

**Ecotourism Social Media Initiatives in China**

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of social media by ecotourism management agencies and how this potentially changes the relationship between the ecotourist and the natural environment. It examines the meaning of ecotourism and the way that social media shapes visitor perceptions and meaning through an examination of the content of 775 Sina microblog postings from five leading ecotourism site management agencies in China. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the social media postings a series of semi-structured interviews was also conducted with followers and management agencies. The findings provide an enhanced understanding of ecotourism marketing and its impacts on the ecotourist while also creating a framework for the use of social media to market ecotourism. The framework outlines the importance of the meanings associated with this form of communication through its promotional appeal to tourists and the outcomes for both the ecotourist and site management.

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## Introduction

The advent of social media, as a new medium of communication, has transformed many aspects of the tourism industry by enabling individuals, the business community and policy makers to gain a deeper understanding of the market (Qualman, 2013). Xiang and Gretzel (2010) argue that social media plays a considerable role in influencing modern tourists' decision making process, while Edwards, Cheng, Wong, Zhang, and Wu (2017) contend that social media plays an important role in redefining Destination Marketing and Management Organizations' and tour operators' marketing environments by extending their social media accounts to reach, convince, and attract potential tourists, and to shape tourists' experiences (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013).

While there has been much debate on how to make effective use of social media marketing in tourism research, there is a lack of empirical evidence in understanding its role in ecotourism marketing and communication. At present the literature on social media applications in ecotourism marketing is at an embryonic stage, especially in the context of developing countries such as China. As a result, a number of important questions remain largely unanswered including why ecotourism site management agencies engage in marketing communication through social media? What are the meanings embedded within these communication messages? What is the associated promotional appeal to ecotourists and what are the intended consequences?

To begin to understand some of these issues the aim of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of ecotourism social media marketing practices in order to provide further insights into its use in China. The study analyzes current ecotourism site management agencies' social media initiatives in China and the embedded meanings associated with it. From this analysis a framework is established to analyze ecotourism social media marketing communication initiatives. Practically, the findings from this research could be utilized by similar ecotourism destinations to craft an effective and Chinese oriented marketing strategy so their desired outcomes can be better achieved.

## Ecotourism, Social Media & Marketing Communication

Literature in the area of ecotourism marketing communication in China is based on three research streams: (1) ecotourism, (2) social media and (3) marketing communication. The first stream highlights the cultural differences between Eastern and Western scholars in their views of ecotourism.

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3 The second stream provides a background for this research by reviewing the existing ecotourism  
4 marketing literature and the use of social media to achieve its aims. The third stream provides a brief  
5 introduction to the area of marketing communication.  
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### 9 10 *Ecotourism and its Cultural Differences*

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12 The ecotourism literature has examined ecotourists' profiles, characteristics, behaviors (Nowaczek &  
13 Smale, 2010), ecotourism management and development (Sofield & Li, 2003), the types of  
14 experiences that ecotourists seek (Lu & Stepchenkova, 2012), as well as the host-guest relationship in  
15 an ecotourism setting (Lai & Nepal, 2006). As such, there is now a large body of literature in this field  
16 that provides a conceptual definition of this phenomenon in a Western context (Donohoe &  
17 Needham, 2006; Fennell, 2001). As the ecotourism field matures, researchers have begun  
18 investigating ecotourism in non-Western contexts. In ecotourism studies in China, recent discussions  
19 on the divergence between the Western view of ecotourism and that of China show that although there  
20 are similarities between the two, key differences exist. These differences include ecotourism's role in  
21 promoting human health (Buckley, Cater, Linsheng, & Chen, 2008; Cheng, Jin, & Wong, 2014),  
22 nature, human interactions (Sofield & Li, 2007) and ecological values (Wen & Xue, 2008).  
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34 Wen and Ximing (2008) further acknowledge the differences in ecological values between  
35 Eastern and Western cultures. Western concepts view ecotourism as an experience, occurring in the  
36 present moment within the natural environment. The Chinese view ecotourism as an experience of the  
37 unification between nature and humanity and the opportunity to connect one's present with the past.  
38 This view is influenced by the evolving notions of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism (Zhang,  
39 1985). Donohoe and Lu (2009) suggest that the difference in culturally determined values between  
40 both cultures has a substantial influence on ecotourism theory and its practice in China. Due to the  
41 differences between the two cultures there is a divergence on how ecotourism management agencies  
42 construct and craft their ecotourism marketing strategies. Donohoe and Lu (2009) argue that  
43 ecotourism standards need to be sensitive to cultural differences, for example they see the Western  
44 model as too rigid for ecotourism in China.  
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55 Ecotourism was initially incorporated into site management by various Chinese government  
56 development and management plans who saw a need for balancing regional economic growth and  
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3 environmental conservation (Stone & Wall, 2004), however, a national ecotourism framework has yet  
4 to be undertaken (Donohoe & Lu, 2009). Two independent studies have revealed that there exists  
5 congruency in ecotourism definitions between the West and China in terms of its emphasis on  
6 nature-based, sustainability, environmental conservation, ethics, education and distribution of benefits  
7 (Buckley et al., 2008; Donohoe & Lu, 2009). However, the authors note, that this congruency is  
8 likely as ecotourism concepts in China were initially borrowed from the West in the mid-1990s  
9 (Buckley et al., 2008). However, a number of researchers note that a range of differences in  
10 definitions exist despite this initial Western influence. Donohoe and Lu (2009), for example suggest  
11 the presence of health/quality of life in the Chinese ecotourism definition doesn't exist in Western  
12 definitions of ecotourism, which for the Chinese is considered a means to spiritual health and  
13 wellbeing. Buckley et al. (2008) points out that Chinese ecotourism has an intertwining relationship  
14 between nature, human beings and cultural elements, whereas Western ecotourism concepts are more  
15 firmly based in ideas of pristine landscapes and ecological features. As such some of the congruency  
16 might not necessarily translate into the reality of ecotourism operation and development in China  
17 (Donohoe & Lu, 2009; Sofield & Li, 2007) and the authors suggest there is no empirical evidence on  
18 how ecotourism practices are contextually defined and understood which is the purpose of this study.  
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### 36 ***Social Media and Ecotourism Marketing***

