

Evaluative Meaning and Persuasion in Shaanxi Tourism Website Discourse: An Appraisal-Based Analysis

SHI WEIPING *

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia
&
Guangdong Technology College, China
p115468@siswa.ukm.edu.my

NG LAY SHI

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

AZIANURA HANI SHAARI

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

In the context of globalisation, tourism websites have emerged as crucial platforms for governments to promote destinations and attract potential visitors, with their textual content exerting profound implications for destination image-building and international appeal. Based on the Appraisal framework within Systemic Functional Linguistics, this study employed the UAM Corpus Tool 3.3 and a mixed-methods approach to analyse the official Shaanxi English-language tourism website, focusing on the distribution patterns and persuasive mechanisms of evaluative resources. The findings indicate that the Attitude system is predominantly realised through Appreciation resources, foregrounding cultural value and aesthetic appeal in destination representation. Engagement and Graduation further reinforce persuasive effectiveness by regulating intersubjective positioning and evaluative intensity. Specifically, the discourse is characterised by a high proportion of monoglossic statements that project authority, alongside heteroglossic strategies, particularly entertain and attribute, that facilitate reader alignment and dialogic involvement. Within the Graduation system, Force resources are most salient, intensifying evaluation and scaling cultural significance. Collectively, these evaluative patterns construct an authoritative yet engaging tourism narrative through affective appeal, stance negotiation, and evaluation scaling, thereby strengthening both persuasive impact and destination image construction. This study demonstrates the analytical value of the Appraisal framework for understanding evaluative meaning-making in online tourism discourse.

Keywords: Appraisal Theory; Tourism websites; Attitude; Persuasion; UAM Corpus Tool 3.3

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, tourism has undergone a significant shift in how information is shared and accessed. Online searches for travel guides have become an essential part of the pre-trip planning and experience anticipation for more and more tourists (G. Wu, 2018). Recent data indicate that over 90% of travellers worldwide rely on online research to plan their itineraries, and 82% complete their bookings through digital platforms (Mitto, 2024). As crucial media for destination marketing, tourism websites serve multiple functions, including providing extensive information, shaping destination images, influencing tourists' decision-making (Lee & Gretzel, 2012), and

facilitating user interaction (Del Vasto-Terrientes et al., 2015). Their core objective is to convert potential customers into actual visitors.

Tourism products are inherently unique due to their intangible nature: potential visitors cannot physically evaluate destinations before arrival and thus depend entirely on symbolic expectations constructed through promotional discourse to make their decisions (Zakhaova, 2020). This reliance compels website designers to strategically craft immersive narratives that simulate authenticity, often invoking an “off-the-beaten-track” travel fantasy to motivate visitation (Maci, 2013, p. 21). Given this, discourse analysis of tourism websites becomes critically significant as it “directly influences the perceived image of the destination and creates a virtual experience for the consumer” (Doolin et al., 2002). However, promotional language is not arbitrarily constructed—the realisation of its persuasive efficacy hinges on systematic discursive strategies, which constitute precisely the analytical focus of Appraisal Theory. Resources from Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation cluster together to construe the ‘rhetorical voice’ of a text (Martin & White, 2005) and shape readers’ perceptions by positioning them to adopt specific viewpoints (Hunston & Thompson, 2000, p. 8), thus providing an effective tool to analyse the key interpersonal features and persuasion strategies (Istianah & Suhandano, 2022; G. Wu, 2018).

Appraisal Theory (AT) has been widely applied across multiple discourse domains, and its application has been shown to be particularly robust in news discourse, where evaluative resources are extensively employed to shape audience perception and construct socio-political realities (H. Wu et al., 2025). In recent years, scholars have explored the persuasive potential of Appraisal resources in contexts where persuasion is central to meaning-making. For instance, White (2025) illustrates how appraisal analysis can unpack “persuasiveness” in journalistic discourse by examining how evaluative meanings position readers to adopt particular viewpoints, and Abrahamyan (2024) applies it to English political discourse to show how evaluative statements influence audience cognition and emotional reactions. Other studies have increasingly examined the persuasive potential of Appraisal resources in academic writing and institutional communication (Hood, 2006; Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Martin & White, 2005; Qiu, 2019; Zhang, 2016). However, systematic investigations of how Appraisal resources function to construct persuasion in government-affiliated tourism websites remain relatively limited, particularly in English-language contexts targeting international audiences, which indicates a gap in understanding how evaluative resources are used to influence audiences.

