

# A Comparative Study of City Branding Through Twitter Usage Patterns\*

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**Abstract**—Both Beijing and Washington DC are capital cities, but Washington DC has outperformed Beijing in promoting itself. Twitter as a new social media, has become the new field of city branding. So this paper attempts to take Beijing and Washington DC as examples to study their city branding performances on the platform of twitter under the theoretical framework by M. Kavaratzis. These two capital cities have their respective official accounts: @Beijingofficial and @washingtondc. The contents of their tweets within a certain period of time and their ways and frequency of interaction with followers are to be analyzed. Results show that although contents are varied in these two accounts, they use similar ways of interaction with their followers. While Washington DC has higher frequency of interaction with its followers, Beijing are already good at city branding strategies, meeting the level of tertiary communication advised by M. Kavaratzis.

**Keywords**—new media; Beijing; Washington DC; tweet; city branding

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the new millennium, globalization has intensified the competition for source, capital, human resources and tourism revenues among cities. In order to compete for the scarce sources of the world, all cities, no matter big or small, are paying more attention to improve their city images and promote its communication to the world through all media. In this new media era, how to sell themselves to the world, how to manage their city images and how to market their city cultures is now the focus of all cities.

Both Washington DC and Beijing are national capital cities which symbolize the image and prestige of a nation. As the capital city of China, Beijing is the political and economic center, having incredible cultural resources, like various scenic spots and historical sites, stylish art symbols, attractive food culture and striking architecture symbols. But according to Anholt-GFK Roper's city image ranking, Beijing was not even in the top 10 of the world for the year 2011, 2013 and 2015. Some international audience still have some bias against Beijing, regarding it as an ancient city bound with cultural relics, while ignore its modern characteristics (Zhao, 2015). On the other hand, Washington DC, the capital city of the United States of America (USA), ranked No.7 in 2011, No. 6 in 2013 and No. 10 in 2015. In

the year 2014, it was called "the most cool" city in America by Fobers. The Lonely Planet journal recommended it as the best place one should go in 2015. In some sense, Washington DC has made tremendous achievement in its city marketing. Then in this new media era, how do these two cities manage their city images and promote their cultural communication? What are their respective communication styles and marketing strategies? What can Beijing learn from Washington DC's successful experience? To answer these questions, the author chose the fast growing social media — twitter as the object of study, trying to compare the performances between these two capital cities' accounts.

Twitter was used here as the study object, because as a new social media in the world, it has become the new field of city branding. It was founded in 2006 as a social network and blog service website. On its website or mobile phone software, it has three ways to reach the world. First, the first way is to publish a message within 280 characters (tweet), which may be followed by outside links. Pictures and videos can also be shared with the world. This is one-way or one-to-many communication, which can be used to disseminate messages by cities. The second way is that users can send messages to a specified person by @ him or subscribe one account to become its followers, and then one can interact with other users by replying directly or resending the message (retweet). This is two way or one-to-one communication, through which cities can communicate with individual audiences all over the world. Meanwhile, anyone in the world can talk to the city directly. The third way is that Twitter users can use hashtag (#) to categorize topics to facilitate audiences to follow certain topics that they are interested in. From these three ways, one can see that twitters can not only broadcast messages, but lay more emphasis on interactive aspect.

According to Statista (July 7, 2018), twitter users have increased dramatically in the last eight years, from 300 million to 33,600 million. The number of tweets produced every day is more than 300 million. So with its cost-effectiveness and high immediacy of interaction, twitter has become an indispensable tool of communication among people nowadays, not limited by time and space. Unlike the traditional mass media communication in which information flow from official news resources to media networks and to the public, twitter has witnessed a transformation of communication process from a hierarchical to a distributed structure, and enables individuals to broadcast their messages

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and interact with each other with low or no costs (Sevin, 2013). It's not surprising to find that cities choose twitter as a platform for city marketing and branding. Many cities have their twitter accounts, like @Parisjecoute for Paris and @CapeTown for Cape Town.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Many scholars agree that city marketing is in some sense similar to corporate marketing, aiming to sell its products and brands to its customers, or audiences in the case of city marketing. The rising concept of city branding is derived from the emergence of corporate branding. As defined by Dinnie (2010, 4), city branding is an adaptation of corporate branding strategy since city and corporate share similarity of complex dimensions and diverse stakeholders. City branding now is considered as an established practice applied to not only big cities like Paris, London or New York, but also small cities in less developed countries. According to Kotler (2002), the process of city marketing comprises 3 levels: the target markets to which the marketing communication will be sent; the marketing segments include attraction and infrastructure of the place, its people, image and quality of life; and the planning group is responsible for the planning and control process.