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38 As a global trend, social media has been widely adopted by both consumers and organizations  
39 who see it as a powerful tool for influencing on consumer behavior (Hays et al., 2013). Research  
40 indicates that engagement via social media engagement can attract consumers buy products (Dubey,  
41 2012) because referrals on social networking sites tend to have a longer carryover effect than  
42 traditional advertising in producing substantially higher response elasticity (Trusov, Bucklin, &  
43 Pauwels, 2009). The existing literature concerning the impact of communication source also reveals  
44 that tourists will be highly engaged with information that is relevant, comprehensive, and useful in  
45 fulfilling their search intentions, which influences purchasing decisions (Shu & Scott, 2014; Tang,  
46 Jang, & Morrison, 2012). Equally, the social media literature recognizes the importance of social  
47 media marketing to support DMOs in strengthening their relationships with their customers through  
48 effective and efficient communication channels (Hays et al., 2013; Shu & Scott, 2014). It is often less  
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3 expensive to influence existing customers than it is to acquire new ones. This efficacy is usually  
4 achieved with active listening, better response and interaction with audiences as well as helping  
5 determine the level of reaction for real time business decisions (Qualman, 2013; Shao, Rodriguez, &  
6 Gretzel, 2012).  
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11 However, the literature investigating the impact of social media has been undertaken on  
12 dominant social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter (Hays et al., 2013), while country  
13 specific social media platforms have largely been ignored (Cheng & Edwards, 2015; Shao et al.,  
14 2012). Chinese tourists are not able to use Facebook or Twitter, the content and marketing  
15 campaigns that were originally created were found not to affect Chinese tourists (SKIFT, 2013).  
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17 Equally, Western scholars still have limited access to Chinese social media. This is largely due to the  
18 uniqueness of China's leading social media channel and also Chinese users' attitudes and behaviors  
19 with social media (Gao, Abel, Houben, & Yu, 2012). Thus, it is fair to expect that Destination  
20 Marketing and Management Organizations (DMO) in China will craft their social media messages  
21 differently from their Western counterparts according to its context, which offers different insights  
22 into the practices that are currently occurring in China (Gretzel, Fesenmaier, Formica, & O'Leary,  
23 2006).  
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34 Prior studies have acknowledged some marked differences in the marketing function between  
35 ecotourism specifically and tourism in general. Ecotourism marketing focuses on integrating the  
36 marketing mix (price, promotion, product/service, and place), the social cause of environmental  
37 quality, and ecological marketing to provide a remedy for environmental damage (Wearing & Neil,  
38 2009). With ecotourism marketing communications and promotions, for example, Wearing and Neil  
39 (2009) note that 'the most productive and cost-effective promotional method for ecotourism business  
40 is word of mouth and an up to date website' (p. 189). As such, DMOs and tourism operators often  
41 utilize social media as a form of electronic word of mouth to reach out to tourists, while tourists often  
42 use it to express their emotions and travel experiences after they have visited a place (Hays et al.,  
43 2013). These communication efforts are essential as they create an effective avenue for stimulating an  
44 individual's affective and cognitive connection with destination images, as well as opening up a level  
45 of interaction between site management and tourists prior to travel (Royo-Vela, 2009). DMO's that  
46 use social media marketing to portray a realistic and culturally relevant ecotourism experience are  
47 more likely to engage tourists and provide positive outcomes from the experience.  
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### *Marketing Communication*

Communication studies often use Shannon and Weaver's (1949) traditional model of communication, which draws a link between the information source and transmitter to the receiver through the communication channel (the medium). Communication theories focus on the input of a message, for example a picture of a destination or a blog of text describing a tourist destination, and its output in terms of a tourist being aroused and motivated to travel to the place featured (Littlejohn, 1999). However, the connotation of the message can vary greatly based on the receiver's background and context. The interpretation and meaning of a message is contingent on how the message 'meets the feelings or emotions of the users and the value of their culture' (Fiske, 1990, p. 86).

In contrast, marketing communication places considerable emphasis on engaging consumers through effective communication messages. It focuses on the consequences of communication through the study of consumer behaviors (Clow & Baack, 2007). Therefore, companies are generally interested in understanding the types of communication appeal such as the function of a product or emotional appeal such as humor or sexual characteristics (Schiffman & Lazar, 2006). Although much of the literature recommends integrated marketing communications through a mixture of different media to reach targeted consumers, the advent of the internet and the ubiquity of social media offers companies an extended communication channel to interact with consumers (Hvass & Munar, 2012). Social media enables agencies to engage in real-time and direct end-consumer contact with relatively low cost and higher levels of efficiency (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In fact, tourism agencies and providers are increasingly relying on this medium to market their products in order to improve their market competitiveness (Dev, Buschman, & Bowen, 2010). Despite recognizing the importance of social media marketing, many park agencies have not made the most of site branding and consequently have restricted the strategic usage of site brands (King & Halpenny, 2014). As such, there is an increasing call for further strategies in site brand communication. Effective social media marketing could help site management create an extended channel to engage tourists and to achieve desired outcomes to manage the sustainability of the sites.

