

Phoenix Lam*

Understanding the perceived capital of a travel destination: a theme-based corpus analysis of an online destination forum

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Abstract: As an empirical investigation of naturally-occurring self-initiated posts in a destination forum on one of the world's most popular travel websites Tripadvisor, the present study identifies the key themes in forum posts generated by travelers worldwide about Hong Kong SAR, China (hereafter Hong Kong), one of the world's most visited city. Incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches, it examines the dominant discourses in the forum posts through a combined thematic and keyword corpus analysis. In addition, Bourdieu's tripartite notion of capital is employed to provide insights into the main resources that travelers to Hong Kong associate with or ask about the city. Four dominant patterns of discourse, namely the discourse of mobility, pleasure seeking, convenience, and budget orientation, have been identified, suggesting that Hong Kong is constructed discursively through its built economic capital in the forum, with little regard for its cultural or social capital. Findings from the study not only provide a window into the qualities, attributes and identities of the city as perceived by the forum users, they also point to the underlying assumptions and expectations that users have about a place, and to the preferences and attitudes which shape the identity of the forum users themselves.

Keywords: capital; corpus linguistics; thematic analysis; travel forums; Tripadvisor

1 Introduction

In the digital age, traveling is no longer simply confined to the offline world. From the initial pre-trip planning, through the on-site research and sharing, to the post-travel review – what used to be done predominantly through guidebooks, travel agencies, family and friends physically are now increasingly conducted online on a much

***Corresponding author: Phoenix Lam**, Department of English and Communication, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Kowloon, Hong Kong SAR, China, E-mail: wylam@polyu.edu.hk. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8885-1800>

larger scale, in a more mobile and personalized fashion, and with a greater population involved. Traveling is therefore as much a virtual experience as an actual physical experience. It is now a norm that travelers do research and make their travel plans online before making travel-related decisions and embarking on their trips (Google 2014; Ye et al. 2009). One major platform for this is destination forums, where users can self-initiate and respond to any topics they are interested in regarding a destination. In the last two decades, such forums have become a key venue for travelers to make inquiries about a destination before or during a possible visit. As such, they assume a significant role in knowledge sharing through user-generated content (UGC) in the travel planning process (Okazaki et al. 2017). As one significant interface mediating the discursive practice of traveling then, these online forums offer useful insights into the discourses surrounding the queries, beliefs, impressions and assumptions that a large number of potential and actual travelers around the world have about a destination.

Despite their importance as a main form of online travel communication for understanding travelers' perceptions about a destination, destination forums have attracted surprisingly little attention in communication, discourse or linguistic studies. Studies have focused on other online travel genres, most notably the closely-related but functionally-different hotel reviews (see, for example, Vásquez 2014; Villarroel Ordenes et al. 2017), but very few thus far have investigated forums devoted to particular travel destinations. Yet such destination forums provide invaluable access to data revealing what travelers want to know about a particular destination in their own words. This in turn has important implications for understanding the dominant values and attributes of the virtual community of travelers concerned and their discursive construction of the destination involved.

As an empirical investigation of self-initiated posts in a destination forum on one of the world's most popular travel websites Tripadvisor, the present study identifies the key themes in forum posts generated by travelers worldwide about Hong Kong SAR, China (hereafter Hong Kong), one of the world's most visited city. Incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches, it examines the dominant discourses present in the forum posts through a combined thematic and keyword corpus analysis. In addition, Bourdieu's tripartite notion of capital is employed to provide insights into the main resources that travelers to Hong Kong associate with or ask about the city. Findings from the study not only will provide a window into the general topics of interest that travel forum users are concerned with, they will also point to the underlying assumptions and expectations that users have about a place, and to the preferences and attitudes which shape the identity of the forum users themselves.

2 Literature review

2.1 The online discourse of traveling

Previous studies on the discourse of traveling have explored a number of forms and media, ranging from tourism official websites, tourism marketing posts on social media platforms, tourism-related product reviews, to travel blogs and destination forums. Research on tourism official websites and tourism marketing posts on social media platforms highlights the promotional discourse of these online tourism texts, and how the commodification and consumption of a place is achieved through advertising features in language as well as in image. Bianchi (2017), for example, identified a number of linguistic and rhetorical strategies used by tour operators on Facebook to promote tourist destinations, including second-person pronouns, imperative verbs and metaphors. Caldas-Coulthard (2008) found the use of the human body as a branding strategy in photographs on official tourism websites. The common denominator of these texts is the prevalence of persuasive discourse produced by travel service providers to construct a desirable identity of a place. Travelers, in this connection, are perceived generally as passive audience of the content (Francesconi 2014).

