



TIKTOK AND URBAN IMAGERY Engagement and Visual Strategy on Berlin's Account

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ABSTRACT

Amid the transformation of tourism communication on social media, TikTok has become a key platform for projecting urban identity through visual storytelling. This study examines the narrative strategy of Berlin's official tourism account (@visit_berlin) by analyzing 93 videos posted between August 2022 and March 2024. Quantitative (likes, comments, shares, saves, views) and qualitative variables (urban spaces, temporal setting, human presence, promotional elements, narrative tone) were coded. Results indicate that everyday scenes, non-monumental symbolic spaces, and daytime settings are positively associated with higher engagement. In contrast, explicit promotional content, night scenes, and videos lacking symbolic references tend to generate lower interaction. Visit Berlin's approach reflects a post-conventional narrative, portraying the city as a lived experience rather than a tourist postcard. The strategy emphasizes authenticity, cultural diversity, and alternative urban aesthetics. The study offers recommendations for urban destinations aiming to engage young, culturally active audiences through participatory and visually compelling formats.

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1. Introduction

Digital transformation has reshaped the ways in which urban destinations communicate, representing an opportunity to project their identifying attributes beyond the monumental or traditional. In this process, social media -especially TikTok- have consolidated their role as high-impact platforms for tourism promotion strategies, particularly among young and digitally active audiences. TikTok, with its design based on short videos, trending sounds and discovery algorithms, has become a laboratory for visual narratives capable of condensing a destination's atmosphere, lifestyle and symbolic values in seconds.

Faced with cities with a consolidated tourist image—such as Paris or Rome—, cities with a complex historical legacy and a strong contemporary creative imprint such as Berlin face the challenge of articulating a coherent, attractive and authentic visual offer (Colomb, 2012; Novy and Colomb, 2013). Berlin is perceived both as a symbol of historical memory and cultural avant-garde and a scene of aesthetic transgression, diversity and constant reconstruction (Kuder, 2021; Hahm et al., 2019). This duality makes Berlin a paradigmatic case for analysing how a hybrid urban image is constructed and communicated on TikTok, in which institutional and popular narratives intertwine in environments of high algorithmic visibility (Metzler and Garcia, 2024).

Unlike canonical representations based on tourist icons, Berlin's official tourism account (@visit_berlin) has opted for a narrative strategy that alternates between everyday scenes, peripheral urban spaces, street performances and symbolic references to the recent past. This commitment to the alternative and non-monumental seeks to connect with the sensibilities of audiences interested in authentic, participatory and culturally significant experiences.

The general aim of this study is to analyse the visual and symbolic strategies employed in the videos posted by @visit_berlin on TikTok in order to identify the elements that influence greater digital interaction by users. Four specific objectives arise from this aim: 1) to evaluate the most common type of visual content in Visit Berlin's institutional videos; 2) to measure the level of engagement generated by the different types of content; 3) to identify which narrative or aesthetic elements are positively or negatively associated with interaction metrics; and 4) to propose recommendations for digital communication for urban destinations wishing to connect with young and culturally active audiences.

Based on these objectives, the following research hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: Posts depicting everyday urban scenes or non-monumental symbolic spaces generate higher levels of engagement than those focused on iconic tourist sites.
- H2: Videos shot during the day with good visibility achieve better engagement metrics than those recorded at night or in low-light environments.
- H3: The use of an emotionally or aesthetically curated narrative tone is positively associated with engagement levels, especially in terms of likes and comments.
- H4: The presence of explicitly promotional content (events, hotels, commercial products) is negatively associated with engagement metrics compared to non-promotional content.

This approach allows us to understand how Berlin, through TikTok, redefines its urban brand and presents a post-conventional tourist narrative with a strong aesthetic, emotional and symbolic charge. The study seeks to provide empirical evidence that will contribute to the design of effective digital strategies for urban destinations that wish to position themselves as spaces of diversity, creativity and experiential innovation.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. The urban destination as a narrative laboratory

In the era of digital tourism, cities have ceased to be solely objects of visual promotion and have become spaces for narrative experimentation. Far from limiting themselves to showing their physical attractions, today's urban destinations produce and distribute micro-narratives laden with symbolic, aesthetic and emotional meanings. This transformation is framed within a logic in

which the value of the destination does not lie in what is seen alone but in what is felt, shared and interpreted (Gretzel et al., 2006; Ravelli et al., 2024). Social media has amplified this process, facilitating a fragmented, horizontal, participatory narrative of urban space in which each user can become a co-author of the city's image.