This study employs a case study approach to investigate the social media marketing communication efforts of ecotourism agencies. The social media chosen for analysis in this study is

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3 Sina Weibo (Weibo) (Cheng & Edwards, 2015). Weibo is the leading Chinese microblog service and  
4 its platform and mode of user interaction is similar to Twitter. However, it is entirely produced in  
5 Chinese and used mainly in China. Chinese tourists are more personally connected to Weibo in that  
6 they tend to trust its content more than Western forms of social media (Cheng & Edwards, 2015).  
7 Similar to Twitter, there is a word limit for postings of 140 written characters, however, “140 written  
8 characters on Weibo could tell a full story” in the context of Chinese language (Nooruddin & Zhang,  
9 2012, p. 42). Weibo not only offers a fast and interactive communication channel to site management,  
10 but also affords a platform embedded with meaning that can be used to reach tourists.  
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## 19 **Methodology**

### 20 *Research Design*

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22 Given the exploratory nature of this study, a two stage qualitative approach was employed. Content  
23 analysis was first utilized to gain insight into how the selected ecotourism site management agencies  
24 use Sina Weibo and its promotional appeal. Then a series of semi-structured interviews with followers  
25 and management agencies were conducted to further investigate the content analysis of the postings to  
26 understand its promotional appeal to tourists and the outcomes for both the ecotourist and site  
27 management.  
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### 36 *Site Selection*

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38 A list of ecotourism sites was selected that were acknowledged by Chinese National Geographic  
39 (2007) as typical of ecotourism sites in China. These were then narrowed down to a list of seven that  
40 were widely recognized in the public domain as being in the top ten most popular ecotourism sites in  
41 China in terms of visitation. Since two of the seven sites did not have an official Sina Weibo account,  
42 they were excluded from the sample. This left five ecotourism sites that were selected in this study  
43 for analysis, these included Mountain Huang, Mountain Tai, Valley Jiuzhaigou, Zhangjia Jie, and  
44 Mountain Sanqing. Each of these sites offers a range of ecotourism experiences that include a fairly  
45 undisturbed natural area with native flora, fauna along with other natural and cultural resources as  
46 attractions (Cheng et al., 2014; Tao, Eagles, & Smith, 2004). A brief description of each site is  
47 outlined in Table 1.  
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Insert Figure 1 and Table 1 here  
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### *Sampling*

To create a sample of postings from Weibo, the authors selected all the postings from the five ecotourism sites from January 1 to January 30 in 2013. As the postings are publicly available, they were retrieved directly from the Weibo platform and organized into a single file. Within the entire period of observation a total of 775 postings were collected and then used for analysis.

### *Content Analysis*

A qualitative content analysis within a naturalist paradigm was conducted on the postings. Latent content analysis was utilized in this study as it searches for implicit meanings embedded in postings and facilitates an in-depth understanding of the emergent categories (Berg, 2004). This was in order to seek a better understanding of how ecotourism site managers utilized microblogs to engage ecotourists and construct meaning around the sites they visited.

In order to provide an instant and overall insight into the major research themes, a visualized word frequency analysis was performed. Word frequency analysis is a simple but effective approach that presented the words in font sizes relative to the frequency they appear in the document (Hunt, Gao, & Xue, 2014). It was used as an exploration tool to generate an initial overview of the travel microblog posted by DMOs, this gave the researchers a tool to enable structured insights into the data (Hunt et al., 2014) and facilitate the later coding process of this study. Some of most frequent keywords were later used as vivo codes in the coding process. Figure 2 demonstrates the word frequency analysis of Mountain Huang and Mountain Thai.

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Insert Figure 2 here  
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Two of the authors, who were bilingual speakers of English and Chinese Mandarin, manually coded the microblog data independently in Chinese. Both are frequent microblog users and have extensive ecotourism travel experience. The coding schemes were developed to assist the analysis of

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3 the postings from the site management agencies. The themes were consolidated and finalized either  
4 through combining or omitting existing codes or developing additional codes through an iterative  
5 coding process. Following Strauss and Corbin (1998), the authors also undertook a constant  
6 comparison process in order to refine the codes in respect to the extant literature (e.g., Nowaczek &  
7 Smale, 2010). Similar codes were organized into first-order categories and further summarized into  
8 second-order themes (Charmaz, 2006). For example, the theme *culture* includes four sub-themes (or  
9 first-order categories) *tangible heritage*, *intangible heritage*, *authenticity*, and *ancient wonders*.  
10 Krippendorff's (2004) inter-rater reliability analysis was performed using SPSS with the results  
11 showing that the inter-rater reliability was 0.81, indicating an acceptable level of reliability.  
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### 23 *Semi-structured Interviews*

24 In order to understand the effects of social media communication efforts and their results for  
25 ecotourism site management agencies, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with fifteen  
26 microblog followers, three followers from each site and also seven staff of the five ecotourism sites.  
27 Both the followers and staff were recruited using purposive sampling. Each interview lasted  
28 approximately 15 minutes. The fifteen microblog followers comprised eight female and seven males.  
29 Seven came from first tier cities (i.e. Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou) and the remainder from  
30 second or third tier cities. Two types of followers were selected based on their frequency of postings  
31 with seven -fluentials (frequent users) and eight lurkers (browsing) (Munar & Jacobsen, 2014). The  
32 followers were interviewed via the internal messaging systems of Weibo or by telephone. One of the  
33 researchers made phone calls to the employees in departments that handled business communications  
34 through one of the researchers' personal networks. Of the seven employees from ecotourism  
35 management agencies interviewed four of them were at the management level and three of them are  
36 communication officers. The subject of the questions revolved around two main concerns. For tourist  
37 followers, the questions were centered on the benefits they seek from following microblogs. For  
38 management agencies, the questions were centered on the intended consequences of the  
39 communication efforts. Both sets of interviews were complete when theoretical saturation was  
40 reached. The data was first coded in Chinese and then the key terms/themes that emerged from this  
41 analysis were translated into English.  
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## Findings

Six key themes emerged from the content analysis. These are noted along with a brief description of each in Table 2. They include: (1) unity of human beings and nature, (2) culture, (3) education, (4) ethics, (5) health, and (6) travel guidance. Each meaning has specific communication implications in respect to the intended message for tourists.