In other forms of online travel communication, however, travelers are taking a more active role in constructing and shaping their perceived image of a destination or a travel-related product. The rise of user-generated content (UGC) following the popularity of Web 2.0 in the last two decades has allowed instant and interactive exchange between web users directly and actively. Tourism-related product reviews, travel blogs and destination forums are just some typical examples, with the first one attracting more scholarly attention than the other two in recent years. Such review-related travel web genres include travel product reviews such as hotel, restaurant and destination reviews, as well as responses to such reviews. Vásquez (2014), for instance, examined the discourse of online hotel reviews combining an eclectic discourse-analytic approach with the tools of corpus linguistics. Her study found a number of lexico-grammatical devices, including slang and rhetorical questions, for expressing evaluation in such reviews. Comparing hotel and book reviews through an empirical text-mining sentiment analysis drawing on speech act theory, Villarroel Ordenes et al. (2017) found that the polarity of sentiment expressed in such reviews is associated with particular linguistic features. For instance, positive sentiment is linked with the use of first-person pronouns in hotel reviews but the opposite is true in book reviews. The authors thus highlighted that explicit expression of sentiment is context dependent and varies according to the product and social media platform concerned. These studies therefore point to the important observation that travel

product reviews are evaluative in function, and that travelers are not simply passive recipients, but active content creators, of online travel content. Their role as producers (Bruns 2008), i.e. hybrid producer-users, in online travel discourse underlines and promotes their increasing collective power in travel activities offline.

While travel product reviews have become a major online genre for travelers to showcase their power as consumers, given the substantial commercial interest involved they are also more susceptible to manipulation. The authenticity of online travel product reviews has increasingly come into question, with the rise of fake reviews produced not only by product providers or bribed guests but also effortlessly by generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) chatbots. In this regard, travel forums are generally less prone to such concerns. Yet, compared with the greater interest in travel product reviews in linguistic or discourse studies, destination forums as another common example of travel-related UGC are very much under-researched. Within the small number of available relevant studies, D'Egidio (2014) analyzed Urry's (2002) notion of tourist gaze in travel blogs and trip reports in assorted Tripadvisor forums after their visits. The analysis showed that tourists from six geographical origins varied in their tourist gaze in terms of what to do, what to look at and how they evaluate the destination. However, online travel forums are used not only *after* visits by travelers but also *before* and *during* travels. Indeed, they are found to be used overwhelmingly for information-seeking purposes, both by local and non-local members with different levels of contribution and knowledge (Lam 2021). An interesting aspect which has yet to be examined then is how forum users discursively construct a destination based on their own beliefs, assumptions and experiences in the process of seeking out information.

2.2 Bourdieu's notion of capital and Hong Kong's perceived capital

In a highly competitive world where places are bestowed such humanlike features as functional attributes and symbolic values for branding, marketization and consumption (Kavaratzis 2005), the discursive construction of a place may be understood in terms of Bourdieu's (1986) notion of capital. Originally proposed as a sociological theory to conceptualize the resources of a person, capital can be classified into three types: economic, cultural and social. Briefly, economic capital refers to one's command of economic resources and material assets. Cultural capital refers to one's possession of knowledge and skill sets, and social capital refers to one's acquisition of a network of social relationships. While the notion of capital has been broadly applied in tourism studies to individuals and communities, it has not been extended to the conceptualization of place. In this connection,

the economic capital of a place can be seen as its ‘hardware’, i.e. its more stable and tangible assets such as its natural resources and infrastructure. The cultural capital of a place, in turn, is its ‘software’, i.e. its more fluid and intangible properties such as its cultural heritage and characteristics of its people. Finally, the social capital of a place concerns its associations or networks of relationships with other places. Through “the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness” (Putnam 2000: 19) which are derived from such connections, a place gains access to external locations and/or resources via such means as foreign policies, visas and trade agreements.

Previous research on Hong Kong as a travel destination is mainly found in tourism studies and has tended to highlight its economic capital, i.e. the tangible physical resources. In a qualitative and quantitative tourist assessment of the city based on 160 questionnaires and 142 interviews, tourists in general considered Hong Kong a ‘shopping paradise’ which scored high for its convenient shopping facilities and for offering a wide variety of good quality products (Choi et al. 1999: 363). Similar findings were reported in the specific study of the perceptions and motivations of Mainland Chinese tourists, the biggest inbound traveler group, based on five focus group interviews involving 36 participants (Huang and Hsu 2005). For these tourists, their strongest motivation for visiting Hong Kong was shopping, though knowledge enhancement and experiencing a different culture, as aspects of the cultural capital, were also considered other motivations (Huang and Hsu 2005). In general, travelers seem less impressed by the cultural capital of Hong Kong. Japanese tourists, for instance, were least satisfied with the attitude of local people and the cleanliness of the city in a study of 31 travel attributes (Heung and Quf 2000). In relation to social capital, one way to examine the associations or connections of a travel destination with other places is through its visa policies on other places and visa-free privileges for its own citizens. Currently, Hong Kong SAR, China offers visa-free access to nationals of approximately 170 countries and territories, including the United States, most European countries, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, while Hong Kong SAR, China citizens may visit 173 places without a visa.¹ On a global scale, Hong Kong SAR, China is generally considered fairly strong on social capital as regards visa-free travel, ranking 19th on the Henley Passport Index, though substantially behind Singapore and Japan, which occupy the top two positions respectively (Henley and Partners 2023). Given the nature and focus of such tourism studies, however, the research tools of choice are typically questionnaires and focus group interviews. With the main aim of model building and testing, these studies are often statistically-based and provide useful insights into the relationship between different factors and variables. A combined theme-based corpus approach paying more attention to the

¹ https://www.immd.gov.hk/eng/service/travel_document/visa_free_access.html (accessed 10 April 2025).

textual analysis of the actual content of online travel discourse will complement well the insights from such tourism studies through the examination of self-initiated data yielding data-driven findings which may go beyond a researcher's intuition or expectation.

