrated visual information, while compelling, established an initial cognitive framework that privileged a spectacle of modernity, often acting as a form of cognitive capture where complex realities were distilled into powerful, yet simplistic, symbolic representations. This dynamic is a manifestation of media logic in its global dissemination, foregrounding certain aesthetics for international consumption.

4.1.2 Cultural Markers and the “City of Warmth and Endeavor”

Within the narrative framework of the “City of Warmth and Endeavor,” Chongqing’s urban image is constructed not merely through architectural visuals but is deeply rooted in a constellation of highly symbolized cultural markers. Chongqing hotpot, for instance, is frequently associated with the city’s “passionate” and “fiery”

character, while the fantastical architecture of Hongya Cave often positions it as an almost otherworldly cultural landmark. Simultaneously, the figure of the bangbang (traditional porters), symbolizing resilience and industriousness, emerges frequently in online discourses. As one participant (F6) noted, “I’d read about the bangbang men online and thought it showed the hardworking side of the city.” These symbolic references contribute to an urban portrait of Chongqing as a city that is not only modern but also culturally distinctive—imbued with human warmth, local vitality, and a tenacious spirit.

However, the repeated invocation of such cultural tropes also reveals the inherent risk of commodification. Under the logic of digital platform dissemination, the “spiciness” of hotpot, the “bitterness” of bangbang labor, and the “fantasy” of Hongya Cave are increasingly abstracted from their original socio-cultural contexts and reconstituted as stylized, easily recognizable motifs. This process tends toward a form of folklorization, wherein complex cultural practices and histories are flattened into digestible cultural snapshots for external consumption. While this mode of representation enhances the recognizability and appeal of the city’s image, it simultaneously constrains cultural complexity and dynamism, acting as a form of commodified cultural encoding within the dominant logic of platform international communication. Moreover, such selective cultural representation does not merely shape how outsiders perceive Chongqing; it also subtly disciplines local imaginaries of the city. As the dominant narrative emphasizes themes such as perseverance and fervor, other dimensions of urban life—such as gendered experiences, generational dynamics, and class-based disparities—may be obscured or marginalized. For German participants, steeped in a specific history of cultural self-perception and external viewing (often informed by particular European narratives and sometimes simplified global discourses on ‘the East’), this folklorization of Chinese identity could either reinforce exoticized tropes or, conversely, prompt a critical detachment when encountering a more complex reality offline. In this sense, cultural markers function dually: as instruments of place branding and as semiotic enclosures, reflecting the tensions and constraints faced by local cultures in the age of platformized representation, frequently within asymmetrical global power dynamics.

4.1.3 The Process of Symbolic Simplification: Efficacy and Erasure

This online projective experience, by its nature, involves a process of symbolization and simplification. Complex urban realities are distilled into a few potent symbols (e.g., “cyberpunk city,” “hot pot capital”) that are easily digestible and shareable. While this simplification facilitates rapid impression formation and possesses undeniable communicative efficacy, it simultaneously engages in a form of erasure, flattening

nance and marginalizing alternative narratives that do not conform to the dominant symbolic repertoire. Participants acknowledged that their pre-arrival “conceptual Chongqing” was built on these striking but ultimately selective and strategically amplified symbolic representations, which primed their perceptual frameworks.

4.2 Embodied Re-Cognition: The Transformation through Offline Sensory Engagement

Arrival and immersion in Chongqing initiated a transformative process where the “conceptual Chongqing” was not merely supplemented but actively challenged, enriched, and often significantly altered by direct, multi-sensory offline experiences, leading to a more nuanced “perceived Chongqing.” This shift highlights the epistemological weight of embodied knowledge (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) in challenging the authority of disembodied, mediated representations and enabling a more situated understanding of the urban landscape.