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 Insert Table 2 here  
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### *Theme 1: Human-Nature Unity: Connection to the Past and Human-Nature Interaction*

The human-nature unity theme describes the interplay and harmonious relationship between human beings and the natural experience offered by ecotourism sites. Unity of human beings and nature (Tainren Heyi) is a concept that originated in ancient China. Its basic belief is to emphasize the wholeness of things and harmony amongst things, namely all things from nature to man, are interrelated parts of a unified whole (Xu & Bing, 2010). This concept intertwined with many aspects of Chinese life and has influenced how Chinese tourists perceive an ecotourism site (Cheng et al., 2014; Wen & Xue, 2008). In the context of this research, human-nature unity is defined as the harmonious relationship between tourists and ecotourism sites. It points to the role of the natural environment as a resource that offers tourists opportunities to make connections with the past while existing in the present. It also allows tourists to appreciate a better life through spiritual enlightenment.

The analysis of the postings indicates that the attractiveness of ecotourism sites might not only be evaluated based on their natural beauty but also on the tangible and intangible cultural heritage embedded in the landscape, especially its connections with famous people and poets who have either visited these sites or have written about them (Xu, Cui, Ballantyne, & Packer, 2013).

Ecotourism site management agencies in China appreciate the fact that nature serves as a means for Chinese tourists to connect the past with the present in that it reminds people about the history of China; for their appreciation of nature and to appreciate deeply rooted Chinese values; and further their spiritual enlightenment as suggested by ancient scholars as well as poets who write about

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3 self-enlightenment. This serves as a basis for integration.  
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7 Huangshan people [The people who seek the life of Mountain Huang] - Huyue Peng. On  
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9 September 2010, Huyue Peng left Beijing to Huangshan, and began to work on his artistic  
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11 creation - 'Catch Clouds' – his coveted ideal life: being a way to catch the cloud; enjoy a day of  
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13 climbing, fishing, painting, watching the sunset, planting, farm work ..... live in his xanadu  
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15 [Fairyland described by ancient scholar Tao Yuanming], and look forward to staying until his  
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17 last day. (Mount Huang, No.89)  
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### 19 ***Theme 2: Culture: Authentic Cultural Experience***

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21 Culture is often defined as a tangible and intangible cultural heritage asset. Within a Chinese context  
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23 this means opportunities for an authentic experience eating local foods, enjoying local poems,  
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25 immersion in ancient philosophy/values and the general way of local life. In particular, food  
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27 traditions ranked as the top categories within this theme. This was particularly true for Mountain  
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29 Sanqing as it constantly promotes local food and local food preparation processes.  
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31 The postings within this theme suggest that the connection between nature and culture is a two  
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33 way channel. On one hand, the natural landscape provides the basis for cultural development; on the  
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35 other culture enhances the integrity of nature by means of morality, enlightenment, and religious  
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37 aspiration. One posting from Mountain Huang described:  
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40 Standing in front of Paiyun Pavilion, see the flow of the cloud and feel the fog touching your  
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42 face..... 'Never be proud or be shameful of yourself – watch the flower blossom and fall;  
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44 whether be promoted or demoted, watch the natural flow of the cloud' [this is a famous Chinese  
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46 poem describing the open minded status of ancient Chinese government officials]. (Mount  
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48 Huang, No.75)  
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51 Analysis reveals that both nature and culture were frequently mentioned together, supporting  
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53 the idea advocated by other researchers that the natural and cultural landscape within the context of  
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55 Chinese culture are inseparable (Buckley et al., 2008; Sofield & Li, 2007). One posting which  
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57 contained a number of magnificent pictures from Mountain Sanqing (No.79) vividly demonstrates  
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3 these points, as the poem used in the posting visualize and humanize the natural scenery, and remind  
4 ecotourists of the scenes appearing in ancient scholars' time. As such, the poems combined with  
5 natural scenery appear to make tourists feel immersed in the scene.  
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10 ***Theme 3: Health: Physiological and Psychological Wellbeing***

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12 The theme around these postings indicates that the natural environment serves as a means to enhance  
13 tourists' physical and psychological wellbeing associated with their ecotourism experience. The  
14 postings often made comparisons between urban areas and ecotourism sites. For example, Mountain  
15 Huang's postings contrasted its physical environment with that of urban areas to illustrate the superior  
16 air quality and natural features, in order to explicitly highlight the health benefits associated with  
17 ecotourism.  
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25 The foggy weather has seriously threatened the health of the public...If you come to Mountain  
26 Huang, you would not only see natural beauty, but also the 'green' environment will contribute  
27 to your mental and physical health. (Mount Huang, No.23)  
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32 Zhangjia Jie also posted a message denoting the superiority of its air quality...“The air quality  
33 in the city... 🤔 .....But the air quality in Zhangjia Jie is unbelievably good. Welcome to wash  
34 your lung in Zhangjia Jie !" (Zhangjia Jie, No.43)  
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41 Postings like these indicate there is a general consensus among ecotourism management  
42 agencies that there is an increasing health concern among Chinese citizens in urban areas, especially  
43 in the well-developed regions such as Beijing. As a result it is perceived that their ultimate physical  
44 and psychological wellbeing could only be enhanced and perhaps restored in a natural environment as  
45 noted in the literature (Cheng et al., 2014). As such, the perceived health benefits could serve as an  
46 important motivating factor for Chinese citizens to visit ecotourism sites.  
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55 ***Theme 4 Education: Connection between the Body and Soul and Reflection of Life***

