

A Positive Discourse Analysis of YouTube Users' Comments on China's Tourism from the Perspective of Appraisal Theory

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Abstract

Social media help individuals to share their opinions and communicate with people from different country. YouTube is a popular online video sharing platform, which has attracted countless users around the world to express their feelings. For the further publicity of China tourism, the investigation on the image of China tourism among the international YouTube users should be conducted. The research firstly annotated manually 100 comments that was chosen from 5 videos about China tourism and employed the AntConc tool to analyze the comments. The results indicated that the Affect and Appreciation resources are used more frequently and most users take an active attitude toward China tourism. This study gives the implications to the image of China tourism among international users and the further development of China tourism.

Keywords

Appraisal theory, Positive discourse analysis, YouTube users' comments, China's tourism image.

1. Introduction

Social media has gradually become a platform for the country to present its image to the outside world, and the influence of private individuals in the construction of the country's image has gradually emerged due to the instantaneous, low threshold and interactive features of social media (Lv & Ma, 2022). YouTube is one of the most popular online video sharing and social media platform worldwide. There are more than 2.5 billion monthly users on YouTube website (Dixon, 2022). Additionally, the users collectively browse this website more than one billion hours of videos each day. (Goodrow, 2017). Therefore, YouTube has a number of users who actively participate in the construction of this online community. Since 2007, Google has launched the new localization system so that the platform has localized versions in 104 countries, one territory (Hong Kong) and a worldwide version, for which more potential users are attracted by the accessible interface around the world. Users can not only share videos but also leave comments on YouTube platform. From these real comments, the attitudes and thoughts of crowds can be ascertained and detected. These natural and interactive comments seem to be a precious deposits filled with semiotic and linguistic resources.

1.1. Background

The State Council made a fourteenth five-year plan for the development of tourism on 22th December, 2021. According to this circular, the government proposes that China will have a stronger modern system for the tourism sector (The State Council, 2022), which means tourism still needs to be paid more attention. In this plan, the promotion of smart tourism with digital, networked and intelligent scenarios is also involved. Since the tourism has a lot of room for improvement, China's tourism image over the sea should be further investigated. China tourism research mainly focuses on the publicity of destinations, and there is scant research to probe into the feelings of consumers. Yu and Pan (2016) argued that social media has its own unique

advantages on investigating the users' perception, for which the public resorts to the Internet when they need to make decisions and meet the needs of entertainment.

To help China gain more popularity and preference among international tourists, the combination of new media and discourse analysis can offer a new perspective. Due to the authenticity and diversity of YouTube users' comments, the present study aims to make use of these opulent comments to study China's tourism image on the international platform since the outbreak of Covid-19.

1.2. Research questions

Considering the huge influence of social media and the lack of discourse studies on YouTube users' comments on the China tourism, the time seems propitious to explore the image of China tourism since the outbreak of Covid-19 and shed light on the development of China tourism. Therefore, an empirical study was designed to discover what discourse strategies are used in users' comments and what attitude the users are toward China tourism. The text of comments was annotated manually for exploring the proportion of positive and negative expressions that belong to the Attitude domain, and the AntConc was employed to acquire the most frequent words and a key word list for investigating the tendency of users' feelings. The following research questions guided our study:

1. What are the most frequent words except form pronouns and function words? And what are the keywords in the chosen comments?
2. What features do the chosen comments have in lexis?
3. What evaluations are made about the image of China tourism and how are the evaluations made?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Previous discourse analysis of China tourism

Some researchers investigate China tourism and their focuses are on the publicity of destination, for which the advertisements, official websites, tourism posters and guide books are regarded as the materials to be conducted a discourse analysis (Ding, 2004; Zhong, 2007; Xi, 2014; Liang & Jiang, 2015), while other researchers explore the tourists' feelings based on their blogs and visitor books so as to further improve the service and experience that are given by destinations (Xie, Yu & Guo, 2019; Feng, 2011; Wu, 2018).

