

Exploring Discursive Factors Influencing Consumers' Online Engagement for Cross-Border Tourism Destination

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ABSTRACT

Empirical studies on the influencing factors of consumers' online engagement with tourism destinations via social media are needed to help explore ways to arouse cross-border traveling intention through destination management organizations' (DMOs') publicity. Previous studies focus more on non-discursive factors which influence the social media communication effects, while systemic scrutiny on discursive factors influencing tourist consumers' online engagement for DMOs' social media publicity are really scant. Drawing on SOR theory, the theory of critical multimodal analysis and regression analysis, this paper systematically explores the discursive factors, both textual and pictorial, influencing consumers' online engagement for cross-border tourism destinations, specifically London. The analysis finds that expressions of positive emotions, visual and affective expressions have significant positive influence on consumers' online engagement, while most lexical and semantic textual features have negative influence. As an empirical study, this paper contributes to the body of knowledge on the role of discursive factors on tourist consumers' online engagement for cross-border tourism destinations, and it also helps tourism management organizations to build their social media accounts to attract more cross-border tourists.

Keywords: Cross-border tourism, discursive factors, social media engagement.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, city tourism destinations are competing to attract cross-border tourist consumers. The boom of social media platforms, eg. Twitter(X), Facebook, Instagram, provides better opportunities for forging prestigious cross-border tourism destination and engaging more international tourists. The mobility, socialization and visualization of social media platforms, especially social network sites (SNSs) make the publicity of cross-border tourism destination image more effective and immediate. Therefore, more and more DMOs are marketing their destinations on social media platforms now not only to attract cross-border visitors but also to make them known to residents in other countries (Pike & Page, 2014).

Tourism is one of the discursive practices (Dann, 1996). With the advancement of informational technology, the form of tourism discourse has deeply transformed: (1) the digitalization of transmission medias, especially the use of SNSs makes communication more convenient; (2) the multimodality of the discourse, the affordances of SNS allows the using of text, pictures, emojis, @ and hashtags to make their marketing more interactive; (3) the turning of research focus to the study of the communication effects, which is reflected by the consumers' online engagement, of tourism discourse rather than its quality, the usefulness of information conveyed by tourism discourse is highlighted.

Consumers' online engagement is an important index to measure the efficiency of DMOs' social media marketing. However, the study of online engagement is indeed complex (Villamediana *et al.*, 2019). Researches have been made to explore the various influencing factors on consumers' online engagement, including the post time and seasons (Villamediana *et al.*, 2019; Mariani *et al.*, 2018); visual forms, ie. videos or pictures, (Alboqami *et al.*, 2015; Boley, Magnini, & Tuten, 2013; Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013; Picazo & Moreno-Gil, 2019); the quantity of information (Lee & Hong, 2016); and the quality of pictures (Li & Xie, 2019). However, these studies focus more on non-discursive factors, while systemic scrutiny on discursive influencing factors on tourism customers' online engagement is really scant.

In view of the above considerations, in this paper we seek to advance the literature on tourism consumers' social media engagement from the following aspects: (1) by exploring discursive factors influencing customers' online engagement; (2) by extending discursive factors as encompassing both textual and pictorial discourse; (3) by inspecting the synergistic effects of textual and pictorial factors on consumers' online engagement. Specifically, we choose London DMOs' official twitter account as our research target, as London is one of the most popular city tourism destinations (UNWTO, 2022) and the city's social media accounts have attracted lots of cross-border tourism consumers (Fileri *et al.*, 2021).

Taking London as an example, this study adopts stimulus-response theory and regression analysis to explore the discursive influencing factors on consumers' online engagement for cross-border tourism destination, and their predicting power on the communication effects of social media tourism posts. On the one hand, this study provides insights on the role of discursive factors impacting the communication effects of DMOs' social media publicity; on the other hand, it offers suggestions for DMOs' social networking publicity. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: Do discursive factors influence the social media engagement on London DMOs' tourism tweets?

RQ2: Which discursive factors positively influence tourist consumers' social media engagement for London DMOs' tourism tweets?

