

Social Media and Destination Promotion: Insights from Travel Agents in China

Yuan Tian^{1,2}, Sharifah Nurafizah Syed Annuar^{3*}

^{1,3}*Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sabah Branch, Kota Kinabalu Campus, 88997 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia*

²*School of Economics and Management, Xinyu University, 338004, Xinyu, China*

Authors' Email Address: ^{1,2}2022392221@student.uitm.edu.my,
³shari339@uitm.edu.my

Received Date: 9 May 2025

Accepted Date: 17 June 2025

Revised Date: 1 July 2025

Published Date: 31 July 2025

*Corresponding
Author

ABSTRACT

China is one of the world's most popular tourist destinations, but inbound tourism has suffered setbacks since the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It is now gradually recovering. The development of social media has provided a new channel for promoting China's destination image. Through semi-structured interviews with English tour guides and travel agency managers, this study explores how Chinese travel agents perceive the use of social media in shaping and promoting the image of Chinese tourist destinations to foreign audiences. Then, a thematic analysis was conducted. Participants highlighted that the perceived usefulness of social media information was closely linked to its quality and credibility. When content was seen as trustworthy and informative, it was more likely to influence their acceptance of the information, thereby shaping perceptions of China's tourist destination image. This study's innovation lies in its use of interviews and unique focus on the perspectives of travel agents, unlike previous research centered on tourists or potential travelers. Insights from travel agents can help the tourism industry refine destination promotion strategies, improve customer experience, tailor targeted marketing campaigns, enhance social media content, and build trust and credibility, ultimately aligning industry efforts with tourist needs and expectations.

Keywords: *China, destination image recognition, social media, thematic analysis method, travel agents*

INTRODUCTION

As the world's third largest inbound tourism receiving country, China has rich natural and cultural tourism resources (Zhu et al., 2020), the number of inbound international tourists to China continues to grow (Yang et al., 2019). By 2019, China's inbound tourism arrivals were 1.453 billion, and international tourism receipts arrived 131.3 USD billion. But this growth momentum suffered a

severe blow in 2020. Affected by COVID-19, many parts of China suspended inbound tourism, and both the number of foreign tourists and tourism revenue showed a significant decline. Starting in 2023, as China optimized and adjusted its epidemic prevention policies China resumed issuing tourist visas and expanded the scope of its 72/144-hour transit visa exemption policy (Huang & Zhu, 2024). But overall, it will take some time for China's inbound tourism to fully recover (Chen & Wang, 2024).

Social media's rise and development have changed how information is disseminated and provided new opportunities for shaping the image of Chinese tourist destinations (Branda et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2024). Social media allows Internet users to create, share, and exchange content (Chu et al., 2020) and facilitates interaction between users. Its high communicability and interactivity enable Chinese tourist destinations to showcase their unique charm to tourists at home and abroad through pictures, videos, live broadcasts and other forms (Khan et al., 2019). This not only enhances the attractiveness of tourist destinations but also helps to establish a positive destination image recognition, thereby improving foreign tourists' intention towards travelling to China.

In order to customize effective tourism strategies, it is essential to understand tourists' destination selection factors (Pan et al., 2021). In previous studies, scholars believed that choosing a tourist destination is a complex process which is influenced by multiple factors, such as attitude (Choirisa et al., 2021; Rahman & Sciara, 2022), travel intention (Agyapong & Yuan, 2022), trustworthiness serves (Pop et al., 2022) and destination image (Choirisa et al., 2021). This study focuses on the influence of social media on foreign tourists' destination image recognition of Chinese tourist destinations. Although destination image is considered an important factor influencing tourists' destination choice, there are relatively few studies on the impact of social media on destination formation (Huang et al., 2021; Pan et al., 2021). Based on this consideration, this study did not adopt quantitative research like most other studies but instead used qualitative research with thematic analysis to find out the main factors that social media has influenced foreign tourists' image recognition of Chinese tourist destinations.

Previous research explores the impact of social media on tourist destinations' image recognition, mainly focusing on customers' perspective (Huang et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2014). Travel agents' insights are equally important and need to be studied. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to investigate the perceptions of travel agents towards the use of social media in promoting travel destinations. This paper is guided by two research questions:

- 1) What do the travel agents think about social media elements that are important to tourists when watching videos promoting Chinese tourist destinations?
- 2) How do travel agents think about how information adoption influences the tourist 's perception and destination recognition through social media?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Information Adoption Model

The Information Adoption Model (IAM) was proposed by Sussman and Siegal (2003) to explain how individuals evaluate and adopt information received through computer-mediated communication platforms (such as social media). This model is based on the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) and Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) (Petty et al., 1981) theories and constructs a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding information processing and acceptance behaviour. The components of IAM are argument quality, source credibility, information usefulness and information adoption. Among them, argument quality represents the clarity and accuracy of the content of the information itself, plays a dominant role in individual cognition, and belongs to the "central route". At the same time, the source credibility depends on the authority and professionalism

of the publisher and belongs to the “peripheral route” that affects individuals' judgment of information (Islam et al., 2022; Silaban et al., 2023).