3 Methodology

The present study collected data from Tripadvisor, the world's largest travel guidance platform (Tripadvisor 2023).² As a public social media platform that relies heavily on UGC, Tripadvisor-branded websites reach hundreds of millions of monthly average unique visitors, and feature more than one billion reviews and opinions on nearly eight million places to stay, places to eat and things to do (Tripadvisor 2023). It may therefore be considered a representative data source to gather the online views of travelers from around the world on what they are most interested in regarding a travel destination.

The Hong Kong destination forum on Tripadvisor, known as the Hong Kong Travel Forum, was chosen for the study, since the city had been ranked the world's most visited city in 2017 for the seventh year in a row before COVID-19.³ Since September 2004, the Hong Kong Travel Forum on Tripadvisor has been a popular interface for users to ask questions and get answers about the city. Although Tripadvisor provides localized versions of the Tripadvisor website, including its travel forums, in 43 markets worldwide in 22 languages,³ the Hong Kong Travel Forum in English is by far the largest with the greatest number of threads. These forum threads, known as 'topics' on Tripadvisor travel forums, contain all the exchanges initiated by the first message which starts the topic and the subsequent responses to the topics. For the purpose of the present study, topics created in the one-year period between 2018 and 2019 have been collected. This timeframe has been selected as it is the latest period of relative normalcy without any severe disruption to life or travel due to social unrest or COVID-19 at the time of the study. Since the focus of the study is on the key themes in travelers' discourse, topics with null replies are excluded. As a result, a total of 2,535 topics, each with at least one reply, have been extracted. Each topic can be structurally divided into the subject line and the body text. The total number of words is 220,547, with an average number of 87 words per topic. Table 1 details the size of these topics in number.

2 <https://tripadvisor.mediaroom.com/us-about-us> (accessed 10 April 2023).

3 <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/01/these-are-the-world-s-most-visited-cities/> (accessed 10 April 2025).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for topic characteristics in the Tripadvisor Hong Kong Travel Forum (in number of characters).

	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Mean	SD
Subject	2	62	32	33.02	14.26
Body text	5	7,219	315	425.88	441.10

Following a theme-based corpus approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods, the present study involved first a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of the topics in the travel forum. All the topics collected were read closely several times by the author. Each topic was then thematically coded and classified manually into categories according to its area(s) of interest. This detailed thematic analysis was inductive and solely data-driven. As an ongoing organic process, the thematic analysis involved multiple rounds of coding to obtain reliability and consistency. To maintain further quality assurance, a second analyst familiar with the coding process was also asked to code a small sample of data for cross-checking purposes. The thematic categories devised from the topics collected were then compared with findings from relevant research. Once all the topics were classified thematically, the dominant categories identified from the data were examined further to classify any sub-categories. After the manual coding of the topics to identify the most salient categories, a keyword analysis commonly employed in corpus linguistics was conducted to identify statistically significant words in topics belonging to one thematic category when compared with all the other topics examined. Topics belonging to multiple categories are therefore excluded in the keyword analysis. Assisted by the software suite WordSmith Tools 7.0 (Scott 2016), this quantitative keyword analysis measures the strength of keywords by their keyness value, calculated using the log likelihood (LL) ratio. Conventionally in corpus linguistics, a p value smaller than 0.05 is generally considered acceptable and worth reporting (McEnery et al. 2006). In the case of the present study, only keywords with a p value lower than 0.000001 are reported. In the analytic and interpretive process of the categories and their respective keywords, Bourdieu’s (1986) tripartite notion of capital was applied to further understand the kind(s) of resources that forum users were most interested in about Hong Kong. It is believed that this combined approach of thematic and keyword analyses, together with Bourdieu’s (1986) sociological theory, can reveal distributional patterns which are more directly related to specific dominant categories, and can in turn provide a more nuanced understanding of the capital that travelers are keen to know with regard to each dominant category identified.

In the analysis that follows, all examples are quoted verbatim except for names which are removed for anonymity. The two research questions below will be addressed in the analysis and discussion sections:

- (1) What are the key themes and dominant discourses identified in the online travel forum of Hong Kong and how are they linguistically realized?
- (2) What do these dominant discourses reveal about Hong Kong as a travel destination in terms of its perceived capital and the identity of forum users?

4 Results

The 2,535 topics collected and analyzed can be broadly classified into 16 categories. The majority of this total ($N = 2,230$, 88 %) belongs to only one single category. The top five thematic categories identified in the single-category forum topics are listed in Table 2:

Together topics belonging to these five thematic categories make up more than three-fifths (62.0 %) of the total. These categories thus constitute the key themes in the Hong Kong Travel Forum, contributing to four dominant patterns of discourse: the discourses of mobility, pleasure seeking, convenience and budget orientation, which will be elaborated in more detail in relation to the perceived capital of Hong Kong and the identity of forum users in the discussion section which follows. While these five categories were solely and independently devised from a thematic analysis of all the topics collected, they match five of the six components of Aggregate Service Satisfaction in the Tourist Satisfaction Index (Song et al. 2012), a measure developed to assess the satisfaction level of tourists across different sectors *after* their visits through questionnaire responses. In the latest version of the Index which is based on the analysis of over 1.25 million Tripadvisor review posts with the use of a large language model,⁴ the five key tourism sectors reported are the same as the thematic categories identified in the present study. A similar classification is also found in Leung et al. (2011), with the top five thematic categories identified in the present study completely coinciding with their categorization scheme. In other words, this data-driven classification of categories, based on a large number of self-initiating posts collected, gives empirical support to relevant models of post-visit tourist satisfaction and perception in earlier research, as the categories in the present study show the areas of interest as revealed by genuine, unsolicited contributions from travelers *before*, *during* and *after* their visits. Such validation of findings confirms that these five types of thematic categories are widely considered important by travelers.