Liang and Jiang employed visual grammar and theory of intersemiotic complementarity to analyze the words and pictures of a public tourism poster for paving the way for the designing public tourism posters, and improving city image (Liang & Jiang, 2015). Intersemiotic complementarity is a theoretical framework used in the research to investigate the tour advertisements for attracting prospective visitors to travel in Jiangxi province (Xia, 2014). Additionally, there are some researchers investigating the perceptions of tourists for promoting tourism. Through analyzing the discourses in tourists' blogs, Feng studied the image of tourist destinations and then the suggestions about how to upgrade the experience evaluation of the Chinese and foreign tourists were given (Feng, 2011). As a linguistic resource, visitors' books could also be analyzed for investigating the tourists' expression appeal and their psychology (Xie, Yu & Guo, 2019). Wu conducted a contrastive analysis to study what functions linguistic resources serve for promoting destinations and what differences two destinations have in marketing methods on the basis of two texts chosen from Hangzhou and London official websites from the perspective of appraisal theory (Wu, 2018).

However, users' comments of China tourism on YouTube website have so far received limited attention. This article examines the image of China tourism through analyzing the discourses under the related videos since the outbreak of Covid-19.

2.2. Framework

Based on the systemic Functional Linguistic, appraisal framework was found since the 1990s. In 1999, Martin proposed the concept of positive discourse analysis on a conference in which the topic was critical discourse analysis (Martin, 2000). He pointed that people should be concerned with how to work in harmony with others but not merely pay attention to the criticism of hegemony or ideology (Martin, 2000).

Martin and Rose (2007, p. 17) argue that “appraisal is concerned with evaluation—the kinds of attitudes that are negotiated in a text, the strength of the feelings involved and the ways in which values are sourced and readers aligned.” This framework is employed with the premise that YouTube users’ comments are abundant in interpersonal meanings, i.e. expressions of interacting with prospective users, exchanging meanings and that the appraisal theory which concentrates on interpersonal meanings linked with the negotiation of social relationships (Martin & White 2005), can be conducive to analyze the materials.

In appraisal framework, the interpersonal meanings are divided into three semantic domains: Attitude, Graduation and Engagement. Attitude is concerned with our feelings, including emotional reactions, judgements of behaviour and evaluation of things. Engagement deals with sourcing attitudes and the play of voices around opinions in discourse. Graduation attends to grading phenomena whereby feelings are amplified and categories blurred (Martin & White, 2005).

As for expressing Attitude, Martin (2000) comes up with three systems: Affect, Judgement and Appreciation. Affect “is concerned with registering positive and negative feelings: do we feel happy or sad, confident or anxious, interested or bored?” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 42). Judgement is related with the attitudes to people’s behaviour, i.e. “attitudes towards behaviour, which we admire or criticise, praise or condemn” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 42). Appreciation means our aesthetic evaluations of semiotic and natural phenomena (Martin & White, 2005). Engagement can be divided into “monoglossic” and “heteroglossic” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 99–100). The former refers to the utterances in which writers or speakers do not quote other voices and viewpoints (Martin & White, 2005). The later refers to the utterances in which writers or speakers do invoke or allow for dialogue (Martin & White, 2005).

Graduation is relevant with the degree of an evaluation, which can be measured from the way of “intensity or amount”, and the way of “prototypicality and the preciseness by which category boundaries are drawn” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 137). Graduation can be merged into the other two domains, Attitude and Engagement (Martin & White, 2005). The engagement and attitude systems are both have the feature “gradability” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 135). The core concepts in Graduation are about “force” and “focus” (Martin & White, 2005, p. 37). “Force” has to do with adjusting the degree of an assessment, while “focus” means the effect of changing the strength of boundaries between categories (Martin & White, 2005, p. 37).”