Destination Image Recognition

Destination image recognition is initially defined as the "beliefs, ideas and impressions" of a tourist destination (Crompton, 1979). Scholars constantly enrich and improve the meaning of destination image recognition. Beerli and Martín (2004) mention destination image recognition is an overall concept, emotion and comprehensive view of tourists' overall image of a destination and has a key influence on tourists' choice of tourist destinations. Tavitiyaman et al. (2021) regard destination image recognition will affect the tourist's future behavioural intention. Marine-Roig and Huertas (2020) also made a similar point, pointing out that destination image recognition is an important factor in attracting tourists to their destinations. When a tourist develops a positive destination image recognition for a tourist destination, the possibility of travelling to that destination increases.

Social Media

With the emergence of Web 2.0, the immediacy and interactivity of information sharing on social media platforms have been significantly improved. Users are no longer limited to passively receiving information but can interactively disseminate information by posting text, pictures, videos, and other content. This feature has significantly increased the number of active social media users. In previous studies, scholars have given various definitions of social media (Leyrer-Jackson & Wilson, 2018; Ronzhyn et al., 2023). This study adopts the definition of Leyrer-Jackson and Wilson (2018), social media as websites and technological applications that allow users to share content and/or participate in social networking.

Scholars (Sultan et al., 2021; Tolossa et al., 2023) believe that social media can influence travellers' destination image recognition when choosing a destination. The information provided by social media has been identified as a key factor in shaping the image of a destination. Social media helps to positively influence the image of online tourism destinations and increase tourists' intention to choose a destination (Huertas, 2018; Kim et al., 2017). In this process, the media plays an important role in searching and sharing tourism information (Sultan et al., 2021). At the same time, social media also influences tourists' choice of destinations (Sultan et al., 2021). For Chinese tourist destinations, through social media, a positive image can be established in the minds of foreign tourists (Sultan et al., 2021), and the image of a tourist destination can be developed and improved based on tourists' feedback (De las Heras-Pedrosa et al., 2020).

RESEARCH METHODS

This research adapts a semi-structural, in-depth interview method. The purpose of the interview is to understand how Chinese travel agents perceive the use of social media in shaping and promoting the image of Chinese tourist destinations to foreign audiences. A semi-structured interview outline was designed to meet the requirements for this purpose. The interview questions mainly include: Is the quality of information on social media important? How do potential tourists judge whether the information is credible? What important social media elements will potential foreign tourists notice when watching videos promoting Chinese tourist destinations? Does the information on social media help tourists become familiar with a destination that will influence their adoption of information? Do the information tourists adopt from social media will affect their destination image recognition?

As this is an exploratory study, it mainly relies on the purposive sampling method to select the target groups to be interviewed. The purposive sampling technique is also called judgment

sampling. Researchers select samples considered the most representative or provide the most key information based on their judgment or research purpose (Etikan et al., 2016). This technique is often used in qualitative research to identify and select individuals or groups who have in-depth knowledge and expertise in the research phenomenon (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

For the purpose of this research, this study selected five participants from China who have been engaged in the inbound tourism business for a long time. Each interview lasted about 1 hour. Veal (2017) argues that interviews longer than 30 minutes are considered in-depth because the length allows the individual to share their thoughts and ideas in a timely and rational manner. After obtaining the consent of the interviewees, the entire interview was recorded and transcribed after the interview. In order to protect the personal information of the interviewees, they were assigned identification codes. The two English tour guides were assigned G1 and G2, and the three travel agency managers were assigned M1 to M3. The codes of the interviewees are as follows:

Table 1: Basic Interviewee Information

Code	Position	Department/Ministry	Years of Service	Awards
G1	English Tour Guide	Tour Guide Department	22	"Top Ten Tour Guides in Jiangxi Province", "One Hundred Key Tour Guides in Jiangxi Province", and "National Excellent Tour
G2	English Tour Guide	Tour Guide Department	10	
M1	Manager	Marketing Department	16	
M2	Head	International Travel Service Research and Study Centre	20	
M3	Deputy General Manager		17	

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The global theme of “Chinese travel agents perceive the use of social media in shaping and promoting the image of Chinese tourist destinations to foreign audiences” include four organizing themes and six basic themes, which will be discussed in the following sections.

Organizing Themes 1: Information Quality

Social media is an application based on a mutual benefit network. Anyone can create videos, pictures, or texts and easily share them without being restricted by time and location (Kim et al., 2017). An important finding is that tourists tend to adopt high-quality tourist information when faced with a large amount of information from social media.