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57 Education here is referred to as the cognitive aspects of the ecotourism experience, which offer  
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3 ecotourists an opportunity to appreciate and learn about ecotourism sites. It is suggested that the  
4 microblog postings are intended to cultivate a deeper understanding of the relationship between a  
5 person's body and soul. In this case, it is suggested that through a better understanding of the  
6 connection between body and soul, ecotourists could gain a level of spiritual enlightenment and  
7 deeper reflection on their life.  
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15 Jiuzhai Gou has different views in four seasons. Visiting us in winter might not experience the  
16 most beautiful scenery, but it is the relaxing and comfortable time to get closer to nature and  
17 enjoy the natural wonder without crowdedness by reaching your heart. It is a time to think of  
18 yourself (Jiuzhai Gou, No. 15)  
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24 This finding is in line with prior research, which indicates that a common motivating factor for  
25 Chinese tourists traveling to natural areas is to seek enlightenment from having a close connection  
26 with nature, rather than seeking scientific knowledge and understanding about environmental  
27 processes and the evolution of landscapes (Xu et al., 2013). This finding is also consistent with Fan  
28 (2001) who shows that ancient Chinese ecological consciousness is about appreciation of beauty; and  
29 thus nature offers spiritual renewal for human beings by purifying and elevating a human's soul for  
30 their esteem and appreciation of nature. This aspect of ecotourism is different from Western  
31 conceptions, which are concerned mainly with human existence (Sofield & Li, 2007). This element  
32 is added to existing ecotourism management initiatives as it better reflects the deep culturally rooted  
33 values of Chinese culture. These findings may explain why ancient Taoists and Buddhists often build  
34 pavilions and temples in remote mountains so as to pursue meditation and reflection free from the  
35 distractions of human made urban environments. The findings also support the notion that the  
36 ecological value of the unity of human beings and nature has the potential to promote philosophical  
37 thought and spiritual movement during an ecotourism experience (Wen & Xue, 2008). As one posting  
38 from Zhangjia Jie highlighted 'travelling is about walking, memory, pursuit, and forgiveness. It is  
39 about self-redemption and self-relaxation. It is all about. Go to a remote place and find a different  
40 oneself.'(No.23)  
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### *Theme 5 Awareness of Necessity for Conservation*

Awareness of the necessity for conservation refers to a destinations appeal to tourists' sense of responsibility to be engaged in sustainable tourism behavior. It aims to stimulate a deeper reflection of the ecotourism experience through opportunities that allow ecotourists to appreciate nature and to respect other ecotourists and site staff. This theme indicates an opportunity for site management agencies to promote awareness of ecotourists' own behavior to others and sites, which aims to lower the costs of monitoring and maintenance. As one staff member in the ecotourism management agencies opined:

Well, though we are not really sure how effective the postings will be, they (the postings) at least will remind tourists of their own on-site behaviors such as to be responsible for their own rubbish. Therefore, it could help us [ecotourism site management agencies] to save costs and lower the burden of our staff, as we could do on site monitoring on a less frequent basis. (Interviewer 1, Mount Huang)

Our analysis also suggests that site management agencies attempt to deliver messages to ecotourists in a tactful and indirect manner, in that the ideal outcome of the postings intends to raise the ecotourists' appreciation of nature, and their empathy towards others. A deeper meaning of the messages also aims to promote ecotourists' consciousness in protecting natural sites. One typical example from an ecotourist of Mountain Huang shows workers cleaning rubbish off cliffs with associated text: "Please consider the work of our cleaners and the beauty of Mount Huang. Be responsible  (Mount Huang, No. 62). The objective of these postings is to promote ecotourists messages to as wide an audience as possible in order to encourage responsible environmental behaviour.

Enjoy the snowing Mountain Tai and watch the sunset. It is a painting of natural wonders; would you tolerate a dirty point [rubbish in the snow] in the painting? [This comment was followed with a picture highlighting the rubbish in the snowy scenery in Mount Tai] (Mount Tai, No.72)

### ***Theme 6 Travel Guidance: Empathy and Hospitality***

Travel guidance is defined as a range of travel services and information offered by an ecotourism site to tourists. Mountain Sanqing possessed the highest number of postings, providing different travel guidance to ecotourists from soft to hard paths. Information is a key aspect of this theme and included regular weather updates and notices on a variety of matters such as opening hours and entrance fees that tourists commonly seek to find as a part the travel planning process. Information notifications, including site notices and weather updates, accounted for a large percentage of postings, as they fulfil the initial function of an ecotourism management agency to provide travel information. Analysis also indicates that ecotourism site management agencies not only post notifications, they also post morning welcome messages and philosophical thoughts related to travel alongside weather updates. These aim to stimulate ecotourists' interests in visiting the sites and to remind them to consider their sites in their travel itinerary. One posting from Mountain Tai noted:

Small Rain in Mountain Tai. Temperature 5°C~ 0°C. The temperature will continue to rise, and after a baptism of sporadic rain, foggy and hazy days have been dispersed. Morning friends! Come and breathe some fresh air here! (Mount Tai, No.79)

### **Intended Consequences**

The aforementioned ecotourism site management marketing initiatives and their associated meanings comprised two main categories. These were organized into: (1) ecotourist outcomes, and (2) management outcomes (see Figure 3). With respect to ecotourist outcomes, the management initiatives helped to create a forum for discussion and social awareness, and thus assisted ecotourists to gain a better understanding of ecotourism site attractions and activities. Further, evocative pictures and positive wording were found to help increase tourists' affection for a particular site and improve their positive attitude toward it. These elements are not only intended to improve ecotourists' travel experiences, but also aim to enhance their eco-travel intention and loyalty to ecotourism sites. For example:

Before I go to ecotourism sites, besides asking my friends for advice, I usually look at the



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3 official Sina Weibo [ecotourism management agencies] for some additional information,  
4 because I could see what the current events are and what the highlights are. Sometimes, I am  
5 really inspired by those pictures [posted by ecotourism site management agencies] and I feel  
6 that I have lived in the city for too long and I should go there to experience an ecotourism life.  
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11 (Interviewee 6, Mount Sanqing)