RQ3: Which discursive factors negatively influence tourist consumers' social media engagement for London DMOs' tourism tweets?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media as Online Cross-border Tourism Destination Marketing Tool

The trend of globalization and the advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have empowered the cross-border tourism marketing. Social media, as the most used online tools for people around the world, has been widely used in projecting destination images worldwide. Researches exploring destination images in social media destination marketing has been growing in recent years (Deng *et al.*, 2019; Ning *et al.*, 2023). They find that DMOs are increasingly using social media as their marketing tool (Hunter, 2013; Hays *et al.*, 2013), and social media projected images may reinforce prospective tourists' impressions on destination images (Molinillo *et al.*, 2018), thus may arouse tourists' travelling intentions. However, empirical studies show that DMOs shall further improve their social media communication strategies (Királ'ová & Pavlíčeka, 2015), especially discursive strategies; and future researches shall guide DMOs towards more effective utilization of social media as a destination marketing tool (Lalicic & Gindl, 2018; Molinillo *et al.*, 2018).

Tourism is an information-intensive industry (Gretzel *et al.*, 2000), the configuration and sharing of discursive information is crucial for destinations' competitiveness (Királ'ová & Pavlíčeka, 2015). In recent years, both textual and pictorial discursive features in social media marketing materials have captured researchers' attention (Flowerdew, 2004; Wang & Feng, 2021; Hallett & Kaplan-Weinger, 2010; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2011; Kim & Stepchenkova, 2015). While these researches focus more on the construction of destination images with discursive factors rather than the effects of these factors on consumers' social media engagement (Govers & Go, 2005; Kuhzady & Ghasemi, 2019).

The Measurement of Social Media Engagement

Numerical variables are utilized as a tool to measure social media engagement pervasively (Song *et al.*, 2020; Mariani *et al.*, 2018). While the built-in affordances on X (originally Twitter) make it possible to gather data representing users' preferences by collecting statistics of likes, comments and shares of the posts. The most popular social media analyzer Socialbakers (2015) also takes likes, comments and shares as most important indicators to evaluate the preferences of the fans. These three types of engagement behaviors are typically classified into three different levels, among which likes belong to the lowest level because it is the quickest and easiest way for users to show their preference (Seiter, 2016); shares, the intermediate level as it involves the recreation and share of the original information which may enhance the visibility of the posts (Ruiz-Mafe *et al.*, 2014); and comments, the highest level as they cost users more time and involve more cognitive load (Sabate *et al.*, 2014). Social media researchers typically adopt these statistics to form the calculation formula for users' engagement, and the three indicators are assigned different weight in the formula according to their levels, namely 0.2 for likes, 0.3 for shares, and 0.5 for comments (Mariani *et al.*, 2016).

Factors Influencing Tourist Consumers' Social Media Engagement

Social media engagement involves users' cognitive, emotional and behavioral responses in their interaction with social media accounts (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2014; Kunz *et al.*, 2017; Li & Xie, 2020). Empirical studies claim that in tourism, social media engagement can significantly boost travel intentions and destination loyalty (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Villamediana *et al.*, 2019). Researchers tend to use likes, comments and shares as common measurements for social media engagement (Ksiazek *et al.*, 2014; Ashley & Tuten, 2015), and SocialBakers, the most popular social media management and analytics platform, also takes these three metrics as the critical basis for users' post preferences analysis (SocialBakers, 2015).

Factors influencing tourist consumers' social media engagement has got some attention (Leung *et al.*, 2013; Mariani *et al.*, 2016; Villamediana *et al.*, 2019). Researchers have carried out empirical studies to explore these factors, including posting time, seasonality, information format, informational cues. For example, Villamediana *et al.* (2019) explores the influence of posting time and seasonality on tourist consumers' engagement on DMOs' official Facebook accounts, and finds that before summer, Thursday, Saturday, eight and ten in the morning, and two and five in the afternoon are the best posting time which may boost consumers' engagement. Contrasted with non-discourse factors, discursive factors influencing tourist consumers' social media engagement have been seldomly scrutinized.