Basic Theme 1: High-quality information helps to form the image of tourist destinations

Information quality is defined as how useful the information provided is to consumers (Yeap et al., 2014). For social media users, information quality is the extent to which information features meet users' needs and expectations (Jiang et al., 2021). In this interview, participants emphasized the

importance of information quality. G2 believes that "on social media, information quality is crucial. The latest videos are the most popular among foreign tourists. Foreign tourists also want to know what are the most popular tourist routes and projects in China." When choosing travel information, tourists also tend to choose "true and reliable information, which makes tourists feel that the information is useful and can give them good travel suggestions" (M1).

Meanwhile, participants believe that the quality of information on social media helps to form the image of a tourist destination (Kim et al., 2017). M2 said, "Whether Chinese or foreign tourists, they can get more high-quality tourism information through social media when choosing a tourist destination. It will be invaluable for tourists to understand a city or destination correctly."

Organizing Themes 2: Information Credible

In previous studies, scholars (Wu & Wang, 2011; Yılmazdoğan et al., 2021) believed that information credibility refers to the information receiver's perception of source expertise and source trustworthiness. An important finding of this study is that information provided by professional and high-credibility sources is considered useful.

Basic Theme 2: Information source expertise and trustworthiness

This study found that foreign tourists judge whether information is credible based on the expertise and reliability of the source. At the same time, when browsing social media information, they pay attention to source expertise and source trustworthiness. Source expertise is an intent when consumers believe that information provided by the source is valid (Ayeh et al., 2013). The interviewees mentioned that foreign tourists are more willing to choose information released by official accounts, company accounts and travel bloggers with many fans when choosing information. G1 mentioned that "official information is fairer and objective." M2 said, "When tourists adopt social media to release information, they will pay attention to authoritative and credible accounts." This finding is consistent with previous studies. Scholars regarded that if consumers believe that the source of information is highly professional, the persuasiveness of the information will increase accordingly (Arora & Lata, 2020; Kim et al., 2017).

Basic Theme 3: Information credibility improves the information's usefulness

Information credibility is defined as a trustworthy source (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Information with high credibility is considered valuable and a significant determinant of consumer decision-making (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Leong et al., 2021). Previous studies have shown (Abedi et al., 2020; Leong et al., 2021; Ngo et al., 2024; Silaban et al., 2023) that there is a positive correlation between information credibility and information usefulness. This view is also supported in this study. M1 believes that "information credibility is related to tourists' perception of information usefulness." M2 mentions, "The higher the information credibility, the easier it is for foreign tourists to identify it as useful information." When tourists believe that information is reliable, they are more inclined to choose this information.

Organizing Themes 3: Information Usefulness and information adoption

Information usefulness is the degree to which individuals believe that using information can improve their understanding (Cheung et al., 2008). Information adoption refers to the degree to which consumers accept information that motivates them to buy (Lee, 2018). Arora and Lata (2020) pointed out that when consumers believe information is useful, they adopt it and make purchasing decisions. In this study, the data showed that foreign tourists actively choose useful information on social media platforms.

Basic Theme 4: Foreign tourists will choose useful information

In the interview, G2 reported, "When foreign tourists browse information on social media, their main purpose is to find useful information. This information can bring them value and help. When making travel plans, they tend to adopt this useful information." M1 also expressed a similar view. Faced with the massive amount of information on social media, "foreign tourists need to judge which information is useful based on their own travel needs. "This finding is consistent with previous scholars' research. Arora and Lata (2020) pointed out that potential consumers usually use social media platforms to help them make travel destination decisions. If tourists think this online video is useful, they will adopt it.

Basic Theme 5: Useful information helps foreign tourists get familiar with the destination

Useful information is very important for foreign tourists. Foreign tourists who travel to China face language barriers and cultural differences (Xie et al., 2024). Obtaining useful information helps reduce uncertainty during travel and facilitates tourists in planning their travel itineraries rationally. Therefore, useful information directly affects foreign tourists' familiarity with the destination. M1 reported that foreign tourists usually "do their homework" on social media before coming to China. M2 mentioned that they can learn about the tourist destination through "relevant videos, pictures and texts, thereby increasing their familiarity with it." This valuable information helps foreign tourists to further understanding of the tourist destination.

Organizing Themes 6 □ Promote destination image recognition

Basic Theme 6: Shape the image of the tourist destination

Social media can shape the image and personality of a destination (Irfan et al., 2022; Tham et al., 2013). M3 and M1 said, "In reality, many foreign tourists' first impression of a tourist destination usually comes from the information obtained on social media. Such as, promotional videos of scenic spots, recommendations from travel bloggers and others "G2 also expressed a similar view, "Different tourists will form unique perceptions and impressions in their minds when they see videos and pictures about tourist destinations on social media." G1 also lamented the charm of social media. He said, "Before watching the video, foreign tourists thought Jingdezhen was a porcelain capital with a thousand-year history and ancient craftsmanship. However, after watching the video on social media, Jingdezhen's cultural and creative products, creative artists, porcelain museums, and other things, tourists have constructed a very innovative Jingdezhen, which has amazed foreign tourists."