4 <https://news.rthk.hk/rthk/en/component/k2/1801866-20250425.htm> (10 April 2025).

Table 2: The top five thematic categories as identified in topics in the Tripadvisor Hong Kong Travel Forum.

Thematic categories	Frequency of occurrence
Transportation	535/2,535 (21.1 %)
Attractions and activities	388/2,535 (15.3 %)
Accommodation	281/2,535 (11.1 %)
Shopping	213/2,535 (8.4 %)
Food and beverages	155/2,535 (6.1 %)
Total	1,572/2,535 (62.0 %)

4.1 Transportation

The most dominant thematic category in the travel forum is transportation, which makes up more than one-fifth of all the topics analyzed. As part of the infrastructure of a city, transportation is a functional attribute (Choi et al. 1999) and also an aspect of its economic capital. Table 3 lists the top ten keywords in this thematic category:

Table 3: The top ten keywords in the topics belonging to the thematic category ‘transportation’.

N	Keyword	Frequency in category	% in category	Frequency in all topics	% in all topics	Keyness
1	AIRPORT	615	1.45	1,282	0.53	364.85
2	FROM	696	1.64	1,775	0.74	284.39
3	BUS	316	0.75	545	0.23	246.18
4	TAXI	199	0.47	308	0.13	177.03
5	EXPRESS	193	0.46	303	0.13	168.82
6	OCTOPUS	142	0.34	189	0.08	148.79
7	STATION	180	0.42	305	0.13	143.24
8	FERRY	240	0.57	514	0.21	135.46
9	TO	2,265	5.34	9,947	4.13	121.50
10	THE	1,840	4.34	7,974	3.31	107.59

Linguistically, this thematic category is chiefly realized by prepositions of movement and general concrete nouns concerning transport. Unsurprisingly, the prepositions ‘from’ and ‘to’ are particularly frequent. They play a key role in shaping a discourse of movement in the forum. Topics raised by Tripadvisor users about movement can be further classified into two types: Internal and External. The former involves enquiries about getting around within Hong Kong, which makes up the

majority (427/535, 79.8 %) of the posts about transportation. Example (1) shows a typical question in this category, specifically to do with finding out information about a route from one place to another:

- (1) Subject: Central/Hong Kong Train Station to Harbour Plaza North Point [...] Hi, does any one know if the free airport express shuttle bus service from Central/Hong Kong goes to Harbour Plaza North Point Hotel? Many thanks.

The nouns concerning transport are associated with the top three local transportation modes that travelers asked about, namely bus, metro, and taxi. All of them correspond to the associated keywords ‘bus’, ‘taxi’, ‘station’, ‘airport’ and ‘express’ on the keyword list, with the latter two keywords referring to the airport express train on the metro system. While ‘ferry’ is a keyword, a close reading of the item in context reveals that it refers to high-speed ferries for external transport to Macao SAR, China (hereafter Macao), a city nearby. The iconic Peak Tram and Star Ferry, as unique images and representative tourist attractions of Hong Kong in their own right (Choi et al. 1999), only feature sparingly in questions about transportation. As inexpensive but less rapid public transit tools, cross-harbor ferries and trams are not considered practical for getting around, especially if luggage is involved. When considering their transport options, travelers therefore appear to be more interested in the most affordable yet efficient mass transport means. This preference for affordable convenience and speed by travelers, rather than privacy and luxury (e.g. by limousine), is also supported by the keyword ‘octopus’, a word used exclusively in the posts to refer to the Octopus Card which is a reusable stored-value contactless smartcard widely used for payment in the city, especially for public transport.

As regards external transportation, roughly one-fifth (98/535, 18.4 %) of the posts in this thematic category involve cross-border travel between Hong Kong and other destination(s). Of all these questions, the most popular ones concern traveling between Hong Kong and Macao, as mentioned earlier via ferries. In planning their trips, travelers often consider visiting the two cities together. Taking a Bourdieusian perspective, this connection with Macao is therefore part of Hong Kong’s social capital, as the proximity and ease of travel between the two places create synergy which makes them both more appealing to travelers. Example (2) shows a question about taking the ferry to Macao from Hong Kong for a day trip:

- (2) Subject: Day trip Macao
Is it best to book ferry online or can you book at agent on arrival. Thank you.

In many city rankings and tourist studies, Hong Kong is often rated positively for its accessibility, i.e. its physical transportation network, both internally within the city and externally to other neighboring areas (Leung et al. 2011). The frequently recurring topics in the forum about travel routes and transportation means,

however, may suggest that travelers are generally not well-informed of the traffic options available, or that there is no readily-accessible resource for them to obtain such information quickly before they embark on their trip.