As one of the world’s largest tourism markets, China has witnessed rapid growth in international tourism and destination branding, with official tourism websites serving as key platforms for external communication. Within this context, Shaanxi Province occupies a distinctive position in China’s tourism landscape due to its rich historical heritage, cultural symbolism, and prominent role in national narratives of ancient civilisation and the Silk Road. Despite its cultural and symbolic significance, the English-language tourism discourse of Shaanxi has received limited scholarly attention from a linguistic perspective. This makes it a meaningful and representative case for examining how evaluative and persuasive strategies are constructed in government-affiliated, English-language tourism promotion targeting international audiences.

Accordingly, this study investigates how Appraisal resources are employed in the tourism section of the Shaanxi official English-language website to construct persuasive meanings. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How are different types of Appraisal resources distributed in attraction descriptions?
- 2) How do Appraisal resources interact to enhance the persuasiveness of tourism discourse?

The innovation of this study lies in two key dimensions. Practically, by revealing the persuasive strategies embedded in official external communication texts, it provides empirical evidence for optimising China's international tourism discourse. Theoretically, by incorporating AT into tourism discourse analysis, this study extends the application of linguistic theory in digital marketing and cross-cultural communication, offering new analytical perspectives for interdisciplinary research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

WHAT IS PERSUASION?

As a communicative strategy for influencing attitudes and behaviours, persuasion has a long-standing history and an inherently interdisciplinary character. According to Carroll and Wilson (2012, pp. 10-19), the foundations of persuasive theory were established in ancient Greece, where Aristotle's triadic model—logos, pathos, and ethos—laid the ethical and logical foundation for persuasion. In the Roman era, rhetoricians such as Cicero and Quintilian expanded upon this tradition by emphasising probabilistic reasoning (possibility) and the credibility of the persuader (credibility) in rhetoric. In the 19th and 20th centuries, with the rise of cognitive psychology, communication studies, and linguistics, persuasion research transcended traditional rhetorical frameworks and gradually integrated interdisciplinary perspectives. The advent of the digital age has further catalysed profound changes in persuasion strategies—information overload and algorithm-driven content dissemination have shifted persuasion from explicit argumentation to implicit emotional manipulation, making interactive communication the mainstream. This evolution indicates that modern persuasion has transformed from a one-way information transmission model to a dynamic interplay of multimodal semiotic resources, where persuasive communication becomes more “subtle and devious, complex and mediated”(Perloff, 2017, pp. 13-15).

Despite disciplinary variations, persuasion is generally understood as “attempting to change others' attitudes or behaviours through the transmission of messages in an atmosphere of free choice”(Perloff, 2017, p. 22). A discourse is considered persuasive when at least one party explicitly recognises the intent of persuasion (Lakoff, 1982, p. 28). In tourism promotion, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) explicitly seek to influence tourists' perceptions and travel decisions, while audiences are generally aware of this persuasive intent. Tourism discourse can therefore be understood as a prototypical form of persuasive discourse, in which linguistic choices play a central role in constructing positive destination images and experiential expectations.

Within this broader category, official tourism websites (OTWs) represent a particularly salient and influential subgenre of tourism discourse. Typically designed and maintained by governmental or quasi-governmental agencies, OTWs function as authoritative and institutionalised representations of place channels, targeting both specialist and non-specialist audiences. As the “official” representations of place, they mediate the pre-trip encounter between tourists and destinations (Manca, 2016). These features make OTWs a particularly relevant site for examining how persuasive meanings are discursively constructed through evaluative language.

LINGUISTIC APPROACHES TO PERSUASION IN TOURISM DISCOURSE

Discourse analysis originated in linguistics as an approach to examining language beyond isolated sentences, emphasising connected stretches of spoken or written text situated in specific contexts (McCarthy, 1991). Early linguistic traditions, including Austin's Speech Act Theory, Dell Hymes' Ethnography of Communication, and Halliday's functional approach, foregrounded the role of discourse in achieving communicative purposes within specific contexts. This social orientation was further extended by critical discourse analysis (CDA), which views texts as products of specific institutional and ideological contexts and seeks to uncover the intentions and power relations embedded in discourse (Fairclough, 1989). Subsequent advances extended discourse analysis beyond verbal language to incorporate visual and other semiotic resources, giving rise to multimodal discourse analysis.

