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瑞士旅游

A PICTURESQUE ONLINE REPRESENTATION
OF SWITZERLAND:
A RESEARCH CONDUCTED ON CHINESE SOCIAL NETWORK
WEIBO

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive summary

Understanding the image of destinations among tourists both offline and online is essential to Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) in order to steer their marketing and communication strategies.

This research is based on the analysis of pictorial tourism-related user-generated content from the mainland Chinese social network Sina Weibo, on the subject of “Switzerland” as a tourism destination. It explores the picturesque online representation of the destination.

440 user-generated pictures were analyzed; 46 drivers and 12 themes were discovered as a result in order to draw the destination’s online image. DMOs can find social networks as a useful tool for investigating perceived images of the destination in the eyes of current and potential tourists, and get implications on their future marketing and promotional strategies.

Research context

USER-GENERATED CONTENT AND TOURISM INDUSTRIES

User-generated content (UGC) from various social media (e.g. YouTube, Flickr) and social networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) has changed how the information is transmitted and distributed within the tourism sector. Tourists became themselves information providers: with the ubiquity of high-speed Internet access, the popularization of social media and social networks offer great conveniences for sharing traveling experiences. Nowadays a single piece of information can be spread much faster and further when it is shared online, reaching a much more considerable scale than just among acquaintances, friends and relatives, compared with traditional word-of-mouth.

At the same time, the aggregated individuals' experiences became widely accepted as an information source due to its online openness and easy-approachability. In this case, the managers of tourism industries that used to be the recognized ones, who control and provide information to their consumers don't have the full "authority" anymore.

Eventually, substantial UGCs generated from travel blogs, travel review websites, forums and other social media have gained a relevant power, because they could create an online representation of the destination, leveraging on how other people perceive it.

PICTORIAL UGC AND TOURISM DESTINATIONS

It is widely acknowledged that tourism and photography are intrinsically linked: on one hand, photographs are crucial in promoting tourism destinations and they are used both in printed and digital media; on the other hand, the practice of photography is thought to be intimately related to the travel experience of a tourist.

This may explain why visual information especially in photographic format is also popularized in UGC. This visual information is focused on the traveler's personal experience and based on the travelers' own perspective, acting as a capture of the reality and representing their perception of what they have seen and what they have done at the destination. These photographs are very informal in comparison with the ones from official posters, brochures and websites, but they are so popular and accessible that they could really influence potential viewer's perception of the place (Garrod, 2009).

Hence, it is important to investigate the pictorial UGC because there will be a picturesque representation of the perceived destination image and tourists' experience, reflecting the most popular sceneries from the tourists' perspective and mirrors their preferences.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

A MARKET TREND: BOOMING CHINESE OUTBOUND TOURISM

Chinese outbound tourism is booming at an incredible fast speed. World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates that 100 million Chinese tourists will travel outside China by 2020; 4.6 million Chinese tourists were expected to visit Europe in 2012. This trend has been proved by the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (2011), confirming that among all foreign visitors, Chinese visitors' (excluding Hong Kong) overnight stay in Switzerland grew strongly in 2007 (+12.1%), though there was a drop in 2008, but a sharp increase showed up again in 2009 (+26.8%) with a strong continuation in 2010 (Figure 1); also, the overnight stay of mainland Chinese tourists in Switzerland in 2011 is over tripled in comparison to those in 2005 (Figure 2).