4.2 Attractions and activities

The second most frequently discussed thematic category in the forum concerns specific sites of interest or suggestions on what to do in a visit. A close study of the topics and the keywords in this category reveals the way in which such topics are introduced and the types of attractions and activities travelers worldwide find worth exploring. Table 4 lists the top ten keywords in this category:

Table 4: The top ten keywords in the topics belonging to the thematic category ‘attractions and activities’.

N	Keyword	Frequency in category	% in category	Frequency in all topics	% in all topics	Keyness
1	#	2,302	5.08	8,366	3.47	253.07
2	DAY	500	1.10	1,178	0.49	206.51
3	ITINERARY	149	0.33	236	0.10	116.96
4	PEAK	199	0.44	438	0.18	93.69
5	PARK	171	0.38	382	0.16	78.22
6	MARKET	121	0.27	239	0.10	68.90
7	DISNEYLAND	160	0.35	370	0.15	68.34
8	OCEAN	121	0.27	247	0.10	65.19
9	PM	86	0.19	157	0.07	55.40
10	TOUR	107	0.24	227	0.09	53.86

Linguistically, this thematic category is largely realized through numbers and proper nouns, with the former concerning the period and duration of time and the latter concerning places of tourist attraction. The number one keyword in this category is the wildcard character ‘#’, which denotes any numerical figure. Its prevalence is largely due to its wide use in posts detailing the itinerary of travelers for other users to review. In these posts, numerical figures are frequently used to represent dates, times, duration, listed items, and so on. Structurally, it is common for such posts to start with a subject line containing the second and third most frequent keywords ‘day’ and ‘itinerary’, as in Example (3):

(3) Subject: Hong Kong/Macao itinerary for 7 days

Hello all, Need your help in defining an itinerary to enjoy most of places at Hong Kong and Macao. My current plan is as below: (1) arrive at around 06:00 am on 30th Dec. will be staying at best western harbour view hotel. (2) planning to spend 2 days I.e 31/12-01/01 at Disneyland. (3) 02/01 will be staying at cityview (4) will spend a day at ocean park on (03/01 4) 04/01-06/01, will be in Macao at Venetian.

These requests for itinerary review are often specific in content and involve not only day-by-day but hour-by-hour plans, accounting for the high frequency of the keyword 'pm'. This suggests that forum users plan their own trips rather than join an all-inclusive package tour and that sightseeing activities are more often planned after noon rather than in the morning. Given the specificity of such itinerary posts, they are much longer when compared with other posts (see Table 1).

The remainder of the keyword list shows site names that travelers either include in their itineraries or ask about specifically. These noun keywords suggest that travelers are more interested in man-made attractions, as part of the built economic capital of the city: family-oriented theme parks including Disneyland and Ocean Park, the landmark Victoria Peak which visitors go for a bird's eye view of the city, and different types of street markets selling items such as birds, fish, and inexpensive souvenirs, which are not particularly unique to Hong Kong. Its natural resources, also as part of the city's economic capital, including the beaches and the countryside, and its cultural capital, as realized by such aspects as the lifestyle and history of the people via attractions including museums, music halls and theatres, are hardly given any attention in the itinerary of the forum users. A close reading of such posts, including the planned time for each site, further suggests that such sightseeing activities often focus on making the most, in terms of the number of sites, out of a trip, rather than on an in-depth experience in a particular site. Travelers to Hong Kong may therefore be classified as recreational tourists (Boorstin 1964), an individual mass tourist type who derives pleasure from pseudo-events, entertainment and shopping, with little interest in the authenticity of the travel experience.

4.3 Accommodation

The third commonest thematic category concerns lodging, again an aspect of economic capital concerning the infrastructure of the city. Topics here often involve either general inquiries about which hotel or area to stay in, or specific questions on a particular hotel or on which hotel to choose from given a small number of choices. Table 5 lists the top ten keywords in this thematic category.

Table 5: The top ten keywords in the topics belonging to the thematic category ‘accommodation’.

N	Keyword	Frequency in category	% in category	Frequency in all topics	% in all topics	Keyness
1	HOTEL	399	1.65	1,311	0.54	306.99
2	STAY	207	0.86	540	0.22	214.12
3	HOTELS	126	0.52	208	0.09	201.20
4	ROOM	88	0.36	134	0.06	149.30
5	LOOKING	119	0.49	387	0.16	92.36
6	LOCATION	50	0.21	88	0.04	75.74
7	BUDGET	62	0.26	165	0.07	62.47
8	NIGHTS	82	0.34	274	0.11	61.11
9	ROOMS	31	0.13	40	0.02	58.92
10	CLOSE	50	0.21	130	0.05	51.76

Linguistically, this thematic category is mainly realized through general concrete nouns of place and time concerning accommodation and duration. In these posts, travelers often seek recommendations on accommodation by specifying their duration of stay (e.g. a two-night stay) and requirement of room type (e.g. looking for a family/twin room), hence the wide use and strong co-occurrences of most of the keywords on the list: ‘hotel(s)’, ‘stay’, ‘room(s)’, ‘looking’ and ‘night’. In addition, the remaining keywords ‘location’, ‘budget’ and ‘close’ reveal the criteria that travelers consider when selecting accommodation. Example (4) shows a traveler taking these criteria into account when looking for a place to stay:

- (4) Subject: Family of 5 accommodation
Hi, Can anyone suggest a budget hotel for 2 adults & 3 kids aged 15. 12 & 8. It will be for 4 nights next March. I was hoping to be close to Mong Kok or Kowloon (or near MRT line) so maybe looking at a 2 or 3 star hotel. Even the YMCA is very expensive. Thank you.