Some researchers have paid attention to the effectiveness of discursive thematic factors on tourists' engagement to explore the better configuration of discursive factors. For example, Villamediana-Pedrosa *et al.* (2019) have investigated the influence of message structure (text length and intelligibility), informative cues (links to the brand, orientation towards the product or the brand, topics relevant to the audience, and a remuneration's promise, persuasive and emotional cues (emotional signals, valence, endorsement and influencer mentions) on Facebook users' engagement on the Brand Spain Official Fan Page on Facebook, and finds that the use of message tools and the informative cues may predict positive/negative engagement. Song *et al.* (2020) assessed the effect of photo themes in Facebook posts from the official tourism destination marketers' accounts on facilitating social media engagement, and finds that the image themes have significant effects on the three social media engagement indicators, namely likes, comments and shares. Aramendia-Muneta *et al.* (2021) and Zhan *et al.* (2023) have applied different

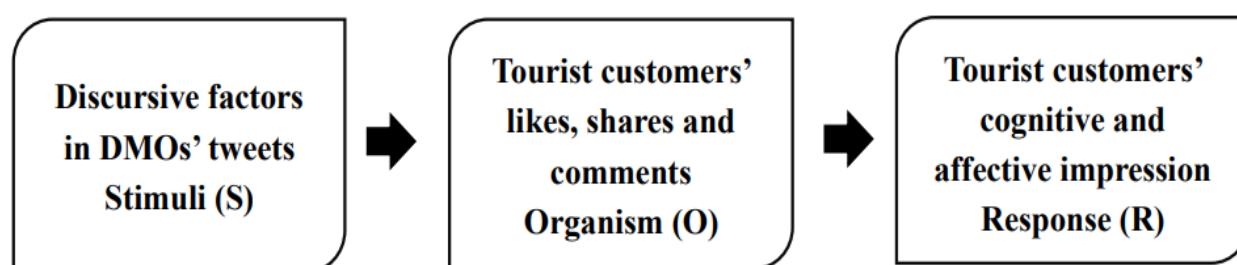
methods to investigate the influence of projected destination image attributes on Instagram users' social media engagement. Whereas, these researches mainly focus on the effects of thematic discourse factors on social media engagement, while systematic explorations on the influence of lexical-grammatical, pictorial and text-picture configurational factors on tourist customers' destination engagement on social media are relatively scant.

THEORETICAL BASIS

SOR Theory

As is suggested by Laroche (2010), the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) paradigm is the most useful theory to explain online consumer behavior. According to Mehrabian and Russell (1974), S-O-R theory suggests that there is a correlation among stimulus (input), organism (process) and response (output). The stimuli are factors that trigger inner emotional and cognitive reactions (Kim *et al.*, 2020). It has been widely used to explore factors in social media engagement in tourism research. For example, Kim *et al.* (2020) adopts the theory to predict potential tourists' behaviors in VR tourism. Aramendia-Muneta *et al.* (2021) takes tourism image attributes as the stimulus, Instagrammers' likes and comments as the organism, and the improved destination images and the enhanced volume of tourists as the response to explore factors (i.e. stimuli) influencing tourists' likes and comments (organism) on Instagram. In this study, the S-O-R modal is adapted to twitter and DMOs, where the stimulus is discursive factors in DMOs' tweets, the organism is twitter users' likes, comments and shares, and the response is tourist customers' cognitive and affective impression on the destination.

We explore the impact of discursive factors in DMOs' tweets that might influence the organism the users' likes, shares and comments, thus to spark off the cognitive and affective destination image projected on tweeter users' mind, which is the response. Their relations are represented in figure 1.



Source: Mehrabian and Russell (1974).

Figure 1: S-O-R Modal for Twitter & DMOs

Based on the S-O-R modal for twitter & DMOs adapted from Mehrabian and Russell (1974), this study constructs the regression modal to explore the discursive factors influencing social media engagement of London DMO' official twitter account. This study chooses texts and pictures posted as our research objects, as these two modalities are more typical on twitter posts. Thus, the stimulus, discursive factors in DMOs' tweets, is divided into three dimensions, namely textual factors, pictorial factors and factors of text-image relations. These three factors stimulate the cognitive and affective impression perceived by tourist consumers, which have direct impacts on their likes, shares and comments on London DMO's official tweets.