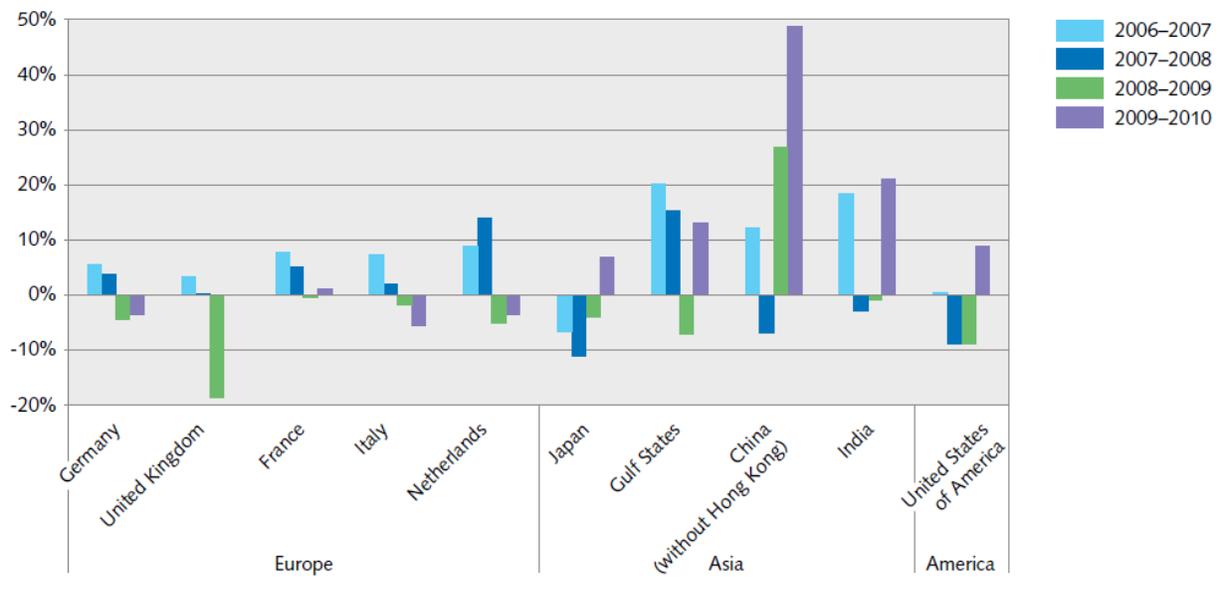


FIGURE 1. Change in overnight stays in the hotels and health establishments in Switzerland from main countries by continent from 2006 to 2010. Swiss Federal Statistical Office (2011)

RESEARCH CONTEXT

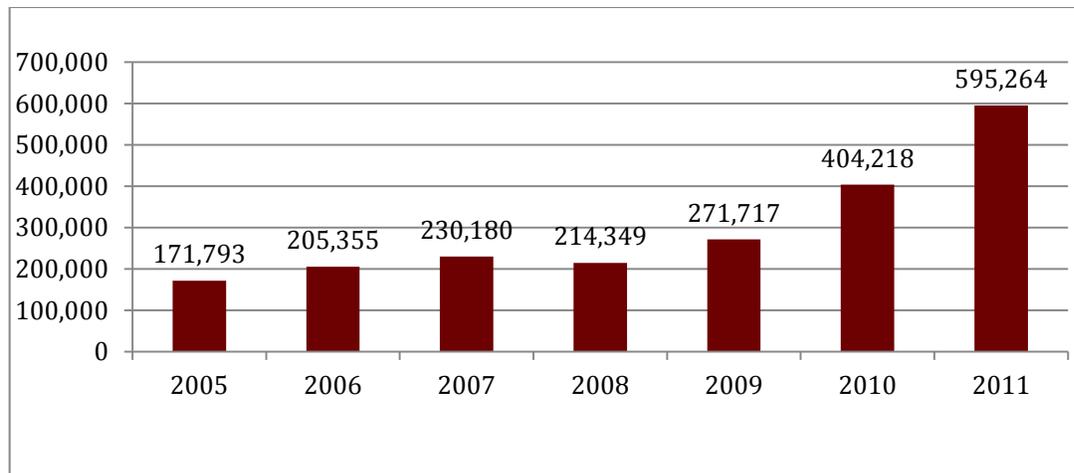


FIGURE 2. Overnight stays of tourists from China (without Hong Kong) from 2005 to 2011.
Swiss Federal Statistical Office (2011)

Additionally, Chinese tourists were the world's biggest tax-free shoppers in 2011. Chinese visitors chalked up more than US\$2.3 billion in tax free shopping transactions, where each Chinese shopper's tax-free average spend amounted to more than US\$1,041 per person, which is much higher than their Japanese (US\$681) and Russian (US\$461) counterparts (China Internet Watch, 2012).

According to the latest survey by Ctrip.com in 2012, China's largest online travel service provider, Switzerland tops the list as the most desirable European destination among Chinese travelers. The result of the survey showed that 80 percent of respondents aged between 20 and 45 wanted to travel to Switzerland, as a top choice among other European countries including France, Greece, Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom and Ireland (Xinhua, 2012).