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14 Often, I look at the microblogs to see what is happening and what I should be aware of, such as  
15 whether the route will be closed in winter. Beyond that, at one time, I saw the cleaner cleaning  
16 rubbish off cliffs. I feel it is so risky for them and feel a bit angry. I wonder why those tourists  
17 have thrown their rubbish and [I] just feel I will be more responsible (Interview 8, Mount  
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26 As a management tool, Sina Weibo serves as a platform that enhances communication between  
27 ecotourists and management, which helps management agencies answer potential enquiries.  
28 Ecotourists often co-create value by answering each other's questions. Addressing ecotourists'  
29 inquiries also promotes the perception that site managers are interested in improving the visitor  
30 experience creating positive images of the ecotourism site. By actively promoting ethical behaviors  
31 and providing travel guidance, many of the management agencies aimed to lower site maintenance  
32 and monitoring costs such as picking up rubbish and cleaning walls. More importantly, the messages  
33 on Weibo help humanize ecotourism sites. As two of the management agency staff mentioned:  
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43 Most of the time, through phone enquiries, we would not be able to accommodate all enquiries.  
44 Sometimes, they [the tourists] are really annoying, because they [the tourists] ask the same  
45 questions over and over again. So having a Sina Weibo will help us disseminate information  
46 more effectively and to be frank, reduce the burden of our staff. In addition, in the Sina Weibo  
47 platform, you could post the icons such as 'smile' and 'amazing'. You know, this could let the  
48 tourists feel that our sites are not boring. ...Besides, you could see that other tourism  
49 destinations have also set up this channel. So if we don't do so, we [ecotourism site] will fall  
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56 behind. (Site management staff 1, Mount Huang)  
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3 We do have meetings regularly with our management teams in terms of what and when the  
4 content should be delivered. Because now is winter, we have been advised that we need to  
5 update the information on climbing routes on a regular basis to keep the tourists informed. (Site  
6 management staff 5, Mount Sanqing)  
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## 10 11 12 **Discussion**

### 13 *Toward a Research Framework of Social Media in Ecotourism*

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15 The research framework presented in Figure 3 illustrates the process of social media initiatives in  
16 ecotourism marketing communications. An interpretive approach was employed to discover the  
17 meanings of the Weibo content. This approach helps to uncover the ways that site managers utilize  
18 social media to communicate with tourists. The framework is based on the input-process-output  
19 model of communication (Littlejohn, 1999). The theory proposes that inputs into a communication  
20 system require processing by the audience from which a set of outcomes are expected. The  
21 ‘dependency model of mass communication’ (dependency model for short) was used (Rubin &  
22 Windahl, 1986). This theory suggests the provision of a networked relationship that creates the  
23 content and functions for a mass media system to meet audience needs, interests, and motives as well  
24 as influencing their cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses. In particular, this theoretical model  
25 accentuates the role of societal system facilitation on mass media’s functionality and availability. In  
26 turn, an individual’s needs and interests as well as consumption and use of certain media content are  
27 dependent on the societal system and mass media system. Rubin and Windahl (1986) write that:  
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43 Dependency’s notion of media influence is enhanced by a more detailed description of people  
44 who actively seek and avoid messages from various personal and mediated sources, emphasizing  
45 that social elements and interaction are important when considering media audience connections.  
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47 (p. 187)  
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52 The dependency model further posits that such dependency shapes the individual’s cognitive,  
53 affective, and behavioral outcomes, leading to: (1) changes to their needs and interests, and (2) the  
54 content and function of the mass media. The dependency model makes it possible to relate the  
55 model’s conceptual underpinning to the framework proposed in Figure 3. The framework begins with  
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3 site management adoption of social media as a means of communication. It is argued that such a  
4 decision is based on the prevalence of social media as a predominant communication channel in the  
5 present social system. Findings from the current study further demonstrate that the site postings are  
6 based on management agencies' initiatives to communicate with ecotourists in order to fulfill  
7 ecotourists' needs and attract their interests. These initiatives intend to promote six major  
8 communication messages: (1) human-nature unity, (2) culture, health, (3) education, (4) awareness of  
9 necessity for conservation, and (5) travel guidance. In the context of Chinese ecotourism a deeper  
10 interpretative experience can be facilitated by promoting the 'unity of human beings with nature'  
11 theme in order to promote the ecotourists' thinking around connections with the past through  
12 interactions with nature.  
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22 The framework also illustrates that the promotional appeal has its intended consequences. Being  
23 able to connect the ecotourism site to the past as well as improving tourist's wellbeing has a positive  
24 impact on tourist attitudes toward a specific site. It increases tourists' affection and travel intention  
25 (i.e., affective and behavioral outcomes). Ecotourist followers of the postings also help create a forum  
26 for discussion and sharing ideas. They provide travel guidance and further facilitate ecotourists to  
27 have a better understanding of the ecotourism site. The combined effect nurtures desired cognitive and  
28 affective outcomes.  
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35 Social media assists in the management of the ecotourism site to deliver intended messages  
36 using pictures and text that visitors can follow, which opens up a channel for two-way communication.  
37 This process furnishes further refinement of the social media content and functions as the dependency  
38 model posits. This reciprocal process illustrates that 'the attainment of goals by one party is  
39 contingent upon the resources [and initiatives] of another party' (Rubin & Windahl, 1986, p. 190).  
40 Furthermore, site managers also actively utilize postings to educate tourists and to promote social  
41 responsibility. Such initiatives could reduce the costs associated with site monitoring and maintenance.  
42 The combined effects of management initiatives improve the competitiveness of the site. The next  
43 section considers the implications of theory and practice related to ecotourism management.  
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### 53 *Theoretical and Managerial Implications*

54 This study sought to contribute to the understanding of ecotourism site management agencies'  
55 marketing and communication efforts. The findings reveal how ecotourism agencies use different  
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3 messages in their microblog postings to reach, attract and influence ecotourists' thinking, feelings and  
4 behaviours. The Chinese ecotourism experience has some subtle and important differences to that of  
5 the Western ecotourism experience. The ecotourism experience for Chinese visitors is often focused  
6 on the unification of one's body with nature and the opportunity to interact with nature by connecting  
7 one's present with the past. This is important because in Confucian societies like China, people are  
8 oriented toward the past and present, whereas typically Western societies are oriented toward the  
9 present and the future (Reisinger & Dimanche, 2010). Also, eco-travel presents an avenue to connect  
10 cultural assets with China's past culture. Yet, such an experience needs to be carefully crafted by site  
11 management agencies before travel takes place, as ecotourists' perception of a site being realistic and  
12 genuine is a result of communication efforts from management agencies. It is important that  
13 ecotourism site managers create realistic expectations through their social media communication  
14 (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). Therefore, social media can play a vital role by presenting a humanized  
15 and realistic platform where tourists and management agencies can interact with each other.  
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Some of the other findings in this study relate to the roles of health and education as a means to motivate tourists to visit these sites. Health is a critical issue in developing countries like China, as pollution has become a significant problem in many developing regions of the country. These findings indicate that managing agencies often take a proactive approach to attract ecotourists by demonstrating the health benefits of ecotourist sites in their postings. It also demonstrates how ecotourists may be attracted to ecotourism experiences that may revive their health and/or provide spiritual experiences that develop a deeper understanding of their relationship to nature. Management agencies can use visitor experiences posted on social media to make ecotourists aware of the linkage between nature and the soul, nature and harmony, and nature and one's physical-psychological wellbeing.