4.2.1 Multi-Sensory Immersion: Beyond the Dominant Visual Gaze

While online images are predominantly visual, offline experiences engage a fuller spectrum of senses. The taste and smell of food, particularly hot pot experienced in its authentic, bustling context, became a powerful conduit for cultural understanding. F2, a tourist, described: “Eating hot pot here, with the noise, the steam, the way everyone shares – it’s totally different from just seeing a picture. You feel the energy.” Similarly, the tactile experience of navigating the city’s undulating terrain (“climbing hills,” as M1, an engineer, put it), the sounds of the bustling streets, and even the pervasive humidity, contributed to a more embodied and visceral understanding of Chongqing, far richer than the “flat images” seen online. This experiential anchoring moved perception beyond the predominantly visual regime of online media, offering a more holistic, if sometimes unsettling, somatic understanding of place that resisted easy symbolization, foregrounding a more profound sense of intercultural engagement.

4.2.2 Social Interaction and Affective Re-alignments

In the process of urban experience, direct interactions with local residents not only reshaped participants’ surface-level perceptions of the city but also triggered deeper affective realignments. As participant F1 remarked, “Online, you see buildings. But once you’re here, it’s the people. The kindness I’ve experienced left the strongest impression.” These face-to-face encounters engendered emotional connections that surpassed the grand narratives or spectacle-driven imaginaries often curated by digital media. They transformed the city from an abstract cultural symbol into an affectively resonant and socially inhabited space, fostering a more authentic form of intercultural empathy and direct dialogue. For instance, observing

Chongqing’s *bangbang* workers laboring in daily life invoked a sense of respect and empathy that far exceeded the flattened or stereotyped representations often seen in videos. As participant M8 stated, “Watching them work every day, you come to understand their hardship and strength in a way no video can show.”

However, affective reconfigurations are neither linear nor uniformly affirmative. These encounters also surfaced the inherent ambivalence and unpredictability of intercultural contact zones (Pratt, 1991), occasionally giving rise to emotional dissonance or discomfort. This textured affective terrain underscores the often-overlooked grey zones in urban experience—where identification and estrangement, empathy and distance, are dynamically negotiated. While online media frequently condense urban life into consumable and aestheticized “Others,” lived interactions can destabilize such reductive narratives, producing both cognitive and emotional frictions. As such, these embodied experiences not only “humanized” the city but also challenged the affective scripts constructed by media imaginaries, foregrounding the contingency, tension, and fluidity inherent in urban image-making and intersubjective encounter (Amin & Thrift, 2002; Sheller, 2004).

4.2.3 Concretization, Dimensionality, and the Unsettling of Certainty

Offline experiences played a crucial role in concretizing and adding dimensionality to previously abstract, symbol-laden representations of Chongqing. The often-evoked “3D city” trope circulating online became more than a visual metaphor when participants physically navigated the city’s layered transportation systems or encountered its striking verticality in everyday routines. These sensory immersions recast the city from a stylized, hypermediated image into a textured, materially grounded urban lifeworld. As M3, a long-term resident and teacher, explained, “You have to live it, breathe it, to start understanding Chongqing. The online stuff is just the very surface.” Such encounters intensified the embodied and affective knowledge of place, lending density and weight to what were formerly flattened symbols.

Yet this process of experiential concretization did not lead to a linear clarification or cognitive resolution. Rather, it often unsettled participants’ prior assumptions, introducing a kind of experiential ambiguity that destabilized the certainty offered by digital portrayals. As M3 further noted, “The more you see, the less you feel you actually know in simple terms.” What emerged, then, was not simply a “richer” or “more real” version of the city, but a transformation in epistemic stance—from confident symbolic recognition to a more unsettled, open-ended grappling with urban complexity. This shift reflects a broader phenomenological dynamic, wherein being immersed in lived space reveals not closure, but layers of contradiction, multiplicity, and affective entanglement

(Lefebvre, 1991; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Rose, 2010). In this sense, the city does not resolve into certainty through direct experience—it becomes more elusive, more plural, and more insistently real, thus demonstrating the inherent challenges in fully “knowing” another culture through a specific lens and mediated representation.

4.3 Navigating Dissonance: Cognitive and Emotional Conflicts as Sites of Meaning-Making

The transition from “conceptual” to “perceived” Chongqing was rarely seamless, frequently marked by moments of cognitive dissonance which, far from being mere ‘problems’ of perception, acted as crucial sites of critical reflection and active meaning-making within the intercultural encounter.