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

Multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) is a combination of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) (Ledin & Machin, 2018). CDA aims to reveal the underlying meanings, power relations and ideologies embedded within discourses through the analysis on the use of language and the patterns of discourse. And MCA tends to make analysis on the meanings of pictures, gestures, music and any other non-verbal symbols, and the meanings conveyed by inter-semiotic relations and interactions. While MCDA combines these two theories to investigate the hidden meanings, power relations and ideologies embedded within verbal and non-verbal discourses and their interrelations. Ledin and Machin (2018) argues that based on the social semiotic approach of MDA (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), MCDA may well reveal the hidden meanings and mechanisms conveyed by different semiotic modalities and their configurations. This study applies MCDA to make critical analysis on the meanings of both language and pictures and their configuration in London official tourism tweets, aiming at revealing their online engagement and its discursive influencing factors.

Visual grammar is a representative social semiotic MDA theory propose by Kress & van Leeuwen in their significant monograph *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. It extends the three metafunctions in systemic functional linguistics into non-verbal semiotic analysis, developing the ideational, interpersonal and textual functions in languages into representational, interactional and compositional meanings in the visual factors of pictures. This study applies the concepts contact, distance and viewpoint in visual grammar to explore the interactional meanings conveyed by the pictures posted in London official tourism tweets, investigating three pictorial interactional features, namely close social distance, direct gaze, frontal and eye-level distance (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996).

Drawing on Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996) research experience, Martinec and Salway (2005) extends the logic-sematic relations in linguistic clause analysis into the research of the text-image relations, including expansion and projection relations.

This study applies the three relations in the relation of expansion, namely elaboration, extension and enhancement as features of text-image relations.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

Twitter (X) is one of the most pervasively used social media platforms worldwide, whose monthly active users have exceeded 388 million times (Statista, 2025). The statistics on this SNS platform may well represent people's opinion towards London as a destination worldwide.

Thus, this study takes Visit London (@visitlondon) as our source of data, which is the earliest twitter account for London DMO with the largest number of followers. We utilize the software Octoparse to capture tweets released in 2020 to 2022. In order to explore the attractiveness of the city's tweets to the audience and avoid content duplication, this study removes retweets and replies, retaining only the official original tweets. At last, we get 1432 tweets including 4268-word types, 26760 tokens, 2491 hashtags, 1541 @, 2266 emojis and 1159 pictures. We also capture the specific numbers for likes, shares and comments of each post.

Data Processing

The researcher employs Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count-22 (LIWC-22), a natural language processing software, to extract textual discursive features in London DMO's tourism tweets, utilizes content analysis to extract pictorial features and features of text-image relations, and then applies regression analysis to figure out the discursive factors influencing cross-border consumers' online engagement on London DMO tweets.

LIWC is a natural language processing software designed to explore the linguistic features of written texts which reflect the mechanism of the effects of these texts. The software makes content analysis automatically based on the dictionary full of functional and emotional words innated in it. Altogether LIWC will generate 118 features of the texts. As the texts of tweets are extremely short, most of which includes less than 100 words. Thus, this study only extracts seventy textual features in the texts of London DMO's tourism tweets.

Concerning the multimodal features, as is mentioned above, this study extracts three image features, namely close social distance, direct gaze, frontal and eye-level distance, and three features of text-image relations, namely elaboration, extension and enhancement.

These seventy textual features, three image features and three features of text-image relations form the independent variables for the regression analysis in this study.

Variables

The study establishes multiple linear regression modals with discursive features as the independent variable and online engagement statistics as the dependent variable. The discursive features, including textual, image features and features of text-image relations, are taken as independent variables in this study. The statistics of likes, shares and comments are taken as the dependent variables in the regression analysis.

The dependent variable of each post is a numerical data calculated by combining the weighted numbers of likes (0.2), shares (0.3) and comments (0.5). While the independent variables include three dimensions, of which textual features are numerical data representing raw frequency number of each feature generated by LIWC, pictorial features and features of text-image relations are categorical data generated by content analysis. The calculus of the online engagement of each post is as follows:

$$CEFi = 0.2Li + 0.3Rti + 0.5Rpi \quad (1)$$

CEFi refers to the number of the online engagement of each post, Li refers to the number of likes, Rti the number of retweets or shares, and Rpi the number of replies or comments.

The variables in the regression analysis of this study are shown in table 1.