Marketing communication in ecotourism helps promote interest in ecotourism sites and influence ecotourist thinking, feeling and behaviors. Additionally, messages can be delivered that enable management agencies to improve a site's sustainability through better ecotourism education, interpretation and awareness of conservation issues. Although the use of social media and its effects on tourism are not new, findings in this study can help practitioners to improve their marketing communication strategies. This study demonstrates that the use of microblogs can provide site managing agencies with a means to provide messages that promote ecotourist cultural affection for

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3 sites, generate discussions among potential users, and the potential to reduce enquiries, and lower  
4 maintenance costs on site.  
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7 This research also has utility beyond the context of China. Given the growing number of  
8 Chinese outbound tourists, Chinese tourists have become an important segment for many destinations,  
9 including ecotourism destinations (Lam & Hsu, 2004; Tourism Australia, 2014). Hence, ecotourism  
10 destinations in countries such as New Zealand may be able to gain a competitive advantage in  
11 understanding how they can use microblogs and what content to provide, while also understanding  
12 how to manage the potential threat to their ecosystems by educating the increasing numbers of  
13 Chinese tourists that are now visiting these countries and areas. The findings from this research could  
14 be utilized by similar ecotourism destinations to craft an effective and Chinese oriented marketing  
15 strategy so their desired outcomes can be better achieved. As a result, this would not only enhance  
16 Chinese tourists' authentic ecotourism experience but also help contribute to effective visitor  
17 management. As noted by previous researchers, a culturally appropriate and effective strategy would  
18 help engage tourists, enhance their appreciation, and encourage further sustainable behavior (Xu et al.,  
19 2013).  
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31 This study offers a framework of ecotourism communication initiatives through the use of social  
32 media, which sheds light on the deep-rooted social values and cultural traditions of ecotourism in  
33 China. It also offers insights into one of the core themes - human-nature unity in fulfilling ecotourist  
34 needs, as prior literature has overlooked this long standing tradition in the social practice of Confucian  
35 societies (Wen & Xue, 2008). More importantly, the proposed framework highlights that meanings of  
36 the communication content are socially constructed based on the ecotourist's experiences and needs.  
37 The deliberate communication efforts from the site agencies are not only driven by market  
38 competition, but also by cost reduction and social responsibility. Findings in this study show that  
39 using social media might be able to educate ecotourists to be more conscious and behave in a more  
40 socially responsible way opening up new avenues for sustainable tourism.  
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50 Additionally, this study is a response to Cater (2006) call for further research that goes beyond  
51 a Western paradigm in order to understand the meaning of ecotourism in cross-cultural contexts. Cater  
52 reminds us that most definitions of ecotourism are rooted in Western theories and philosophies that  
53 do not always capture the way it is conceptualized and practiced in non-Western cultures. Practically,  
54 it has been suggested that the "true" ecotourism is little more than a supply-led market niche  
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3 (Sharpley, 2006) and this paper proves further insights into this idea.  
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6 Essentially, ecotourism practice is similar to other sustainable tourism practices in China in so  
7 far as it is a learning-by-doing process, it operates from a top down model that is guided by an  
8 institutional (government) approach (Xu, Zhu, & Bao, 2015). Most of the ecotourism destinations in  
9 China are set up initially as a catalyst for economic development as the government recognises the  
10 contribution it can make here later their significance is seen to align with environmental sustainability  
11 initiatives. As such, ecotourism sites in China would still predominantly cater to mass tourism for  
12 balancing regional economic development and conservation purposes (Stone & Wall, 2004; Wen &  
13 Xue, 2008), which is still happening today. This challenges the Western definition of ecotourism as an  
14 approach that is small scale and which caters to a niche market. Placing ecotourism in the context of  
15 China like to trying to achieve an “enlightened mass tourism” (Weaver, 2014). Given the size of  
16 China’s population, it is almost impossible to offer small scale niche products so the challenge  
17 becomes one of how to integrate mass and alternative tourism as demonstrated through ecotourism  
18 social media practices, which indicate that conservation messages can be transmitted to a much larger  
19 audience than more traditional forms of interpretation. Given China’s dominant institution approach,  
20 the lesson is that there is a need for an integrated approach for ecotourism to fulfill its path to  
21 sustainability, as sustainability is not a universal criterion but an individual solution (Whitehead, 2003;  
22 Xu et al., 2015).  
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38 In summary, this research indicates a continued need for sustainable tourism research to focus  
39 on pragmatic solutions as opposed to idealism (Bramwell & Lane, 2015). This paper highlights  
40 contextualized ecotourism practices in China by highlighting realities that are not always aligned  
41 with Western idealism, understand how it operates and the alternative interpretations made by  
42 Chinese ecotourists. While the ecotourism marketing practices presented in this study might not be  
43 consonant with Western definitions, understanding the divergence in ecotourism practices through  
44 social media discourse reflects the differing interpretations of ecotourism in countries like China,  
45 which provides the basis for an East-West tourism dialogue and another step in the globalization of  
46 knowledge of sustainable tourism practices.  
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### Limitations and Further Research

Given its exploratory nature, this study is not without limitations. Data collection was limited in scope to 775 postings from five leading ecotourism management agencies during the period of one month (January, Winter Season in China). Thus, it reflects a snapshot of the communication practices of ecotourism site management in China. Future studies, including postings from all four different seasons, would provide additional insights into how each theme is emphasized and communicated during different periods. Although the content analysis of the postings was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with ecotourist followers and management agencies, further research is needed to improve our understanding the interactive nature of Weibo and the style of language used. The researchers found that many users and DMOs were actively interacting with each other through postings and comments. DMOs frequently used a humanized tone in their postings by using smile and unhappy signs to interact with followers. This interactive process might have the potential to influence followers' intentions offering additional insights to ecotourism theory and practice. Although this study provides a good overview of ecotourism management communication practices, a longitudinal study should be encouraged to examine tourist followers' attitude and behavioral changes over time to understand whether the essence of the ecotourism experiences being communicated are consistent with each site's marketing or management plan.