While there are several researches about Chinese outbound tourism, ranging from studies of travelers' motivations to investigations of destinations' images, underlying the great value of investigating Chinese outbound tourism for the destinations; Switzerland in particular, as a destination favored by the Chinese tourist, has not been studied so far. Moreover, the role of social media and the related representation in online media has not been investigated, representing a promising area of interest in the tourism domain. This study provides the first insight based on this bilateral interest, and offers enlightenment for similar cases.

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE STRUCTURE

Methodology and sample structure

The sample for this study was acquired from Sina Weibo, a microblogging service, which is the most popular social network in Mainland China (<http://t.sina.com.cn>). Data collection was done by querying its search engine using the next keywords “瑞士旅游” (in English: Switzerland travel) with one-year time slot that ranged from July 2011 to June 2012. All published pictures have been collected and analyzed by first identifying the actual dominant presented objects and then the surrounding context of the objects through human interpretation. Intercoder reliability was undertaken as the analysis was done by three different coders.

On Sina Weibo, when the user uploads multiple pictures in one tweet, the pictures are grouped into one picture and could be only retrieved as one single picture (see Figure 3). In this situation, the grouped pictures were considered as one picture but with multiple frames inside. As a result, 468 pictures were collected among 1415 retrieved micro blog posts.



FIGURE 3. Sample of a picture with multiple frames

Analysis

According to the structure of the sample, analysis of pictures without multiple frames inside (hereafter *single-frame picture*) and pictures with multiple frames inside (hereafter *multi-frame picture*) were done separately following the next steps:

- sort out all present drivers from single-frame pictures;
- classify sorted drivers into themes (e.g. chocolate, wine, fondue and so on were classified under the theme of “food”);
- identify the surrounding context (e.g. inhabited lake vs. non-inhabited lake);
- assign multi-frame pictures to the developed themes according to its dominant driver;
- if multiple drivers were presented in a multi-frame picture, it was assigned up to three different drivers.

RESULTS

Results

SAMPLE FORMAT

468 pictures were retrieved. Out of them there were 132 multi-frame pictures (28%) and 308 single-frame pictures (66%). 28 pictures were not usable due to irrelevant content (e.g. images of site attractions in destinations outside of Switzerland) or insufficient quality of the picture (e.g. vague images). Thus, 94% of retrieved pictures were usable for this research purposes.

RESULTS FROM SINGLE-FRAME PICTURES

According to the methodology, drivers and themes that take the dominance in the pictures were generated from single-frame pictures first so as to form the criteria for analyzing multi-frame pictures. There were 11 themes generated from 308 usable single-frame pictures and their distribution by percentage is shown below (Figure 4).

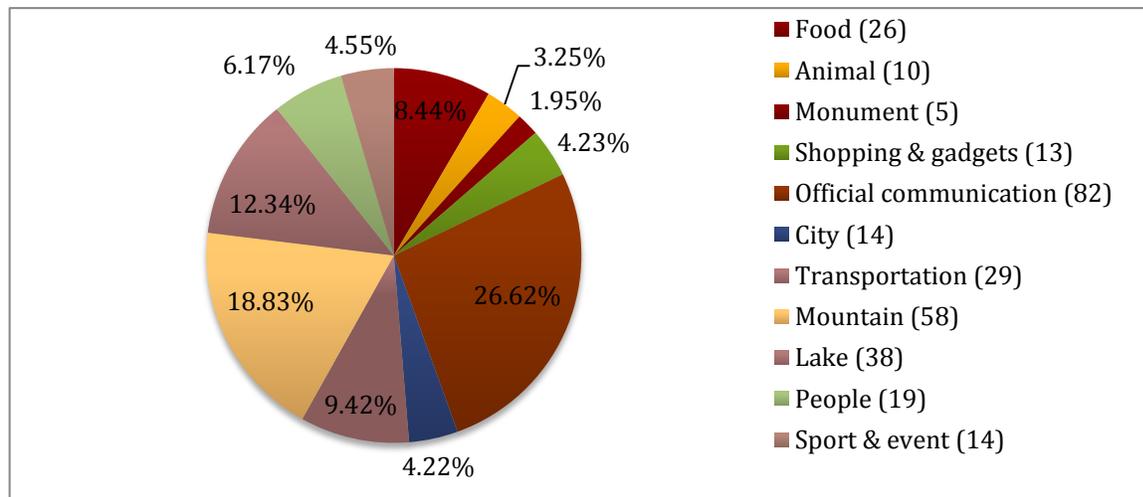


FIGURE 4. Percentage of themes generated from single-frame pictures (N=308)

RESULTS

Figure 5 presents the drivers under each theme and driver occurrence from single-frame pictures.