4.3.1 Disjuncture Between Idealized Symbols and Lived Realities: The “Reality Shock” and its Aftermath

The hyper-curated and aesthetically polished representations of Chongqing circulated online often stood in stark contrast to the lived, multisensory realities encountered on the ground. Participants frequently described a perceptual disjuncture—a form of “reality shock” (Oberg, 1960)—when confronted with the everyday textures of the city that disrupted their previously internalized digital imaginaries. As M7, a lawyer visiting briefly, observed, “The YouTube videos show the amazing skyline, but then you walk around and see older areas, a lot of construction, and the pollution can be bad. It’s not all shiny.” Similarly, F4, an executive, articulated the emotional dissonance experienced when the glamorous “prosperous capital” image collided with scenes of socio-economic struggle: “Seeing the hard lives of some lower-tier workers really made me uncomfortable.”

This discord between the idealized symbolic order and the plural, often gritty urban reality demanded more than simple cognitive recalibration. It frequently required participants to engage in emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983)—negotiating not only feelings of disappointment or moral discomfort, but also a destabilized sense of orientation and expectation. For some German residents, whose cultural background may foreground concepts of efficiency, systematic urban planning, precision, or strict social structures (shaped by their own historical experiences of modernity and governance), this ‘reality shock’ extended to perceptions of urban management, public order, or environmental conditions that sometimes differed from their deep-seated cultural expectations about what a ‘modern’ or “livable” city entails from a specific Western European perspective. This disjuncture is not merely an individual cognitive gap but a microcosm of broader power dynamics in representation, where a “packaged” modernity often fails to account for the uneven socio-economic realities and specific cultural practices of the represented “Other”. This clash compelled an active engagement with the semiotic rupture in the city’s media-scripted image, revealing how hyper-

aestheticized representations can obscure, even erase, the unevenness and contradictions of lived urban space. In this sense, the experience of “reality shock” functioned as a critical moment of reflexivity: an affective and epistemic rupture that compelled participants to reconfigure their understanding of urban authenticity—not as coherence or polish, but as contradiction, incompleteness, and complexity (Lury & Lash, 2007; Massey, 2005).

4.3.2 Affective Responses to Sensory Overload or Mismatch: The Limits of Symbolic Representation

While offline sensory encounters often enriched participants’ understanding of Chongqing, they also exposed the limits of symbolic representation and the fragility of mediated imaginaries when confronted with the material force of embodied experience. The city’s celebrated sensory symbols—its pungent hot pot, vertiginous topographies, and kinetic urban rhythms—were not universally welcomed. For some, these experiences veered into sensory overload. As F3, a visiting teacher, recalled, the famous spicy hot pot was “too much” and resulted in “an uncomfortable experience,” attaching negative affect to what had previously been framed as an iconic local attraction. Such mismatches between mediated symbols and lived sensation illustrate what Laura Marks (2000) refers to as the “haptic visuality” of intercultural encounters, where sensory immersion can produce friction rather than affirmation, unsettling preconceived notions.

These embodied disruptions underscore the inherent incommensurability between the idea of the city and its visceral actuality. The notion of spice as cultural identity, for instance, breaks down when it encounters the burning intensity of taste that exceeds narrative and image. Likewise, Chongqing’s vertical density and urban dynamism, so often aestheticized in promotional materials, became sources of disorientation and stress for some participants, leading to fluctuating affective appraisals of the city. These affective responses are not merely individual preferences, but socially and culturally inflected reactions that reveal how bodily encounters can subvert symbolic coherence (Ahmed, 2004; Massumi, 2002). In this light, the dissonance between expectation and sensation becomes a critical site where the imagined city is deconstructed by the lived city—where affect unsettles symbol, and where experience exceeds representation, thus challenging reductionist accounts of intercultural engagement.