Table 1: Variables in Regression Analysis

Variables	Discursive features	Types of variables	Dependent variables
Textual features	Total pronoun, personal pronoun, 1st person plural, 2nd person, 3rd person plural, impersonal pronouns, Numbers, adverbs, negations, common verbs, common adjectives, quantities, comma, periods, question mark, exclamation points, apostrophes, drives, affiliation, achievement, power, cognition, all-or-none,	Numerical variables	Online engagement measured by the communication effects of the tweets $CEFi = 0.2Li + 0.3Rti + 0.5Rpi$ (SocialBakers, 2015; Mariani <i>et al.</i> , 2016)

	cognitive processes, insight, causation, discrepancy, tentative, certitude, differentiation, affect, positive tone, negative tone, emotion, positive emotion, negative emotion, social processes, social behavior, prosocial behavior, politeness, communication, social referents, culture, politics, ethnicity, technology, lifestyle, leisure, home, work, money, religion, physical, food, acquire, curiosity, allure, perception, attention, motion, space, visual, feeling, time, past focus, present focus, future focus, conversational, netspeak, emoji (Pennebaker <i>et al.</i> , 2022)		
Pictorial features	close social distance direct gaze frontal and eye-level distance (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996)	Categorical variables	
Features of text-image relations	elaboration extension enhancement (Martinec & Salway, 2005)	Dummy variables	

Source: This study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study establishes multiple linear regression modals with discursive features as the independent variable and online engagement statistics as the dependent variable as is shown in table 1. The regression modal equation is as follows:

$$CEFi = b_0 + b_1 TM_i + b_2 PM_i + b_3 TP_i + e_i \quad (2)$$

CEFi refers to the number of the online engagement of each post, b_0 is the constant number, b_1 , b_2 and b_3 the regression indexes, TM the textural features, PM the image features, TP features of text-image relations, e non-discursive factors, and i refers to any tweet.

In order to increase the modal fitting, first, a correlation analysis is made to exclude the highly interrelated independent variables, and then the backward stepwise regression analysis is applied to figure out the relations between the left independent variables and the dependent variable, the consumers' online engagement for London DMO's tweets, in SPSS 26. This means the highly correlated and irrelevant predictors are excluded from the final modal. Finally, thirteen regression models are constructed. The results are statistically significant in every regression modal ($p < 0.001$). All models are statistically significant in explaining the dependent variables. The statistical level is set at $p < 0.05$ and a 95% confidence interval is adopted.

We adopt the results from the thirteenth modal as it is significant with a p value less than 0.05, and it explains 18.5% of the variance in consumers' online engagement (R^2 adjusted = .185, $F(13,1415) = 25.915$, $p = .000$). And the results show that there is no collinearity problem (tolerance = 0.977; CI = 9.654; VIF = 1.023).

The statistical analysis shows that the thirteen variables included in the chosen modal all have statistically significant effect on the number of online engagements. According to the findings in table 1, close social distance (Beta = 0.184, $t = 7.22$, $p = .000$), text-image elaboration relations (Beta = 0.182, $t = 6.987$, $p = .000$), text-image enhancement relations (Beta = 0.179, $t = 6.685$, $p = .000$), positive tone (Beta = 0.053, $t = 2.141$, $p = .032$), and visual (Beta = 0.052, $t = 2.134$, $p = .033$) are found to be positively predictive of the consumers' online engagement. While netspeak (Beta = -.188, $t = -7.485$, $p = .000$), direct gaze (Beta = -.120, $t = -4.946$, $p = .000$), space (Beta = -0.117, $t = -4.668$, $p = .000$), period (Beta = -.082, $t = -3.376$, $p = .001$), exclamation (Beta = -.079, $t = -3.242$, $p = .001$), insight (Beta = -.076, $t = -3.105$, $p = .002$), emoji (Beta = -.066, $t = -2.685$, $p = .007$), and ethnicity (Beta = -.055, $t = -2.27$, $p = .023$) are found to be negatively predictive, see table 2.

Table 2: Results of Regression Analysis

Variables	Positive engagement		
	Beta	t	Sig.
close social distance	0.184	7.22	0.000
elaboration (text-image relations)	0.182	6.987	0.000
enhancement (text-image relations)	0.179	6.685	0.000
positive tone	0.053	2.141	0.032

visual	0.052	2.134	0.033
	Negative engagement		
netspeak	-0.188	-7.485	0.000
direct gaze	-1.2	-4.946	0.000
space	-0.117	-4.668	0.000
period	-0.082	-3.376	0.001
exclamation	-0.079	-3.242	0.001
insight	-0.076	-3.105	0.002
emoji	-0.066	-2.685	0.007
ethnicity	-0.055	-2.27	0.023

Source: This study.