DISCUSSION

Information usefulness depends on information quality and credibility. Information usefulness affects information adoption, which has a positive effect on destination image recognition. The following are some of the points derived from the research findings.

First, information quality is crucial for information usefulness and the image of tourist destinations. This result is consistent with previous studies (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Leong et al., 2021; Silaban et al., 2023). The accuracy, objectivity and timeliness of information will affect information quality. Social media has become the primary means for tourists to find destination information (Silaban et al., 2023). When foreign tourists browse tourist information through social media, if the information accurately and objectively describes the tourist destination and is timely, it means that the information is useful. At the same time, high-quality information helps to form the image of tourist destinations (Kim et al., 2017). Therefore, information quality plays an important role when using social media to promote tourist destinations.

Second, information credibility includes source expertise and source trustworthiness, which affect information usefulness. It is consistent with previous studies (Abedi et al., 2020; Leong et al., 2021; Ngo et al., 2024; Silaban et al., 2023). This research finds that when foreign tourists obtain information from social media platforms, information posted on official websites, corporate accounts, and verified social media accounts is credible.

Third, information usefulness affects information adoption. Users' perception of usefulness is key to adopting externally provided information (Silaban et al., 2023; Sussman & Siegal, 2003). When foreign tourists use social media, sites such as TikTok and YouTube provide much tourism information. When information can help tourists choose a destination or arrange an itinerary, the information is useful. The more useful the information is, the more likely foreign tourists are to adopt it in their decision-making (Cheung et al., 2008). Similarly, this result is consistent with previous research findings (Islam et al., 2022; Leong et al., 2021).

Fourth, information adoption has a positive effect on destination image recognition. Information adoption is vital in destination image recognition (Junyi et al., 2018). The valuable information social media platforms provide allows foreign tourists to deeply understand Chinese tourist destinations, including scenic spots, cultural customs, and exceptional food. In particular, some personal experience videos and live broadcasts from foreign travel bloggers allow foreign tourists to feel the exotic customs of China more intuitively. Benefiting from the interactivity of social media, the interaction between tourists and information publishers makes the experience more comprehensive and real. Social media has also become an important platform for shaping the image of Chinese tourist destinations.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the research on social media as a marketing tool for Chinese tourist destinations. Through thematic analysis, the study found that the quality and credibility of information posted on social media will increase foreign tourists' recognition of information usefulness. In addition, information usefulness can promote the adoption of information on social media and significantly impact the image of Chinese tourist destinations.

Therefore, travel agencies need to optimize the use of social media. First, mainstream media such as YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok should be selected to create high-quality promotional information for Chinese tourist destinations and spread the image of Chinese tourism in international languages and from the perspective of tourists from source countries. Second, build a visitor-generated content incentive system. Encourage foreign travel bloggers and tourists to upload special experience videos on mainstream media, such as the experience of making ceramics in Jingdezhen and others, and share them to redeem corresponding rewards. Guiding potential tourists is important in constructing a destination image (Huang et al., 2021).

The present study strengthens and advances the existing literature on social media and destination image recognition, adding a perspective from Chinese travel agencies. However, it still has several limitations. First, the interview subjects of the study were managers and front-line employees of Chinese travel agencies. Future research can expand the scope of participants to include travel agency managers in different provinces, thereby further enriching the research results. Second, this study adopts qualitative research and relies on the subjectivity of researchers. A mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative research can be adopted in future studies to understand tourist behaviour better.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank Dr. Cynthia Robert Dawayan for her valuable comments and insights on this article.

FUNDING

This work was funded by the Jiangxi Province Basic Education Research Project: A Study on the Curriculum Design of High School Geography Study Tours Based on the 'Experiential Learning Cycle' Theory (SZUXYDL2023-1005).

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Yuan Tian and Sharifah Nurafizah Syed Annuar conceived and planned the interview. Yuan Tian carried out the interview and transcribed the data. Sharifah Nurafizah Syed Annuar contributed to the thematic analysis. Yuan Tian took the lead in writing the manuscript. All authors provided critical feedback and helped shape the research, analysis and manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

We certify that the article is the Authors' and Co-Authors' original work. The article has not received prior publication and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. This research/manuscript has not been submitted for publication, nor has it been published in whole or in part elsewhere. We testify to the fact that all Authors have contributed significantly to the work, validity and legitimacy of the data and its interpretation for submission to Jurnal Intelek.

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