4.3.3 Reinforcement, Challenge, or Complexification of Stereotypes: The Malleability of Perception

The interplay between online symbolic representations and offline urban experiences did not yield a uniform effect on participants’ perceptions of Chongqing. Rather than simply reinforcing or disconfirming existing stereotypes, many participants underwent a dynamic process of perceptual recalibration—a negotiation marked

by tension, ambiguity, and affective labor. For instance, M3 described Chongqing as a city where “prosperity coexists with poverty” and where “spiciness intertwines with hardship.” This formulation reflects neither the wholesale acceptance of online imagery nor a total rupture from it, but rather a synthesis that complexifies the city’s symbolic identity while still bordering on a reductive cognitive shorthand. In this sense, complexification is not the dissolution of stereotype, but its reconfiguration into a layered but still potentially limiting schema (Pickering, 2001).

Such processes underscore the malleability of perception, particularly when individuals attempt to reconcile dissonant inputs from mediated ideals and embodied encounters. The symbolic codes circulating online—whether framing Chongqing as hypermodern, chaotic, or culturally exotic—were rarely accepted or rejected in binary terms. Instead, they served as semiotic baselines that were expanded, disrupted, or selectively confirmed through situated experience. This illustrates Stuart Hall’s (1997) notion of encoding/decoding, wherein audiences do not passively absorb representations, but interpret and negotiate them through their own cultural and affective filters. Yet, as Edward Said (1978) reminds us, even “complex” understandings can stabilize into new forms of Orientalist or essentialist discourse under the guise of nuance. This suggests that while direct experience might challenge overtly simplistic media narratives, the cognitive processing of these new complexities is still susceptible to pre-existing cultural frameworks and historical baggage. For German participants, reconciling a modern, prosperous Chongqing with aspects of “otherness” could involve navigating specific Western perceptions of “development paths” or “societal differences” which may not be overtly stereotypical but still rooted in culturally specific interpretive patterns shaped by decades of East-West relations. Thus, the perceptual outcomes of mediated urban experience are neither inherently liberatory nor deterministically reductive; they remain open-ended, contingent, and deeply shaped by the symbolic–affective feedback loop between media and materiality.

5. DISCUSSION

The study’s most significant theoretical contribution lies in proposing a nuanced, culturally situated processual model for understanding the cognitive and affective dynamics of cross-cultural place perception in the digital age. Moving beyond simplistic or linear communication models, our findings elucidate how initial encounters with urban images are profoundly subject to “cognitive capture” by simplified, highly mediated symbolic representations. This “conceptual Chongqing” is not a neutral precursor but an active heuristic, dynamically

framed by existing cultural schemata and the pervasive logic of visual spectacle inherent to global media platforms. Subsequently, the “perceived Chongqing” emerges from the dialectical engagement between these mediated expectations and raw, multi-sensory lived experiences. This ongoing negotiation, often manifesting as productive dissonance, becomes a critical site for meaning-making, where individuals actively (re)calibrate their understanding of the “Other,” critically reflecting on the power and limits of both media representation and their own cultural pre-dispositions. This process provides empirical grounding for theorizing the complex interplay of cultural pre-understandings, mediated representations, and embodied experience in shaping global subjectivities and negotiating global images.

Our research resonates with, yet also critically nuances, theories emphasizing the active role of audiences (Hall, 1980). While German residents actively decoded mediated messages, the power of initial online framing—often characterized by a highly selective and aesthetically optimized “symbolic economy” (Baudrillard, 1981)—exerted a significant and sometimes resilient influence on their perceptual pathways. This finding challenges overly optimistic accounts of audience agency by demonstrating how powerful, visually driven online narratives can establish persistent cognitive anchors (i.e., cognitive capture) that require substantial experiential counter-evidence to dislodge or reconfigure. It critically interrogates the linearity often assumed in traditional city branding models, asserting that digital platforms introduce profound pre-configurational effects that complicate straightforward impact measurement. This interplay goes beyond a simplistic active/passive audience dichotomy by showing the profound influence of initial image logic. This inherent complexity is further filtered through the specific cultural lens of the German residents, whose prior knowledge, values, and even national narratives (e.g., related to industrialization, urban planning, or historical and contemporary inter-state relations with China) provide distinct interpretive schemas, underscoring the deep embeddedness of intercultural communication within broader socio-cultural and geopolitical frameworks.