Both the keyword analysis and the close study of the posts indicate that accessibility and price are the two most important criteria for selecting accommodation for the forum users. When looking for a place to stay in the city, travelers opt for low to mid-range lodging close to public transport or major tourist attractions, rather than prioritizing facility, size, service, luxury or safety. This is similar to their preference of transportation means as discussed earlier, which gives priority to affordable convenience. These preferences thus also provide clues to the identity of the travelers as much as to the image of the city.

4.4 Shopping

Another common thematic category concerns shopping, a major activity for travelers and an important source of economic development for many destinations worldwide. Indeed, shopping as the primary motivation for traveling has received growing attention both academically and industrially. Given the official effort to promote Hong Kong as an international center of trade⁵ and the traditional world reputation of the city as a shopping destination (Choi et al. 2016), it is perhaps not surprising that topics about shopping make the list. Table 6 shows the top ten keywords in this thematic category:

Table 6: The top ten keywords in the topics belonging to the thematic category ‘shopping’.

N	Keyword	Frequency in category	% in category	Frequency in all topics	% in all topics	Keyness
1	BUY	122	0.88	311	0.13	231.12
2	STORE	45	0.33	80	0.03	107.78
3	WHERE	109	0.79	573	0.24	99.97
4	BUYING	36	0.26	77	0.03	76.91
5	STORES	30	0.22	48	0.02	76.20
6	PRICES	35	0.25	92	0.04	64.65
7	SHOES	22	0.16	27	0.01	63.76
8	SHOP	33	0.24	89	0.04	59.76
9	SHOPPING	60	0.43	306	0.13	57.21
10	QUALITY	23	0.17	40	0.02	55.76

Linguistically, this thematic category is realized mostly through general nouns and material verbs concerning the action of purchase, though only one specific item of purchase, i.e. “shoes” actually makes the list. Apart from representing the social practice of buying and shopping through the material verbs of ‘shop’ and ‘buy’ in their variant forms, keywords on the list indicate that travelers are interested in three aspects to do with shopping: where to shop (‘where’, ‘store(s)’ and ‘shop’), what to buy (‘shoes’), and the value they are looking for while shopping (‘prices’ and ‘quality’). In terms of shopping locations, travelers are more interested in stores

5 <http://www.discoverhongkong.com/eng/shop/index.jsp> (accessed 10 April 2025).

and shops rather than markets or stalls. This preference for indoor shopping experience at large malls or chain retail stores is consistent with the items travelers intend to buy. While recent research has shown that small and local shops are much more appealing to travelers than big global brands,⁶ findings here seem to suggest otherwise. Instead of eyeing such unique symbolic items as craft souvenirs which may reflect the society and culture of the destination (Littrell et al. 1993), travelers in this forum are more interested in functional and luxury branded products which can be purchased from almost everywhere in the world. These include goods such as clothes and shoes, jewelry and watches, and electronic products. Example (5) shows a question in this category, with the use of the keywords ‘stores’, ‘shoes’ and ‘shopping’:

(5) Subject: Mall

Please could you inform me which are the best Malls for Fashion Shopping & non edible items? Which are the best stores for roller blades & sports shoes? Thanks.

Also on the keyword list are ‘prices’ and ‘quality’, which with close reading of the associated posts indicate that travelers consider the quality and price of goods two important criteria when deciding to shop in Hong Kong. Service quality and variety of goods, often also deemed key shopping attributes (Wong and Law 2003), are given little emphasis here. Taken together then, travelers focus on the physical shopping facilities available and the pleasure derived from purchasing value-for-money functional and luxury branded products, rather than on the learning of the local culture through the possession of specialized or one-of-a-kind handicrafts or souvenirs. In other words, it is again the economic, not the cultural, capital of the city which attracts travelers worldwide.

4.5 Food and beverages

The last thematic category to be discussed concerns forum users’ anticipated culinary experience. As a city offering a wide range of dining choices, Hong Kong has been considered a gastronomic holiday destination, attracting a substantial market of visitors with the main motivation of experiencing food (Kivela and Crotts 2005). At the same time, food has also long played a prominent role in marketing the city in official tourism promotional materials (Okumus et al. 2007). Table 7 lists the top ten keywords in this thematic category:

6 <https://www.unwto.org/archive/global/press-release/2016-01-25/shopping-tourism-key-destination-marketing> (accessed 10 April 2025).

Table 7: The top ten keywords in the topics belonging to the thematic category ‘food and beverages’.