But city marketing is largely dependent on the construction, management and communication of the city's image. So years later Kavatzis proposed his influential framework on place image communication in 2004. According to him (2004: 67-69), city image be communicated through three types of communication, namely primary, secondary and tertiary.

Primary communication refers to everything that is actually happening and can be visible in the city. It includes four broad areas of intervention: landscape; structure; infrastructure and behavior. Major monuments, large airports, various facilities (like cultural centers, and conference facilities), services provided by the city and even those events (like festivals and other cultural, sports or leisure events) organized in the city all belong to the first level.

Secondary communication is the formal, intentional communication that most commonly takes place through well-known marketing practices like indoor and outdoor advertising, public relations, graphic design, the use of a logo etc. It's in accordance with corporate's advertising and promotional measures, through which a city can communicate its city image to its audience. According to Grabow (1998: 4), "the communicative competence of a city is a key factor and vital requirement for all phases of successful urban marketing". But one thing is for sure: promotion comes only after one has something to promote. To put it another way, in order to attract more audiences, a city needs to have something to sell and make the communication effective.

Tertiary communication refers to word of mouth, reinforced by media and competitors' communication. Among the three levels, the first two are controllable by marketers (cities in this case), but the tertiary level is not. The process of city branding is a process in which

government can negotiate with audiences. Although the tertiary level of communication is out control of government, the first two controllable types of communication can evoke or reinforce positive tertiary communication. In some sense, the goal of the first two types of communication should be to lay a good foundation for the tertiary type of communication, as a result, enhance the city's image.

Based on this theory, twitter belongs to secondary communication. It is not only an important channel for cities to spread messages, but also a vital way for users to establish new and interactive social relationships, so that messages can be resent.

## III. RESEARCH PROCESS AND FINDINGS

By analyzing the performances of Beijing and Washington DC on twitter platform, this article attempts to answer the following questions:

- What are their tweets about (the topics or subjects of messages they spread)?
- How many outside links, hashtags and retweet do they have (their way of interaction with followers)?
- How many dialogues do they have? How many round at most (the frequency of interaction)?

The total number of tweets of @Beijingofficial is 1,756, with 87,000 followers, while the account of @washingtondc has 29,701 tweets and 163,400 followers (till August 2, 2018). There is huge difference in case of the number of tweets and followers between these two cities. Washington DC's tweets are about 17 times of that of Beijing and its followers are about 2 times of that of Beijing. It's partly because twitter is forbidden in mainland China. Based on this wide differences, the paper chose 500 tweets from @Beijingofficial (from Jan 1, 2016 to May 20, 2017) and 1000 tweets from @washingtondc (from Jan 1 to Mar 25, 2018) as the objects for analysis. For Twitter account @Beijingofficial, it sent 1 tweet every day on average during that time, only four days had more than 5 tweets (Feb 29, 2016: 5 tweets; Jul 4, 2016: 6 tweets; Oct 15, 2016: 10 tweets; May 17, 2017: 5 tweets ) and it seldom resends those tweets. While for @washingtondc, it sent 1000 tweets in no more than 3 months, 12 tweets every day on average. Among them, four days had the most tweets (Feb 1: 24 tweets; Feb 22: 19 tweets; Jan 18 and Mar 1: 18 tweets). But most of them are messages resent, for example, among the 24 tweets on Feb 1, only 4 are new tweets, and the rest are repetition. The day it has the least tweets are only 2 tweets (Jan 13 and Mar 25).

As to the topics of the 1500 tweets sent by both capital city accounts, they cover all aspects of each city. For the convenience of analysis, the author put them into 13 different categories: natural scenery and scenic spots; events; culture; leisure and entertainment; food; accommodation, history; art; traffic; festivals; shopping; tourist guide and other. The results show big difference in the top five categories of both cities based on their number of tweets. Please see the following "Table I":

**TABLE I. DIFFERENCE IN THE TOP FIVE CATEGORIES OF BOTH CITIES BASED ON THEIR NUMBER OF TWEETS**

Top 5	Beijing	Washington DC
1	natural scenery and scenic spots (29%)	tourist guide (25%)
2	Events (19%)	Events (20%)
3	Food (11%)	Food (13%)
4	Culture (10%)	Art (10%)
5	leisure and entertainment (8%)	leisure and entertainment (8%)