To analyze the key interpersonal features in YouTube users’ comments, there are three steps based on the appraisal theory. First, the YouTube Users’ comments about “China tour” will be collected and annotated within the system of Attitude. The comments are mainly analyzed from the perspective of Attitude. The aim of this study is to explore what the YouTube users’ attitude toward China Tourism. Second, if the comments involved with Engagement and Graduation, they will also be marked and later will be explained as a way of probing the interpersonal meanings. By analyzing whether the voice is heteroglossic or not, or what strengthen that the voice demonstrates, the present study will also investigate what voices and gradability are drawn into the comments. Third, on the basis of comments, this article will present the evaluation of YouTube users on China tourism and then investigate what linguistic and semiotic resources are used on the comments to interact with other users from the perspective of appraisal theory.

3. Method

3.1. Data collection

For this study, data was collected from the YouTube website. "China tour" as a search term for retrieving, there were countless results. The exact number of the results was not shown on the users' interface. Then, the results were ranked by relevance and the research filter five videos from these relevant results. Except from the relevance, the number of video views is another criterion. The chosen videos should have more than 100 million video views, which can ensure that the video has influence on more users and there are quite a few comments under the videos. Moreover, the release date of the videos should be after the epidemic broke out for the purposes of the study. After choosing five videos, the comments were ranked by hotness. Under each video, the top 20 comments were selected. In the end, 100 comments were selected in total. These comments were firstly turned into plain text and then manually annotated on the basis of appraisal framework. According to the research questions, the focus of annotation was on the Attitude domain. The researcher will mark the comments with affect, judgement and appreciation, in which the positive and negative meanings were also be highlighted. In the process of annotation, if the comments involve the Engagement and Graduation, these comments would be noted particularly as well.

3.2. Data analysis

The present study employed a mixed method, which included quantitative and qualitative analysis of 100 YouTube users' comments to summarize the image of China tourism among the international users. As for the qualitative analysis, the researcher made reference to positive and negative words or phrases that were presented in the Attitude domain for analyzing the expressions in the comments that included users' evaluations and identifying the appraisal framework in the text. In the quantitative analysis, the AntConc software was used to obtain word frequency and key word list. For acquiring the key word list, COCA Samples Text was set as a reference corpus, which had 9412521 tokens; while the corpus of comments had 4746 tokens. The word frequency and key word list would contribute to the text analysis.

4. Results

4.1. The Attitude strategies in YouTube users' comments

The coding system is based on the three strategies in the Attitude domain, affect, judgement and appreciation. If the comments made an evaluation about China tourism, they will be marked by which strategy they used. After annotating 100 users' comments on China tourism, the Attitude strategies can be concluded in the Table 1.

Table 1. The Attitude strategies in the users' comments

	Affect	Judgement	Appreciation
Number	44	9	66
Proportion	44%	9%	66%

As shown in the Table 1, there are 66 percent of total comments involved with Appreciation strategy, which the frequently used strategy. The strategy of Affect is employed in the comments less than Appreciation strategy, while only 9 users applied Judgement strategy in their comments.

Table 2. The positive and negative expressions in the Attitude strategies

	Positive Expressions		Negative Expressions	
	Number	Proportion	Number	Proportion
Affect	44	100%	0	0
Judgement	8	88.9%	1	11.1%
Appreciation	63	95.5%	3	4.5%

In the Table 2, the positive expressions in users' comments are significantly more than negative expressions. All 44 comments employing the Affect strategy, used positive expressions. There are only 3 comments using negative expressions in total 66 comments that used the Appreciation strategy and 1 comment using negative expressions in total 9 comments that used the Judgement strategy.

4.2. The high-frequency words and the keyword list

The 100 users' comments on the image of China tourism were turned into plain texts, which were imported into the AntConc tool for gaining the frequently used words and the key word list for exploring the evaluation of the international users. The top 10 high-frequency words except from pronouns and function words are summarized in the Table 3.