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**Table 1:** Profile of the Ecotourism Management Agencies' Weibo accounts  
(adapted from UNESCO, 2013b)

Name	Description	Postings
<b>Huang Mountain</b>	Mountain Huang is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and appeals primarily for its 'four wonders' including peaks, spectacular rocks, odd-shaped pines, and a sea of clouds. The name Mountain Huang is embedded in Chinese literature, art and paintings.	123
<b>Tai Mountain</b>	Mount Tai is situated in the middle of Shandong Province in Northern China and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with outstanding historic, cultural, aesthetic and scientific value. It is regarded as "a source of inspiration for Chinese artists and scholars and (it) symbolizes ancient Chinese civilizations and beliefs" (UNESCO, 2013a).	205
<b>Sanqing Mountain</b>	Mount Sanqing is a National Park located in the northeast of Jiangxi Province and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Mount Sanqing is regarded as a renowned Taoist sacred mountain with outstanding natural scenery containing a large variety of species.	117
<b>Jiuzhai Gou</b>	Valley Jiuzhaigou is situated in northern Sichuan province in China comprising a series of diverse forest ecosystems and is best known for its colorful lakes, multi-level waterfalls, and snow-capped peaks.	245
<b>Zhang Jiajie</b>	Zhangjiajie is a prefecture-level city located in the northwest of Hunan Province, however, tourists usually refer to it as the Wulingyuan Scenic Area – the site itself is within the city (UNESCO, 2013c). Zhangjiajie (the site) is dominated by narrow sandstone pillars and is home to a variety of endangered plant and animal species.	85

**Table 2:** Summary of the Thematic Analysis

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Unity of Human Beings and Nature</b>	The interplay and harmonious relationship between human beings and nature.
<b>Culture</b>	Cultural heritage that is both tangible and intangible
<b>Health</b>	Perceived physical and / or mental health benefits
<b>Education</b>	Cognitive aspect of ecotourism experience, which offers tourists an opportunity to appreciate and learn about the nature and environment as well as the ecotourism site.
Awareness of necessity for conservation	Destinations appealing to tourists' sense of responsibility to be engaged in sustainable tourism behavior. It aims to stimulate a deeper reflection of the ecotourism experience through opportunities that allow ecotourists to appreciate nature and to respect other ecotourists and site staff.
<b>Travel Guidance</b>	A range of travel information services



Figure 1: Location of five ecotourism sites

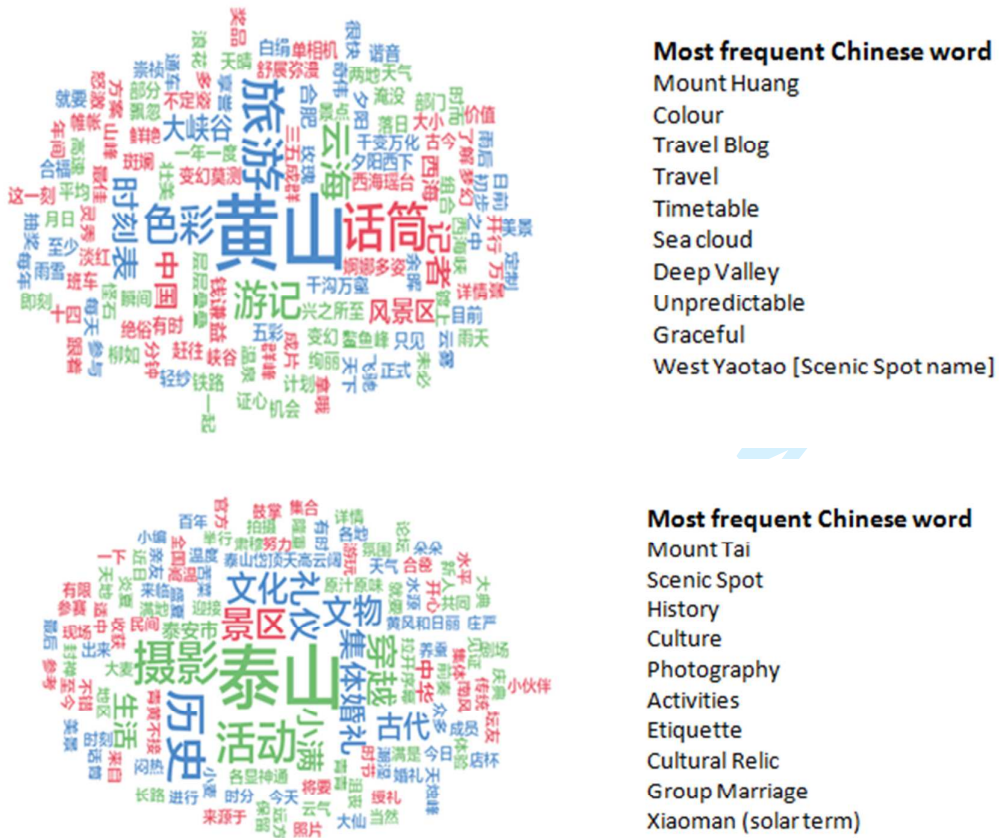


Figure 2: Most frequent Chinese words (Mount Huang and Mount Tai)

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Figure 3. Research Framework: The Meaning of Ecotourism Social Media Marketing Communication Initiatives