From the results one can see that, among the 500 tweets sent by Beijing in the one and a half year, natural scenery and scenic spots occupies 29.2%; events about 19%; food 11.4%, culture 9.8%, and leisure and entertainment 8.2%. All of these together accounts for about 77% of the 500 tweets. But for Washington DC, tourist guide occupies 24.5%, events 20%, food 12.5%, art 10.4%, and leisure and entertainment 7.8%. All of these accounts for about 76% of all the 1000 tweets. Washington DC already has a large number of followers, so its main focus is to provide tourists enough guides about the city. But for Beijing, it still works on attracting more followers, so introductions on its natural scenery and scenic spots are important. Among the natural scenery and scenic spots mentioned by @Beijingofficial, the Great Wall, Forbidden City, Hutong and the Summer Palace are the five repeated the most. Other places mentioned are Botanic Garden, ChongWen Gate, National Stadium, Temple of Heaven, Shihua Cave, Baihe Valley, Wuling Mountain, Houhai Lake, Glass Street, Beihai Park, Temple of Earth, Fragrance Hill, Yanqi Lake, Lama Temple, the Space, Bell Tower, Prince Gong’s Mansion, and so on. The cultural relics possessed by Beijing, which is the something that Beijing can promote, will never be surpassed by Washington DC. In terms of cultural relics, Beijing ranked No. 3 in the world by the ranking of Anholt-GFK Roper in 2011.

For those tweets about events and activities, the ones Beijing mentioned the most are the Great Wall Hero, Beijing International Tourism Festival and Global Tourism Economy Forum. That’s the reason why @Beijingofficial have more tweets on those four days mentioned above. Other events cover New Year Marathon, Charming Beijing Presentation, Beijing Auto Show, and the 1st World Conference on Tourism for Development, Color Run, Beijing International Bicycle Exhibition, the Summer Palace Flower Show, Yanqing Ice and Snow Tourism Festival, Lantern Display at Olympic Park, and etc.

What’s worth to be mentioned is the event of “the Great Wall Hero”, and this title finally belonged to American filmmaker and travel blogger Sawyer Hartman. It’s a global marketing campaign launched by Beijing Municipal Commission of Tourism Development, with an aim to recruit the first hero who is ambitious enough to conquer the Great Wall. The award Sawyer got was a free tour to explore Beijing. From jogging on the ridge-backed dragon to strolling around the crisscrossed Hutong, from feasting traditional royal cuisine to snacks on the street, he is truly experiencing and sharing the beauty and culture of Beijing with his audience. After spending 3 days at the Great Wall,

Sawyer also joined several Beijing experiences sponsored by MasterCard, to explore the culture and local life of the Beijingers in depth. He learned Tai Chi from a master at the Temple of Heaven and had a hero to hero talk on Simatai Great Wall with Langlang, a famous pianist in China. As a photographer, Sawyer put these striking pictures on the YouTube and shared with people around the world. What’s more, he even gave a speech about his wonderful experiences at Beijing Tourism Presentation in New York. Communicating Beijing image through the perspective of a foreigner reaches the tertiary level of communication defined by Kavaratzis. From this event, one can see the high communicative competence and skilled marketing strategies of @Beijingofficial.

As always, food plays a vital role in developing China and also in the tweets of Beijing account. Peking roasted duck, hotpot, Huguosi Snack Street, Daoxiangcun Bakery, Guijie Street, glutinous Ludagunr, Laba rice porridge, Ramen, Jianbing, spring rolls, leek pancakes and so on all appear in the tweets to promote. As to tweets about culture, besides the 24 solar terms (like Spring Equinox and start of summer), welcome the god of wealth, house decoration with couplets and Gate Gods, Taichi, Cupping therapy, Confucianism, Qigong etc. are also promoted. In this way, audiences can have a further understanding on unique Chinese culture.

But for @washingtndc, tourist guide accounts for one fourth of all the tweets. Among them, “12 ways to make the most of winter in Washington DC” was resent 28 times, “become a DC Insider when you sign up for our newsletter” 24 times, “20 women-focused places to go in Washington DC” 24 times, and “order a copy of official visitors guide” 19 times. Others include “do date night right with our ultimate guide to romance in Washington DC”, “exciting reasons to visit Washington DC in 2018”, “things to do this weekend”, “cool museums”, “hot restaurants” and such like.