The transformative power of offline, embodied experience documented here reinforces phenomenological understandings of place (Tuan, 1977; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). However, our study demonstrates that this transformation is not a simple journey towards “truth” or “authenticity,” but rather a process of ongoing negotiation with, and often re-signification of, the initial mediated symbols. The “perceived Chongqing” is not an unmediated reality but a co-construction, a palimpsest where online imagery and offline sensations are continuously inscribed and re-inscribed upon each other. This challenges essentialist notions of urban authenticity, suggesting that perceived ‘realness’ is not inherent but actively

constructed through dynamic interplay and iterative negotiation, profoundly shaped by pre-existing cultural paradigms. This study contributes a more dynamic and less linear model of city image formation than often found in place branding literature, which sometimes presumes a more direct impact of experience over mediation.

The identified cognitive dissonance and emotional labor are not mere side effects but central mechanisms of meaning-making and identity negotiation in cross-cultural urban encounters. Our findings suggest that these “friction points” (Anna Tsing, 2005) – the clashes between idealized online symbols and the sometimes “messy” offline realities – are productive spaces where individuals critically reflect on their own expectations, cultural assumptions, and the nature of representation itself. This proactive engagement with dissonance can thus be reframed as a moment of genuine cross-cultural dialogue and reflexivity, where participants are compelled to critically confront not just the city itself, but also their own culturally derived expectations and preconceived notions regarding “the Other.” This offers a more agentic view of dissonance, moving beyond a purely psychological deficit model to see it as a catalyst for deeper cognitive engagement and indeed, as a potential feature for resilient communication. This challenges conventional city branding approaches that primarily seek to minimize dissonance, suggesting that acknowledging and even strategically engaging with urban complexities might foster more resilient and sophisticated city images.

5.1 Implications

This study offers significant theoretical and practical implications for intercultural communication, urban media studies, and critical place-making. Theoretically, it provides a grounded, processual, affectively situated model of cross-cultural city image construction, foregrounding co-constitutive dynamics between mediated representations and embodied encounters. It underscores integrative analytical frameworks for meaning negotiated through sensory, emotional, and discursive processes, especially in global information asymmetries. The distinction between “conceptual Chongqing” and “perceived Chongqing” serves as a heuristic to illuminate how urban imaginaries are emotionally charged, contested sites of cultural meaning and power. Concepts like cognitive capture, emotional labor, and productive dissonance advance theorizing on complex affective negotiations where mediated expectations meet material realities across cultural divides.

Practically, findings are relevant for city branding practitioners, educators, and transnational communicators. They critically problematize over-reliance on idealized city branding. While iconic imagery attracts, active erasure of complexity paradoxically risks disillusionment or entrenching stereotypes. Thus, communicative strategies should move towards “textured authenticity”—

acknowledging urban life’s messiness and unevenness. Rather than polished spectacles, this embraces socio-cultural plurality and temporal flux for resilient, credible city images.

Second, the study highlights cultivating critical media literacy for place. In an era of algorithmically amplified imagery, international audiences must interrogate representational conventions. Fostering reflexive consumption and recognizing frames’ partiality can destabilize reified city understandings, especially those constructed via external gazes, challenging embedded historical narratives often positioning non-Western urbanities within a Western-centric developmental trajectory. This enables more critical engagement with global realities.

Third, “designing for productive dissonance” offers a novel intercultural place communication approach. Instead of merely mitigating representation-reality gaps, practitioners can strategically harness perceptual incongruities for reflective engagement. Dissonance, when properly scaffolded through narrative and discourse, can generate critical learning that deepens understanding. This shifts city communication from static image management to co-creation of meaning through dynamic, reflexive cultural engagement within complex global power configurations, emphasizing dialogue over declaration.

Finally, the study contributes to intercultural communication debates by critically interrogating symbolic infrastructures that make “the Other” intelligible within global media flows. Mediated narratives, while accessible cultural touchpoints, can reinforce epistemic closures and power imbalances obscuring lived complexity. Genuine, equitable intercultural dialogue demands awareness of prefigurative discourses and commitment to enabling embodied, relational, and at times uncomfortable, encounters where more equitable, multi-vocal, and critically nuanced representations—free from reified ‘othering’—can emerge, fostering authentic global understanding.