N	Keyword	Frequency in category	% in category	Frequency in all topics	% in all topics	Keyness
1	RESTAURANT	75	0.73	140	0.06	213.02
2	BREAKFAST	69	0.67	135	0.06	191.24
3	FOOD	63	0.61	212	0.09	124.35
4	RESTAURANTS	47	0.46	125	0.05	109.02
5	DIM	36	0.35	73	0.03	97.81
6	SUM	33	0.32	70	0.03	87.49
7	DINNER	41	0.40	145	0.06	77.87
8	EAT	30	0.29	85	0.04	66.75
9	NEAR	45	0.44	254	0.11	55.46
10	BUFFET	15	0.15	22	<0.01	47.69

Linguistically, this thematic category is realized primarily through general concrete nouns concerning places for dining and types of meal or food, one material verb expressing the action of eating, and one preposition indicating proximity. Topics in this thematic category which travelers create in the forum are largely related to four aspects, as reflected by the use of keywords on the list: the place to eat (‘restaurant(s)’); the time to eat (‘breakfast’ and ‘dinner’); the kind of dishes to sample (‘dim’, ‘sum’ and ‘buffet’), and the factor to consider while dining out (‘near’). Overall, travelers are more interested in the more traditional or standard dining venues of restaurants, rather than the more adventurous locations of markets, food trucks or outdoor stalls. Breakfast and dinner, as two main meals of the day, draw more attention than the mid-day meal of lunch. Also appearing in travelers’ topics are the style of traditional Cantonese cuisine served in small portions, known as dim sum, and the buffet style of dining. These show that travelers seek not only local or regional tastes but also variety in their culinary choices. When considering where to eat, diners often prefer locations close to their accommodation or sites of interest, as illustrated by Example (6):

- (6) Subject: Japan, Chinese and dim sum
 Hi, I know that it asked several times, but, very mixed. we will stay in Pottinger hotel. would you please advise near our hotel or in Tsim Sha Tsui good – delicious Japan, Chinese and dim sum restaurants. Thank you.

It appears that travelers in the forum are a mix of recreational and diversionary ‘gastronomy tourists’ (Hjalager 2003), who opt for more traditional, conservative culinary options without investing too much effort. While these forum users show

some awareness and also interest in the local gastronomy through the two keywords ‘dim’ and ‘sum’, their priority is accessibility and quantity, rather than quality, of food, as evidenced by the keywords ‘near’ and ‘buffet’. Making a special trip for dining or participating in cooking classes or food tours to sample the food culture of the destination seems not the most popular ways to enhance tourism experience for these forum users. As with other thematic categories then, convenience appears to take precedence over other considerations.

5 Discussion

The thematic analysis of the forum posts created in the destination forum into categories and the subsequent study of the keywords in each category provides us with a deeper understanding of the aspects of travel that forum users are interested in, and the specific concerns they have for each aspect of travel. These aspects and concerns in turn indicate to us how Hong Kong and the forum users are discursively constructed. In this regard, the findings generated from the thematic and keyword analyses above can be subsumed under four dominant patterns of discourse: the discourses of mobility, pleasure seeking, convenience and budget orientation, with the former two discourses about the place and the latter two about the users themselves.

As a travel destination, Hong Kong is portrayed, through the inquiries in the forum, as a modern city which boasts contemporary facilities and sensory delights. The dominant discourse of mobility as revealed by the transportation thematic category and its associated keywords of nouns denoting transportation means and prepositions of movement produces an image of a place which is connected internally and to a lesser extent externally by a network of public transport. Instead of staying and relaxing in a particular location such as a resort or a spa, forum users are keen to know how to get around from one spot to another and to maximize the number of spots to be covered in a day. This discourse of mobility gives the impression that people are always on the move and contributes to the hustle and bustle aura of city life. At the same time, the dominant discourse of pleasure seeking, as evidenced by the three thematic categories of attractions and activities, shopping, and food and beverages, as well as the abundance of associated keywords of concrete nouns, indicates that Hong Kong is characterized by landmarks and man-made sights, with large chain stores selling mass-produced items and restaurants offering local and variable culinary choices. It is thus a destination designed for sensory and material pleasures, especially in the areas of shopping and culinary tourism. These two dominant discourses of mobility and pleasure seeking both suggest that Hong Kong is discursively constructed as a place strong on its economic capital, in

particular its built economic capital, but not its natural economic capital. Despite its natural reserves, country parks, outlying islands and sinuous coastline, Hong Kong is typically characterized as a center for urban tourism, outranking all other cities in the world as a city destination.⁷ Previous studies on the image of Hong Kong have also confirmed tourists' common perception of the city as a place for shopping (Choi et al. 1999; Huang and Hsu 2005). In this respect, topics in the forum match this perception, as they are hardly associated with rural tourism or scenic routes. The dominant discourses in the forum strongly suggest the forum users' preferences for consumption tourism, which entails the acquisition of goods and/or services in a destination. While official attempts have been made in recent years to diversify the tourist market, to advocate sustainable tourism and to promote other less tangible experiences, including arts, culture, and outdoor activities, that Hong Kong has to offer,⁸ forum users still seem more interested in seeking entertainment and sensory pleasures through urban leisure-based activities. A visit to Hong Kong is conceptualized as a recreational experience (Cohen 1979), with minimal intention of making social contact with the locals (cf. Fan et al. 2017). This lack of regard for the local people seems to be typical not only of the forum users here but also of the general official tourist gaze (Francesconi 2014). Man-made cultural attractions such as museums and temples, or activities including theatre-going and class-attending, are barely discussed in the forum. To these forum users, the lifestyle or history of the local people is perhaps of little concern, and the authenticity or uniqueness of their own travel experience is also of little relevance. As such, they pay little attention to Hong Kong's cultural capital.