From the above statistical analysis, we can see that the positive predictors for London DMO's tourism tweets can be categorized as affective and visual factors, while all the textual factors, such as netspeak, are negative predictors. Firstly, about the affective factors, positive tones are conveyed by affective adjectives and adverbs such as "good, well, love", they arouse people's positive cognitive and affective emotions and impressions, thus will elicit positive online engagement. This conclusion is in line with those from Kumar *et al.* (2016) and Wu (2018), whose researches find that the positive comments and affective expressions in social media promotional discourse may arouse good feedback from potential tourism consumers. Casais and Poço (2023) also figures out that DMOs in the government shall try their best to enhance people's affective attachment to develop positive city destination images. For example, example 1 is a tweet which has got 1045 likes. The words "perfect" and "lovely" has conveyed a positive tone, which arouses readers' love for the beautiful Autumn on Thames which is the landmark of London, establishing people's place attachment to the city.

Example 1 A perfect picture capturing the lovely change of season along the Thames 🍁 #VisitLondon [📷 @antbuket]

Secondly, visual factors are also positive predictors of the online engagement for London DMO's official tourism tweets. Specifically, the four positive predictors, close social distance (image feature), elaboration (feature of text-image relation), enhancement (feature of text-image relation) and visual, are all related to image interactive factors. As is summarized by some tourism researches, pictures worth thousands of words or picture speak louder than words (Lee *et al.*, 2015; Hamid, 2016), pictures are good at arousing people's affective attachment to destinations. For example, in example 2, the text and the picture establish an elaboration relation, in which the text and the picture explain each other without adding any new information to each other. This text-image relation makes the scenery of Autumn on Thames vivid and full of charm.

Example 2 Autumn along the Thames. 🍁 #VisitLondon [📷 @photosbyjet]



Thirdly, all the textural factors entered the regression modal are negatively influencing tourist consumers' online engagement. Textual factors are extracted from tweet texts, which represent information in tourism tweets. For example, example 3, as one of the longest texts in 2020 London tweets, only gets 6 likes. Too much information creates visual fatigue for the readers.

Example 3 @ChiswickFlowers opens for the first time this Sunday! Explore the market and view the wonderful selection of flowers, house plants, bouquets and all aspects of horticultural loveliness. #BecauseImALondoner

These results support the conclusion that interactive factors, including visual and affective factors in London DMO's tourism tweets are positively influencing tourist consumers' online engagement. While informative factors, namely textual features, are negative predictors of social media engagement on London DMO's official tourism tweets. This result is highly in line with Wu (2018) and Filieri *et al.* (2021), which confirm that pictures of the current city attractions and place attachment of London are tourists' favorite parts on social media posts from both the supply side and demand side in cross-border tourism, namely DMOs and tourists.

CONCLUSION

Based on SOR theory, the theory of critical multimodal analysis and regression analysis, this study conducts a research model to explore discursive factors influencing consumers' online engagement for cross-border tourism destination, London. It finds that discursive factors do have some impacts on tourist consumers' online engagement for London DMO's official tweets. Regression analysis further finds that factors of visuals, text-image relations and affection have significantly positive impact on consumers' online engagement, while textual factors have significantly negative impact. These results may offer insights on the design of city DMOs' social media promotional posts. And they also help readers to learn the mechanisms of discursive features' impact on social media promotion.

Several limitations have to be addressed in this quantitative study. First of all, this study takes London DMO's tourism tweets as our research object which is a little bit limited. Future researches may investigate that of more cities, or may carry out comparisons among cities of different cultures. Secondly, this study investigates textual and pictorial discursive factors and factors or text-image relations in social media posts, neglecting video modality which is very popular now on social media. Future researches may take video factors into consideration, and compare the influencing effects among different modalities. Thirdly, this study just takes twitter posts as our research data without considering other popular international social media platform, such as Facebook or Instagram. Future studies may include more platforms, and make comparison on the different communication effects among different social media platforms.

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