Tweets about events or activities also occupy a very important part of @washingtndc and various colorful events were held in this capital city. What the tweets mentioned include Cherry Blossom Festival, Women’s voices Theater Festival, Jazz Festival, DC Auto Show, DC Bike Ride, DC Baby Show and so on. As the most important festival in spring, Cherry Blossom related tweets were even resent for 43 times. Besides these, @washingtndc had some other bonus awarding activities. Anyone who participates or re-tweets has the chance to win a surprise, like free tickets, free accommodation, free ice cream or drinks. This, of course, stimulates followers to retweet or communicate for @washingtndc to the world. All these give a sense that Washington DC is a vibrant and energetic city, and Beijing should definitely learn from it.

For tweets about food, the ones @washingtndc sent the most are “the hottest restaurants in DC”, “winter restaurant week”, “can’t miss dishes in DC”, bakeries, bars, Valentine’s dinner, pizza day, etc. Among them, “the hottest restaurants in DC” was resent for 37 times. But what’s need to be noticed is that they are usually followed by outside link.

Washington DC has wonderful museums and theaters, and most of them are free, which provides a very good atmosphere for art. So tweets like “19 cool museums that aren't on the National Mall”, “a unique and enlightening museum-going experience in the nation's capital” and “explore modern artworks in this stunningly beautiful free museum on the National Mall” are resent many times. National Art Gallery, Art Museum, Washington Art District, Ford Theater and such like are also the objects of promotion in the official tweets. In sharp contrast to Beijing's unique cultural heritage, Washing DC focuses more on modern art.

In the case of the means and frequency of interaction with audiences, the author compared the two official accounts from five aspects: outside link, hashtag, comment, like, and retweet. Results show that 40% of tweets by @Beijingofficial have outside links, which is twice of that by @washingtondc. Apparently, Beijing is eager to share resources and information with its audiences. Meanwhile, for the convenience of audiences, Beijing uses more hashtags to categorize topics than Washington DC, reaching about 70% of all tweets. Therefore, it's easier for audiences to follow certain topics. For interaction with followers, big differences can be found between these two capital accounts. 91% of tweets by @Beijingofficial have comments, while for @washingtondc, it's only 51%. It's partly because @washingtondc usually resend a tweet for many times every day. For 98% of @washingtondc tweets, followers will give a like and 80% of all tweets are resent. In case of @Beijingofficial, 93% of tweets receive likes and 79% are resent. So there is no big difference between these two accounts in this aspect and both of them are well accepted by their followers. But in case of dialogues, @washingtondc apparently did a better job than @Beijingofficial. Its number of dialogues above 3 rounds is 3 times than that of Beijing, which means @Beijingofficial should pay more attention to interaction with followers in its city branding.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis one can see that @Beijingofficial lays more emphasis on its cultural heritage and natural scenery in city marketing, while @washingtondc focuses on providing tourist guide and promoting events or activities. In the year 2013, Washington DC changed its marketing strategies and labeled itself as “Cool DC”. To match this, it supported all kinds of prized events or activities, attracting people from all walks of life and different groups. This vibrant and modern characteristic is what @Beijingofficial needs.

Like in corporate branding, the goal of city branding is to use the values associated with the local products to promote the city itself. Everything in the city communicates its image and everyone in the city can benefit from city branding as a whole. Cities should make full use of all their assets to communicate their vigorous images to audiences. As Solis (2011) mentioned, in this new and interactive era for city branding, cities “either engage or die”. City branding cannot be made by shutting the door, or just for attracting more tourists or boosting its economy, but it lies in making itself an excellent and reliable brand.

Twitter, as a new communication media, has redefined people's abilities to get information (no longer be limited by media outlet), to broadcast messages (become the source of information), and what's more, to interact with the world. Through these new follower-following relations, audiences can also create content and spread information by the word of mouth. So cities should make full use of its interactive feature of the new social media to have dialogues with their audiences directly. Only through these kinds of interaction and participation can cities have more chances to promote their city images. @Beijingofficial should invite its audiences into its city branding communication, understand their thoughts and invite them to participate in it by turning them into positive communicators.

Finally, to survive and flourish in this fierce competition, cities need to focus on developing colorful event or activities to improve the city image and enhance the quality of life. Admit or not, twitter-based communication will be an important battlefield for city branding in the future.

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