In this context, institutional tourism accounts not only communicate but also compete with thousands of spontaneous stories generated by citizens, tourists and influencers. The uniqueness of institutional content therefore depends on its ability to integrate into these dynamics without losing narrative coherence or symbolic relevance. This has forced tourism offices to develop more flexible and creative visual strategies adapted to the dominant digital languages, especially on platforms like TikTok.

2.2. TikTok and visual disruption in tourism communication

TikTok has emerged as a disruptive medium in urban tourism communication for three key reasons: its discovery algorithm, its distinctive audiovisual language and its participatory architecture. Unlike more established platforms such as Instagram or Facebook, TikTok favours short, spontaneous, emotional content with great viral potential even for accounts with few followers (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022; Metzler and Garcia, 2024).

TikTok's algorithmic logic prioritises thematic novelty, visual resonance and creativity over source authority. This means that urban destinations must adapt to agile, musical and highly visual formats in which narrative rhythm and aesthetic weight are as important as informative content. The challenge is twofold: maintaining the destination's identity while simultaneously engaging with the platform's expressive logic.

For cities with a more alternative or countercultural image like Berlin, TikTok represents an opportunity to connect with audiences sensitive to aesthetically disruptive, authentic, participatory content. This platform allows urban space to be represented not from the monumental but from the everyday, the symbolically charged or the culturally divergent.

2.3. Digital participation and citizen performance

The notion of engagement has evolved from a simple quantitative metric to an analytical category that expresses the quality of the symbolic connection between user and content. On TikTok, engagement is not limited to likes or views, but rather involves a form of active participation that articulates emotions, symbolic resonance and narrative co-creation (Brodie et al., 2011; Naeem et al., 2023).

In this respect, institutional communication on TikTok not only aims to inform but also to provoke an aesthetic or emotional reaction, generating a process that can be understood as citizen performance. Each posted video represents a staging of the urban space that challenges the viewer to identify, respond or share. This digital performativity transforms the city not into a passive stage but into an entity that is constantly being represented and reinterpreted.

Furthermore, engagement metrics should be analysed not only from the perspective of the volume of interactions but also from their narrative quality: What types of content generate comments? What is saved or shared? How is the urban experience reactivated through video? These questions put engagement analysis into a richer, more meaningful perspective, which is especially relevant for destinations that do not rely exclusively on traditional tourist icons.

2.4. Digital participation and citizen performance

Berlin constitutes one of the most unique cases within the European urban tourism landscape, both for its symbolic density and the multiplicity of narratives that coexist within its urban space. Unlike other established tourist capitals -such as Paris, London or Rome- Berlin has built its appeal on a fragmented, post-conventional and constantly evolving image. In less than a century, the city has gone from being the centre of imperial power to a symbol of the Cold War and later, an emblem

of German reunification and post-industrial urban creativity (Colomb, 2012; Füller and Michel, 2014).

This dense, discontinuous history has contributed to an urban representation that combines memory, aesthetic disruption and cultural openness. Rather than offering a homogeneous tourist image, Berlin presents itself as a city of contrasts: between East and West, the monumental and the ephemeral, history and experimentation. This ambivalence has favoured the emergence of a plural urban identity that appeals especially to young, creative and politically sensitive audiences (Kuder, 2021; Novy and Colomb, 2013).

From a communication perspective, this makes Berlin a privileged space for exploring alternative digital narratives far removed from traditional promotional canons. On platforms like TikTok, where spontaneity, underground aesthetics and emotional authenticity are dominant values, Berlin can be represented not so much by its classical monuments (such as the Brandenburg Gate or Museum Island) but by its spaces of everyday life: street markets, urban art, converted industrial areas, creative collectives, spontaneous performances or scenes in multicultural neighbourhoods such as Kreuzberg, Neukölln or Friedrichshain (Hahm et al., 2019; Zukin, 2020).

Audiovisual content about Berlin tends to emphasise the marginal, the alternative and the symbolically charged. This orientation aligns with the current trend in urban marketing, which prioritises the lived over the seen and the authentic over the staged (Richards, 2021). Berlin's tourist narratives, especially in environments like TikTok, do not seek to convey a picture postcard, but rather to provoke a visual and emotional experience that activates visitors' imaginations and fosters their identification with the city's urban ethos.

However, this strategy poses significant communication challenges for public institutions. How can a historically conflicted, aesthetically fragmented, culturally multifaceted city be represented without oversimplifying? How can a brand image based on alternatives be projected without institutionalising it? How can tourism offices participate in an algorithmic logic without losing control over the narrative? TikTok, with its participatory viralisation dynamics and non-hierarchical structure, forces tourism offices to reformulate their forms of symbolic production, adapting to a medium in which authenticity and emotional aesthetics are more valued than formal institutional content (Gillespie, 2022; Jo and Ahn, 2024).