Table 3. The top 10 high-frequency words (except from pronouns and function words)

	Rank	Frequency
China	1	77
City	2	40
People	3	39
Chinese	4	31
Like	5	30
Beautiful	6	24
Cities	7	23
Love	8	22
Country	9	21
See	10	17

As shown in the Table 3, 6 high-frequency words are nouns, and 3 words are verbs and one word is an adjective. Additionally, three out of ten words are positive words while the rest of them could be regarded as words related to neutral.

For triangulating the high-frequency words, the keyword list was made through operating the AntConc in which the COCA Samples Text was settled as the reference corpus. The keywords are ranked by keyness, and ten keywords with high keyness are shown in the Table 4. Pronouns and function are also excluded from the keywords.

The statistics tell us that seven keywords are nouns, two are adjectives, and one is a verb (see Table 1). Among these keywords, most of them are related with places, such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, cities, which might be caused by the content of the chosen videos. Additionally, the keyword "beautiful" also occurs in the list of high-frequency words. Except from the adjective "beautiful", the keyness of "amazing" is relatively high.

Table 4. The top 10 keywords

	Rank	Keyness (Likelihood)
China	1	600.211
Guangzhou	2	217.254
Chinese	3	198.915
City	4	171.671
Cities	5	166.090
Shanghai	6	149.706
Beautiful	7	138.891
Videos	8	129.845
Amazing	9	95.617
Visit	10	78.426

5. Discussion

5.1. The features of users' comments in lexis

According to the Table 1, sixty-six instances of Appreciation and forty-four instances of Affect can be found in the user's comments compared to only nine Judgement instances, suggesting that the comments are obviously assessments of China and Chinese. The primary attitudinal source used by the YouTube users is the that of Appreciation. Compared with negative expressions, the statistics tell us that positive expressions are employed most dominantly (see the Table 2). The Affect strategy is related with the direct expressions of emotion. YouTube is a social media and individuals would like to give vent to their feelings rather than hide their emotion. However, in the study of Italian newspapers' reports on the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Judgement and Appreciation strategies are used more than the Affect strategy, which suggests that the newspapers prefer to show objective statements than subjective appraisal (Dong, 2019). Compared with newspapers, the users' comments tend to be more subjective.

With regard to the lexis used in the users' comment, most words are positive and complimentary. In the top 10 high-frequency words, the words "love" and "like" are frequently used to express the users' emotion and preference (see the Table 3). The word "like" cannot only be used as a verb, but also used as a proposition.

Excerpt 1.

*Wow! I never imagined China is so beautiful.. It's **like** heaven on Earth which is filled with people with full of happiness and joy in their minds and also a wave of different colors. Also, a lot of air bubbles....hahaha Love from India.*

In the Excerpt 1, China is compared to "heaven on earth" by using the phrase "be like", which demonstrates that the user thinks highly of China. Additionally, the user applies the strategy of appreciation to make an evaluation of Chinese people's happy life.

Excerpt 2

*Shanghai is a modern-day metropolis that I would **like** to visit someday. It has a long, rich history. There is the sense of nostalgia when walking around the Bund, the architecture of the buildings, the nearby riverbend, the nightclubs, and triads of the 1930's and 1940's. It is what I think about when I watch the TVB series of the 80's.*

In the Excerpt 2, "would like to" is used in two comments and it is usually collocated with "visit", "everyday", "metropolis, and "sometimes" on the basis of the "collocate" function in the AntConc.

By illustrating these collocations, most users are eager to travel China and have a passion for visiting metropolis in person one day.

Apart from the word “like”, another word “love” is one of Affect resources and is often used to convey the writers’ affection and ardor. There are 22 comments using the word “love”, in which it is often used as a verb and a noun. As a verb, “love” is often collocated with “their bullet train”, “their country”, “their dramas”, and “China”, which suggests that quite a few YouTube users take an active attitude toward China and Chinese culture, and also high technology. As a noun, “love” is usually followed by a preposition “from”, after which there are many countries, for example, “love from India”, “love from Japan”, “love from Pakistan”. “Love from” might be an idiomatic phrase on the YouTube website and this phrase occurs in the comments repeatedly. Among these comments, the phrase is widely used by Indian, Pakistani, which might indicate that people from the neighboring countries pay more attention to the development of China (see the Excerpt 3).