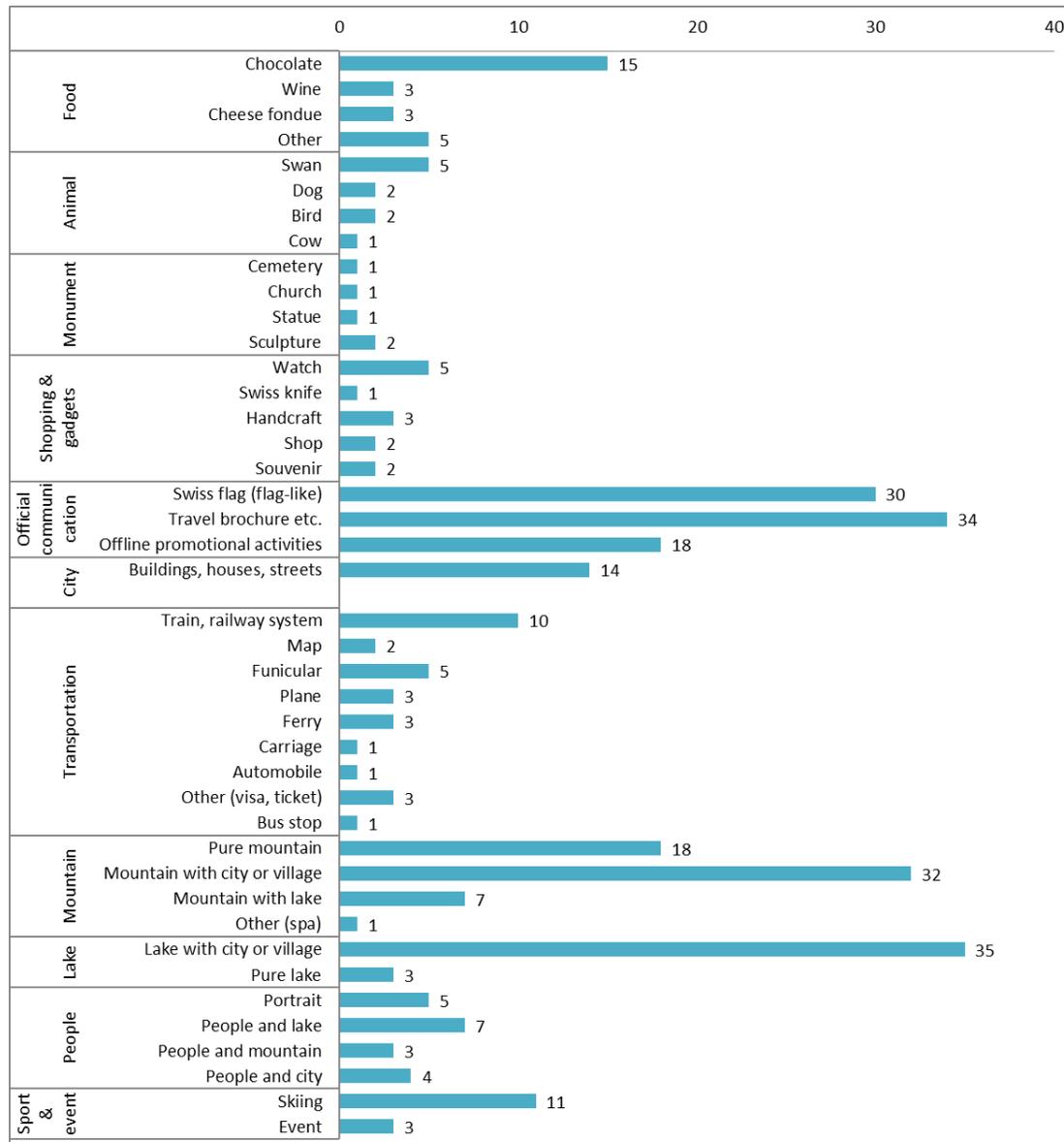


FIGURE 5. Themes and driver occurrence from single-frame pictures

However, mountain and lake are also identified as context for some drivers under other themes; cities and villages are often seen together with mountains and lakes, which projects the image of Switzerland as balanced between “well-inhabited nature” and “pure nature”.