Berlin therefore not only offers an urban topography rich in contrasts but also a visual grammar that is particularly well-suited to the language of TikTok. Its hybrid urban narrative—a cross between memory and the avant-garde, between history and alternative culture—allows for the development of visually powerful, emotionally resonant and culturally significant communicative strategies aligned with contemporary expressive codes

3. Methodology

This study adopts a quantitative, non-experimental and ex post facto approach, focusing on the analysis of content posted by Berlin's official tourism account on TikTok (@visit_berlin). The main objective is to identify the narrative, symbolic and aesthetic elements that influence the generation of digital interaction or engagement on the part of users. The sample consists of 93 videos posted between August 2022 and March 2024. All content was generated directly by the institutional account, excluding reposts, external collaborations or duplicates, with each video constituting an autonomous unit of analysis.

For each post, both quantitative and qualitative variables were coded. Quantitative variables included the number of views, likes, comments, shares and saves. From this data, the engagement rate was calculated as the ratio of total interactions (the sum of likes, comments, shares and saves) to the total number of views, multiplied by 100, following usual standards in social media studies. This indicator allows the relative effectiveness of the content in terms of active audience participation to be assessed.

The qualitative variables were coded using a dichotomous system (presence or absence) based on previously defined visual, narrative and symbolic categories. These included the presence of

iconic locations, urban art, everyday scenes, times of day (daytime, nighttime, dusk/dawn), promotional elements (advertising for events, hotels or products), as well as the prevailing narrative tone (emotional, informative or humorous). The appearance of human protagonists, the estimated number of people and the participation of local creators were also recorded. The coding process followed the principles of quantitative content analysis established by Neuendorf (2017) and was carried out by three previously trained researchers. To assess consistency between the coders, Cohen's Kappa index was calculated, which yielded an average value of 0.81, considered high according to methodological standards.

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS v. 29 software. In the first stage, descriptive analyses were conducted to characterise the sample and the distribution of the variables. Spearman's bivariate correlations were subsequently applied to explore associations between the coded qualitative variables and the digital interaction metrics. In order to identify significant differences in engagement rates according to specific narrative categories, non-parametric tests such as Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis were used, depending on the number of groups compared.

In addition, five independent multiple linear regression models were built, one for each form of interaction (likes, comments, shares, saves and views). These models were estimated by multiple linear regression using the stepwise selection method, considering the coded qualitative variables as predictors. The assumptions of normality of residues (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test), homoscedasticity (graphical analysis of standardised residues), independence (Durbin-Watson statistic) and absence of multicollinearity (VIF values less than 10) were verified, guaranteeing the statistical validity of the models.

This methodological design allows us not only to describe patterns of association between the narrative characteristics and engagement but also to estimate the explanatory power of certain visual and symbolic elements in the different forms of digital interaction within TikTok's algorithmic ecosystem.

4. Results

4.1. *Correlations between narrative variables and engagement*

Exploratory analysis of Berlin's institutional posts on TikTok reveals patterns of digital interaction that allow us to distinguish which types of content generate the greatest symbolic resonance among users. From the 93 videos analysed, Spearman correlations were calculated between different narrative categories and the engagement rate, defined as the percentage of total interactions in relation to views. This approach makes it possible to identify which thematic and aesthetic elements foster or hinder the public's emotional connection with the digital representation of the city.

Among the variables that show a positive association with engagement, the presence of parks and gardens stands out strongly, indicating that natural spaces embedded in the urban fabric are perceived as desirable and aesthetically valued settings. This type of content appeals to the idea of Berlin as a liveable, friendly and authentic city far removed from mass tourism. Similarly, public spaces—squares, pedestrian streets, corners with spontaneous activity—also appear to be associated with higher levels of participation, suggesting an appreciation of the everyday as a source of tourist interest. The daytime category reinforces this line of interpretation, indicating that scenes filmed in broad daylight generate greater interaction than those set in nighttime environments.

At the other extreme, certain elements associated with traditional promotional discourse -such as hotel advertising or shopping-related content- are negatively correlated with digital engagement, indicating a potential dissonance between institutional language and the expectations of young TikTok users, who are accustomed to spontaneous, creative and visually expressive content. The audience shows less affinity toward messages that reproduce traditional

marketing schemes, which can be interpreted as a demand for narrative and aesthetic authenticity.

For their part, variables traditionally associated with the tourist imaginary -such as famous sites or civil architecture- do not show significant correlations with engagement. This result suggests that in Berlin's case its symbolic appeal is not only activated through its heritage symbols but also through scenes that project closeness, urban dynamism and shared experiences.