Excerpt 3

*China is the most Beautiful country in this world and the Chinese people are most peaceful **Love** from Your iron brothers **Love** from Pakistan China.*

The word “beautiful” is one of typical Appreciation resources and is used as much as 24 times in the 100 comments. “Beautiful” is included in both the top 10 high-frequency list and the keywords list. Among these instances, this word is often used to modify “city”, “China”, “Chinese culture”, “Shanghai”. In addition, the juxtaposition of “beautiful” and “safe”, “clean” is often used by the users in their comments (see the Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4

*This city is so **beautiful, clean** and it looks really **safe**.*

In the excerpt 4, the adjectives “beautiful”, “clean”, and “safe” are value-laden and carry positive senses, indicating that the commentators want to associate “this city” with positive qualities such as “beautiful”, “clean” and “safe”. In this way, a positive evaluation is made in the comments, and the other YouTube users are orientated to interpret the text in a certain way. Therefore, it is obvious that the image of “this city” is elicited through tokens of Appreciation.

In the users’ comments, regardless of the high-frequency words or the keywords, most of them carry positive senses and belongs to Affect and Appreciation resources. Through using positive words, most commentators would like to convey an attitude of peace and friendliness.

5.2. The evaluation on the image of China tourism

Through analyzing the users’ comments, the Affect and Appreciation resources are used most frequently in the texts. From the lexis level, positive expressions are employed dominantly in the comments, which suggests that most users have an attitude of peace and love toward China since the outbreak of Covid-19. Although the pandemic has a negative influence on the world tourism, the results have shown that the image of China tourism has been less affected.

Most evaluations are made by the users are positive, and these evaluations are closed to the development of China and cities, the advancement of technology, and the abundance of Chinese culture. Many users compared China to other countries for complimenting the safety and clean of Chinese cities. In the process, they used Graduation resources to make a comparison, such as “so clean”, “very clean”. Except from make a comparison between China and other countries, the users preferred to compare the past with the present in China to praise that the development of China is amazing in a short period.

The users would like to employ the Affect and Appreciation resources in making an evaluation on the image of China tourism. That preference is different from the reports of newspapers, in which the Judgement evaluation is used most frequently (Dong, 2019). For the property of the newspapers, they tend to give the readers an objective impression rather than a subjective

impression, while the YouTube is a video shared platform so as to give more freedom to the users to express their feelings, which might lead to more use of the Appreciation resources in the comments.

In the process of analyzing the texts, it is obvious that the neighboring countries pay more attentions to the development of China, which is partly because our government has published policy such as Belt and Road Initiative and Asian countries share the similar culture and have some communications in the history.

China still has a relatively high reputation among the international YouTube users through analyzing their comments. The culture, history, and technology of China have attracted prospective visitors to some extent by investigating the Affect and Appreciation resources in comments.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, this paper analyzes 100 comments chosen from 5 videos about China tourism with a discourse approach, and sheds some light on the different discursive strategies of users' comments on China tourism since the outbreak of Covid-19. Discourse analysis of the YouTube users' comments on China tourism has some implications for investigating the image of China tourism among the international users and making use of social media for online tourism promotion. In order to increase the effectiveness of social media, some investigations based on the comments should be conducted. More systematic research is needed to better promote the transformation from the YouTube users to the prospective visitors and give a good impression on China to international users. To further probe into whether there is a consistency between the online image of China tourism described in the comments on the real image of China tourism in their mind, further research is needed to examine the feelings from the users' perspective. One of limitations of this study is that the corpus just contains 100 comments and the chosen videos are relatively high-quality and well edited, for which the users are more likely to be touched by the content. Another limitation is that the present study only uses the Attitude resources to analyze the comments while the Engagement and Graduation resources have not been discussed in the study.

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