RESULTS

RESULTS FROM MULTI-FRAME PICTURES

Among 132 usable multi-frame pictures, 110 pictures were analyzed with their dominant subjects; other 22 pictures were associated with more than one driver. Hence, the sum of driver occurrence is over 100% (N=171).

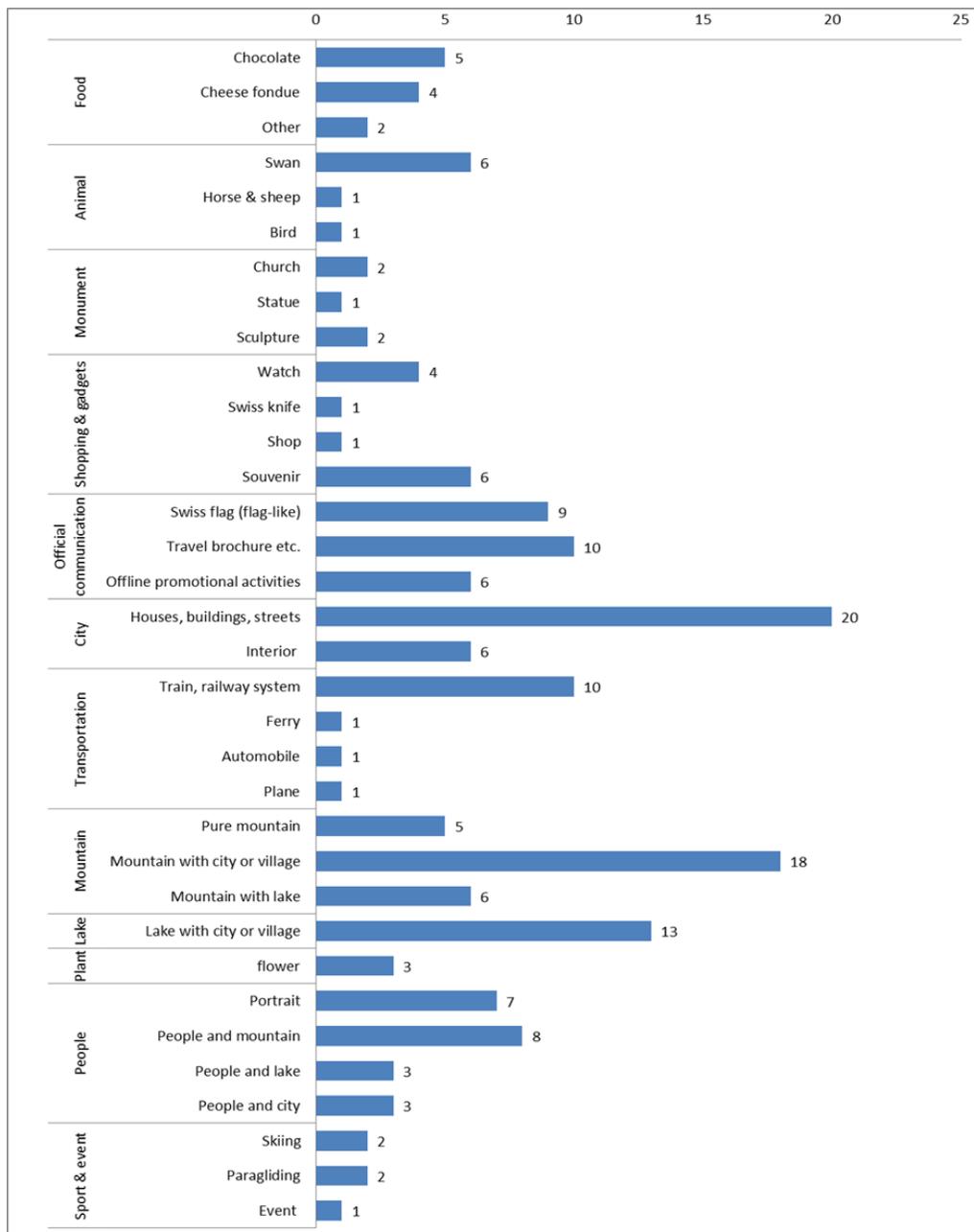


FIGURE 6. Themes and driver occurrence from multi-frame pictures

RESULTS

An interesting finding is that the carving of the dying lion in Luzern is very popular and as sightseeing landmark of Luzern, the area around the Chapel Bridge and the Water Tower is the one of the most-seen site attractions among all pictures presenting the driver *lake with city or village*.

OVERALL RESULTS

Figure 7 below shows that the top three themes are *Official communication* (22.34%), *Mountain* (18.16%), and *Lake* (10.65%), which indicates that the Swiss official promotional activities got considerable attention, and well-preserved mountains and lakes own significant popularity from Sina Weibo users.

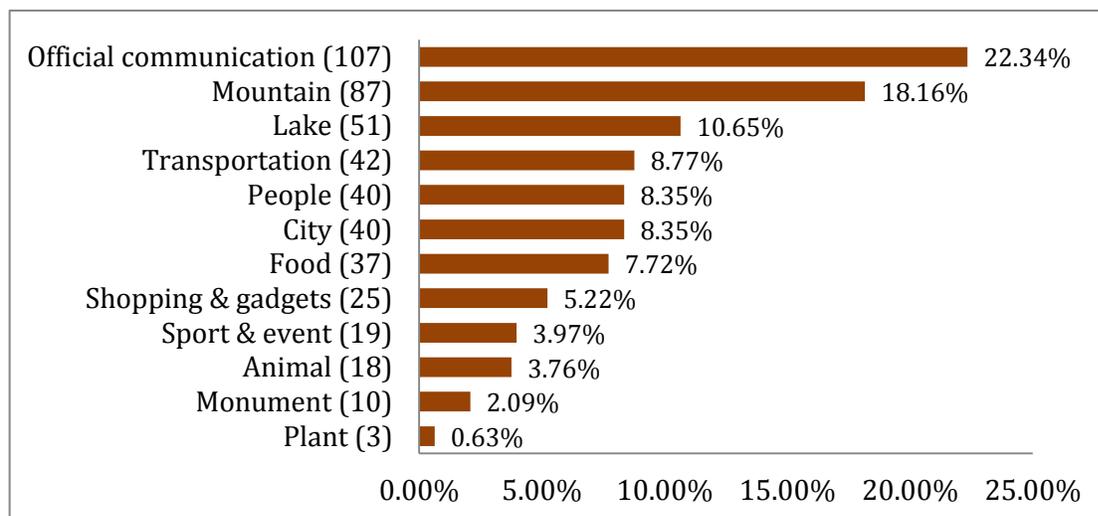


FIGURE 7. Percentage of all themes by the driver occurrence under each theme

There are several points that need to be noted:

- There is no pictorial content referring to night life, while only few pictures were taken during evening hours;
- In *Transportation* theme, almost all kinds of transportation means appeared except for buses. Typical Swiss Post Bus is not presented within the visual representation of Switzerland;
- Few pictures do belong to the *Shopping and gadgets* theme, which appears to be in contrast with Chinese tourists' interest in shopping; that may be due to the hesitation to publish online pictures that could suggest how much a person has spent;
- Among pictures of *People*, very few local people were presented.

RESULTS

TOP TEN DRIVERS BY OCCURRENCE. EXAMPLES

Figure 8 presents top ten drivers by occurrence, showing Chinese tourists' favored sceneries in Switzerland. The official communication offered by the Swiss Tourism Office in China can be seen as very impressive both online and offline: there are many pictures referring to its online campaign as well as its diverse offline promotional activities.