5.2 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study, while offering rich insights into cross-cultural image construction, has limitations. The sample (German residents) limits immediate generalizability; future studies could examine other nationalities, especially from non-Western or less media-saturated contexts, for richer comparative data. Second, reliance on retrospective accounts introduces potential recall/interpretive bias; a multi-method approach combining in-situ media diaries, real-time screen tracking, and post-experience interviews could enhance rigor.

Third, the study’s scope excludes algorithmic structures. Future research might adopt a platform studies perspective (Gillespie, 2018) to critically interrogate how algorithmic curation and geopolitical filtering impact

urban imaginaries and perceptions of specific global regions, examining their influence on the “global digital common.” Furthermore, complementary quantitative research is needed to assess prevalence and variability across larger, diverse samples, potentially using cross-cultural comparative methodologies.

Further theoretical/empirical innovation includes longitudinal designs tracking perception evolution from anticipation through long-term residency, integrating acculturation/intercultural adaptation theories. Applying multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) to online media offers deeper insights into semiotic choices and their cross-cultural interpretations in platformized environments. Another vital direction is critically examining the production side of international city imaging within a critical public diplomacy framework. Future research could interrogate how Chongqing's global image is constructed by state actors, tourism bureaus, commercial influencers. Questions of intentional image curation, narrative control, instrumentalization of symbols for economic/geopolitical purposes, and ethical implications of representation in asymmetrical global media remain underexplored, yet vital for a holistic understanding of intercultural media dynamics and global representation politics.

6. CONCLUSION

This grounded theory study illuminates the dynamic and multilayered process through which German residents construct a cognitive image of Chongqing. It traces a trajectory from an initially abstract, symbolically saturated “conceptual Chongqing”—formed primarily through online media exposure and profoundly shaped by pre-existing cultural filters and the pervasive logic of mediated spectacle—to a more complex, sensorially rich, and affectively infused “perceived Chongqing” shaped through direct, embodied engagement with the city. While digital media projections provide an accessible and powerful initial framework (often leading to cognitive capture), offline encounters prove essential for refining, verifying, or critically challenging these mediated impressions.

Crucially, the relationship between the symbolic and the experiential is not always complementary. Idealized digital representations may clash with everyday urban realities, generating cognitive dissonance and prompting profound affective recalibration. This negotiation is not merely an individual cognitive task but deeply informed by pre-existing cultural frameworks and the power dynamics of international representation, highlighting the constant interplay between global narratives and situated cultural interpretations. It underscores how city images, particularly across significant cultural divides, are active sites of interpretive and emotional negotiation

that reveal the inherent complexities of intercultural understanding and communication, challenging simplified notions of cultural exchange. In some cases, this tension results in the reinforcement of intricate—and at times contradictory—stereotypes, as individuals grapple with the discord between expectation and lived experience, emphasizing the enduring challenge of moving beyond simplistic “othering” in cross-cultural perception.

For international urban communication, these findings underscore the critical narrative interplay between the seductive simplicity of online symbolic branding and the often unpredictable, multidimensional texture of lived city life. This tension invites a critical reconsideration of how global cities are represented, suggesting the urgent need for communicative strategies that are both compelling and capable of reflecting complexity, contradiction, and diverse lived realities. Cultivating resilient and credible urban imaginaries thus requires a fundamental paradigm shift towards representational forms that embrace contradiction, multiplicity, and affective realism, fostering more grounded and enduring cross-cultural understandings. This necessitates moving beyond a purely promotional logic to one that is acutely aware of the cultural filters of diverse international audiences and the asymmetries inherent in global knowledge production about “the Other,” seeking truly reciprocal, ethical, and nuanced forms of communication that transcend simplistic branding and contribute to more profound, authentic intercultural dialogue in a complex, mediated world, thereby enhancing inter-societal trust and mutual recognition.

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