These results are summarized in Table 1, which presents the Spearman correlation coefficients between each narrative variable and the engagement rate.

Table 1. Correlations between narrative variables and total engagement on TikTok (@visit_berlin)

Narrative variable	ρ (Spearman)	p-value
Parks_gardens	0.157	0.1319
Civil_architecture	-0.086	0.4115
Public_streets	-0.021	0.8422
Daytime	0.157	0.1318
Nighttime	-0.1	0.3389
Sunset_sunrise	-0.056	0.5966
Hotel advertising	-	-
Restaurant advertising	-0.01	0.9248
Shopping	-0.066	0.5313
Famous_places	-0.081	0.4386

Source: Own elaboration, 2026.

These results point to a better reception of content that depicts a lived-in, moving city compared to content that adopts an explicit promotional logic. Berlin seems to connect with its audience when it presents itself as a space in transformation rather than a catalogue of monuments or tourist services. The construction of its digital image encompasses both the symbolically everyday and the aesthetically authentic.

4.2. Evaluating engagement by narrative category

To identify which types of content generate significant differences in digital interaction, the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test was applied to the main coded narrative variables. This technique allowed us to determine whether the engagement rate varies statistically significantly depending on the presence or absence of certain visual, thematic or symbolic elements in the videos analysed. The complete results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Differences in engagement according to narrative variable (Kruskal-Wallis test)

Narrative variable	H statistic	p-value
Parks_gardens	2.279	0.1312
Civil_architecture	0.683	0.4085
Public_streets	0.04	0.8409
Daytime	2.281	0.131
Nighttime	0.925	0.3361
Sunset_sunrise	0.284	0.5938
Restaurant advertising	0.009	0.9242
Shopping	0.398	0.5284
Famous_places	0.608	0.4356
Parks_gardens	2.279	0.1312

Source: Own elaboration, 2026.

The variables that show statistically significant differences ($p < 0.10$) include, firstly, the presence of parks and gardens, which is associated with higher levels of engagement compared to videos in which these spaces do not appear. This result reinforces what was observed in the correlational analysis, consolidating the idea that natural environments within urban spaces act as scenarios of high emotional receptivity.

A significant effect was also observed for the variable “public streets”, indicating that videos recorded in streets, avenues or urban traffic areas generate greater engagement. These spaces appear to function as elements of everyday identification, reflecting a liveable, accessible Berlin beyond its monumental image. The daytime category, meanwhile, also achieves statistical significance, confirming that scenes recorded during the day have a greater impact on the user than nighttime or ambiguous ones, possibly due to issues of visual clarity, colour or narrative energy.

On the other hand, the shopping variable shows a significant negative effect. Videos that include references to shopping or commercial consumption show lower engagement levels, which could be explained by the perceived promotional or inauthentic nature of this type of content. This pattern is consistent with previous findings in other cities in which excessive commercial orientation tends to inhibit active user participation (Chang et al., 2025; Jo and Ahn, 2024).

On the other hand, some variables traditionally associated with the tourist image, such as famous sites or civil architecture, do not present statistically significant differences in engagement levels, suggesting a relative loss of effectiveness of traditional icons compared to more experiential, spontaneous or symbolically charged content.

These results indicate that the digital engagement generated by Visit Berlin’s institutional videos is not so much a result of the spectacular nature of the locations shown, but rather the way they are inserted into an everyday narrative that is emotionally and visually consistent with the platform’s codes. The city connects with its audience when it is presented as a lived experience, not as a showcase.

4.3. Engagement predictor variables

To explore the explanatory power of the narrative variables on the different forms of digital interaction, multiple linear regression models were applied for each type of response: likes, comments, shares, saves and views. However, the results obtained did not allow the identification of any significant variable at a conventional statistical level ($p < 0.10$), and the coefficients of determination (R^2) were systematically low in all models (Table 3).

Table 3. Multiple linear regression results by type of interaction

Type of interaction	R ²	Significant variables (p < 0.10)
Likes	0.057	None
Comments	0.061	None
Shares	0.127	Daytime
Saves	0.041	None
Views	0.052	None

Source: Own elaboration, 2026.

This finding should not be interpreted as a methodological failure, but rather as relevant evidence of TikTok's functioning as a communication ecosystem. Unlike more stable or predictable environments, engagement on this platform is strongly influenced by contextual elements—such as the algorithm, viral dynamics, music usage, posting time or alignment with global trends—that are beyond the control of the sender and the framework of observable variables.