Ranking	Drivers	Driver occurrence
1	Mountain with city or village	50
2	Lake with city or village	48
3	Travel brochure, guide book, promotional calendar, advertisement, etc.	44
4	Swiss flag (flag-like)	39
5	Buildings, houses, streets	34
6	Offline promotional activities	24
7	Pure mountain	23
8	Chocolate	20
8	Train, railway system	20
10	Mountain with lake	13
10	Skiing	13

FIGURE 8. Top ten drivers by occurrence

RESULTS

INTERACTION BETWEEN KEY DRIVERS

Figure 9 illustrates the relationships among key drivers and themes. Drivers under themes *Mountain*, *Lake* and *City* highly interact with each other; meanwhile, pictures with tourists are usually considered within the contextualization of mountain or lake or city or overlapped. Some other drivers as *Swan*, *Skiing*, *Train & Railway system* from other themes are also associated with these popular themes.

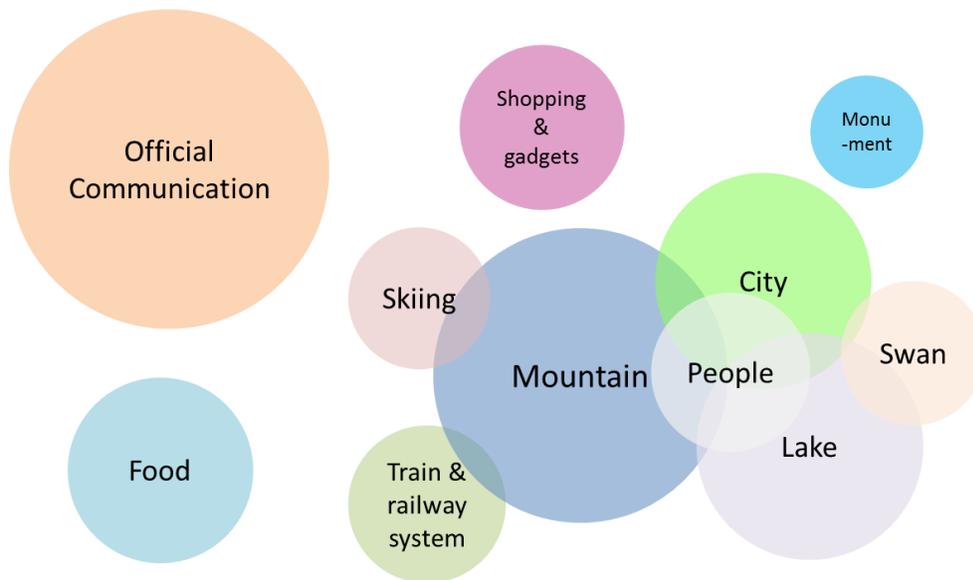


FIGURE 9. Relationships among key drivers and themes

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions

Results show that the online image of Switzerland as a tourism destination from Sina Weibo is composed by five main aspects: *Mountain, Lake, Transportation, City, and Food*, as they are the main focal themes exhibited from the analyzed pictures. At the same time, *Mountain, Lake* and *City* are the most interrelated and favored elements among all pictures.

In addition, large numbers of pictures are related to the promotional official communication. It is obvious that Weibo users actively take part in online campaigns, posting also about offline promotions; it can be also understood that there is an organized online marketing and communication strategy from the Swiss Tourism Office in China. Large numbers of online campaign participants also confirm that there is a great potential on the number growth for prospective tourists from mainland China.

However, the online profile of Switzerland as a tourism destination cannot be regarded as completed: very little reflection by Chinese visitors was paid on entertainment, events, accommodation (especially hotels), and nightlife.

This study confirms that social networks could be used as a feedback system helping DMOs to manage relationships with current and potential tourists. A microblog, Sina Weibo in this research, turns out to be a very effective and creative tactic for reaching Mainland Chinese tourists. DMOs may get in touch directly with the users who express their willingness for visiting and make use of positive UGC from users who already visited the destinations to create a more engaging marketing path. Those users who have large numbers of followers could get more attention during the communication as they may further influence their followers.

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CONTRIBUTORS

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Tu has got a Master Degree in Communication Sciences. She was a junior researcher in the Faculty of Communication Sciences, Università della Svizzera italiana (USI Lugano, Switzerland) where her focus was on social media and online reputation. Her interests range from interaction design, usability to social media and how online communication can influence people's life. Being a person with international experience with a background of Chinese literature and linguistics, she also loves exploring how Chinese culture and language are perceived in a multicultural environment.

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