As potential or actual visitors to Hong Kong, forum users construct, through indicating their preferences and attitudes in their queries, a mixed identity of the mythologized tourist and traveler. On the one hand, the dominant discourse of pleasure seeking as discussed earlier constructs a typical mythologized tourist identity – one who only has a “shallow regard for local people and with little or no interest in really learning about the local culture” (Thurlow and Jaworski 2011: 233). Their preference for mainstream must-see sights, public transport and mass-produced shopping items seems to suggest a rather superficial form of travel which closely follows the typical tourist script. While traveling necessarily involves venturing into the unknown, they are happy to do what other tourists do instead of

7 <https://www.euromonitor.com/article/hong-kong-to-maintain-its-position-as-top-city-destination-despite-decline-in-visitor-arrivals> (accessed 10 April 2025).

8 <http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/travel-leisure/article/2065512/hong-kong-tops-list-worlds-favourite-city-tourism> (accessed 10 April 2025).

getting off the beaten track to visit somewhere secluded or try something completely exotic. On the other hand, the discourses of convenience and budget-orientation, as evidenced by the three thematic categories of accommodation, shopping, and food and beverages, with their associated keywords, hint that these forum users are not mindless package tourists who simply accept and follow what is arranged in a tour. Instead, they are relatively independent visitors who plan their own travel and appreciate choice and flexibility. The discourse of convenience, which permeates the top five thematic categories and their keywords, most notably through the thematic category of transportation and such items as “close”, “location” and “near” in the other categories, highlights a community who values efficient transport and accessibility in accommodation and dining choices. The discourse of budget-orientation, again supported by the transportation thematic category and price-related keywords including “budget” and “prices” in the two thematic categories of accommodation and shopping, shows that forum users prefer affordable material comforts and value for money through their choices in transport, accommodation, and shopping. The emphasis on affordability and convenience but not luxury indicates that while forum users travel by choice, they are not engaged in elitist tourism. They are, however, mostly from well-developed countries which have visa-free arrangements with Hong Kong. Visa-related issues therefore only concern a small number of users from less well-developed economies and thus do not feature as one of the top five thematic categories. In other words, the social capital of Hong Kong, while only mostly alluded to but not extensively covered in the forum, seems to be well-matched with the majority of the forum users in terms of access, though the potential of inter-city and inter-region travel, except perhaps for Macao, seems not to have been fully tapped. At the same time, the official attempts to introduce the cultural capital of Hong Kong to visitors also seem rather futile at least to the forum users. This has become a cause for concern for the city. As travel trends have changed especially after the pandemic, the appeal of shopping tourism in the city has declined due to the dominance of online shopping and lower sales tax rates in neighboring economies.⁹ Hong Kong is thus in dire need of diversifying its offerings through utilizing all types of its capital, as tourism largely based on replicable material experiences, rather than unique cultural experiences, is unlikely to be sustainable or beneficial for long-term development as economies become more symbolic than monetary (cf. Aiello and Thurlow 2006).

9 <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/hong-kong-economy/article/3306814/can-hong-kong-look-beyond-its-shopping-paradise-era-and-attract-tourists-again> (accessed 10 April 2025).

6 Conclusions

Through a theme-based corpus analysis of the major thematic categories and the keywords in such categories in thousands of forum posts, the present study has identified the key themes, dominant discourses and their linguistic realizations in an online Hong Kong travel forum, an important form of online travel communication which is very much under-researched in linguistic and discourse studies. Combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, the study has demonstrated the value of applying a sociological theory, linguistic techniques and tools to the study of the discursive construction of a place and its visitors. Practically, findings from the study provide the official tourism bodies and practitioners in the industry with insights into what travelers are most interested in when visiting Hong Kong and the core values and attributes of such travelers. They also further our understanding of the travelers' image of the city based on their beliefs, assumptions and experiences. These findings allow evidence-based specific recommendations to be made for tourism policies and promotional measures, and provide invaluable information for market segmentation. Further, they draw attention to such critical issues as consumption tourism and sustainable tourism. Methodologically, the thematic and keyword analyses based on naturally-occurring, self-initiated data offers a fresh analytical perspective to complement results in tourism studies which are largely generated via traditional marketing surveys and interviews. This approach can be easily applied to the study of other destinations and of similar online travel texts. More importantly, the present study contributes to a better understanding of the online discourse of traveling, the discursive construction of places and visitors, and the virtual discursive practice of traveling, through the examination of destination forum as an important form of online travel communication.

While this study helps to enhance our understanding of traveling as a discursive practice and of the online discursive construction of a destination, the scope of the study only allows one online forum concerning one destination on one platform to be examined thoroughly. Future research should investigate other travel forums and destinations so that the discursive construction of the same place on different platforms and the discursive construction of different places can be compared to determine the extent to which the dominant discourses identified here are unique to this particular forum or generalizable to forums for other destinations. Other aspects worthy of further examination include the comparison of discursive construction by travelers from different geographical origins, or the trend of discursive construction over time, especially the comparison before and after COVID-19. It should also be acknowledged that Tripadvisor users do not represent the whole traveler population. Their views thus need to be considered together with those from other online

and offline traveler communities in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the ways in which the city is discursively constructed as a travel destination by all the stakeholders concerned.

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