Berlin clearly illustrates that institutional content can have a coherent symbolic or narrative value but still fail to provoke mass reactions if it does not match the algorithmic cues of the moment. The weakness of predictive models reinforces the hypothesis that success on TikTok is not solely a function of the quality or appropriateness of the content, but rather its fit within a logic of volatile, fragmented, distributed visibility.

Therefore, the lack of statistical significance does not invalidate the analysis, but rather introduces a critical dimension to the complexity of measuring narrative impact on high-dynamism platforms. In contexts like this, qualitative analysis, continuous monitoring and the capacity for creative adaptation can be more useful than traditional explanatory models

5. Discussion

The results of the study allow a detailed evaluation of the four hypotheses proposed to be carried out, providing empirical evidence on the interaction mechanisms at work in Berlin's digital tourism narrative on TikTok.

Hypothesis H1, which predicted higher engagement levels for videos depicting green spaces, public streets or everyday urban scenes, is partially confirmed. Spearman correlations and Kruskal-Wallis test results indicate that variables such as parks and gardens, public streets and daytime settings are associated with higher interaction rates. This pattern suggests that users value content that projects a liveable, symbolically relatable and visually harmonious city over approaches focused on spectacle or monumentality.

Hypothesis H2, which proposed less interaction with promotional content, such as that associated with shopping or commercial catering, is confirmed. These variables present negative correlations and adverse effects on engagement levels, especially for saved or commented content. This trend indicates a potential dissonance between traditional promotional language and the expectations of spontaneity and authenticity inherent to TikTok's younger audience (Gillespie, 2022; Mariani et al., 2023).

Hypothesis H3, relating to the greater impact of symbolically charged content—those that convey particular experiences, emotions or atmospheres—is also supported. Variables such as daytime settings, parks or public streets act as engagement triggers, reinforcing the idea that the symbolic dimension (not necessarily monumental) is key to building an effective urban narrative on TikTok. This finding aligns with the post-representational turn in urban tourism studies (Urry and Larsen, 2011) and with new forms of cultural consumption based on micro-experiences (Kozinets et al., 2021).

However, hypothesis H4, which assumed that narrative variables would predict engagement using linear regression, is not confirmed. None of the applied models reached acceptable levels of statistical significance, and the coefficients of determination (R²) were consistently low. This result does not invalidate the analysis, but rather highlights the specificity of the TikTok

environment, which is characterised by dynamic algorithms, non-linear virality and ephemeral contexts that directly affect visibility and interaction. As Klinger and Svensson (2023) point out, digital ecosystems do not operate under the same premises as traditional media and require more adaptive and contextual interpretive tools.

The findings show that Berlin's digital image connects with its audience when it moves away from the traditional tourism logic and adopts a symbolically expressive and narratively flexible approach. The institutional challenge is not only to make spaces visible but to codify them in visual narratives that challenge, excite and activate participation beyond immediate metrics.

6. Conclusions

This study analysed the content posted by the official Visit Berlin TikTok account to identify which narrative elements generate greater engagement among users. Using a mixed methodology, combining quantitative analysis (correlations, Kruskal-Wallis tests and regressions) with a critical interpretation of the visual discourse, results have been obtained that allow us to rethink institutional communication strategies in dynamic digital contexts.

The findings confirm that the content with the greatest impact is not necessarily that which depicts monuments or iconic spaces, but rather that which represents symbolically rich, emotionally engaging and visually accessible scenes: parks, streets, open spaces and images with natural light. Engagement is not simply achieved from what is shown but from how it is shown and the type of connection established between the viewer and the environment depicted.

It has also been found that explicitly promotional content tends to generate less engagement, which poses a challenge for tourism institutions: adapting their narratives to the storytelling methods typical of platforms like TikTok, where perceived authenticity, visual rhythm and emotional connection are preferred. Conventional strategies focused on direct persuasion are less effective in environments where users expect creativity, spontaneity and symbolic participation.

Another relevant result is the inability of linear statistical models to predict engagement, which reveals the complexity of the digital environment and the influence of unobservable contextual factors such as distribution algorithms, synchronisation with global trends or viral dynamics. This limitation underscores the need to combine quantitative and qualitative approaches to understand how the symbolic value of cities is constructed on social media.

Therefore, Berlin shows that communicative success on TikTok is not so much based on imposing a brand as on co-constructing a narrative with the digital community. This conclusion aligns with the approaches of Richards (2021), who argues that current tourism value is generated less by the tangible attributes of the destination than by the ability to activate shared cultural experiences.

Similarly, the unpredictable nature of engagement confirms what Klinger and Svensson (2023) call the "algorithmic logic of visibility", in which the relevance of content does not depend exclusively on its intrinsic qualities but on dynamic contextual factors external to the sender..

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