Research on tourism discourse has largely drawn on the theoretical traditions outlined above. Early studies examined tourism texts as purposeful communicative acts embedded in specific cultural and ideological contexts, while more recent work has increasingly adopted critical and multimodal perspectives to capture the complexity of contemporary tourism promotion.

For example, Jabeen et al. (2022) investigate online tourism discourse in the context of Saudi Arabia's tourism modernisation by combining CDA with Visual Grammar (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). Their study demonstrates how written language and imagery jointly construct a modern and multicultural national image, revealing the ideological work performed by institutional tourism websites through both verbal and visual resources. Similarly, Du and Cheong (2025) examine sustainable tourism imaginaries on TikTok in Anhui, China, employing a multimodal discourse analytical framework to explore how short-form videos integrate language, visuals, and platform-specific affordances to shape perceptions of sustainability and local identity.

Taken together, these studies indicate that analyses of tourism discourse have progressively shifted from purely verbal texts to multimodal, digitally mediated forms of communication. As digital platforms, OTWs have become primary sites of destination promotion, and the study of tourism discourse has become closely intertwined with the study of persuasion.

From a systemic functional perspective, persuasion is essentially a social interaction that constructs and reconstructs power relations and solidarity structures, falling within the interpersonal variable (tenor) of register. Thus, the semantic dimension of persuasion is primarily manifested in interpersonal meanings, with its core lying in using language to influence others' attitudes and beliefs (Dvorak, 2016) and achieving alignment between the author and the reader (Zhang, 2016). Building on this view, Martin and White (2005, p. 95) advance the study of interpersonal meaning through AT, which shifts analytical attention from isolated grammatical forms to the contextual and rhetorical construction of evaluation in discourse. Since persuasion occurs through the semantics of evaluation, AT is believed to be the most appropriate model to analyse evaluation, anchoring the mechanism of persuasion in the interaction of three systems: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation (Dvorak, 2016).

APPRAISAL THEORY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR PERSUASION ANALYSIS

As mentioned above, the core strength of AT lies in its ability to integrate different linguistic strategies within a coherent discourse-semantic framework. This allows for a clearer understanding of how speakers express attitudes, negotiate positions, and shape meaning in persuasive communication. In recent years, the theory has gained increasing attention for its value in analysing persuasive discourse across various contexts. For example, Dvorak (2016) emphasised

the need for a sociolinguistic model in studying discourse persuasiveness and identified AT as a particularly effective approach, both theoretically and in practice. Similarly, Zhang (2016) analysed business English correspondence and found that appraisal resources play a key role in shaping interpersonal meaning. Based on this, she proposed an integrated “Appraisal–Persuasion” analytical model. Moreover, Qiu (2019) investigated the distribution patterns of appraisal resources in product launch speeches, exploring how different subsystems convey speakers’ viewpoints and stances to achieve persuasive effects, and further provided four optimisation suggestions for their use. Additionally, Jalilifar and Moradi (2019) examined the Graduation subsystem in tourism brochures and demonstrated that the frequency of these evaluative resources correlates with the brochures’ persuasive effectiveness—that is, their capacity to attract potential tourists. More recently, a growing number of scholars have adopted it to investigate persuasive strategies across diverse discourse contexts (Abrahamyan, 2024; Hamby & Jones, 2022; White, 2025).

However, while it has been increasingly applied to persuasive discourse across domains, its systematic use in the analysis of official digital tourism promotion remains limited. In particular, English-language tourism websites produced by Chinese government-affiliated institutions have received little sustained attention from an appraisal perspective. To bridge this gap, the present study adopts AT as an analytical framework to systematically examine the distribution patterns and interaction mechanisms of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation resources in the Shaanxi English-language tourism website (FIGURE 1). By uncovering how evaluative language constructs persuasive power, this study contributes to both persuasion research and tourism discourse analysis, providing new insights into persuasive strategies in digital tourism communication.

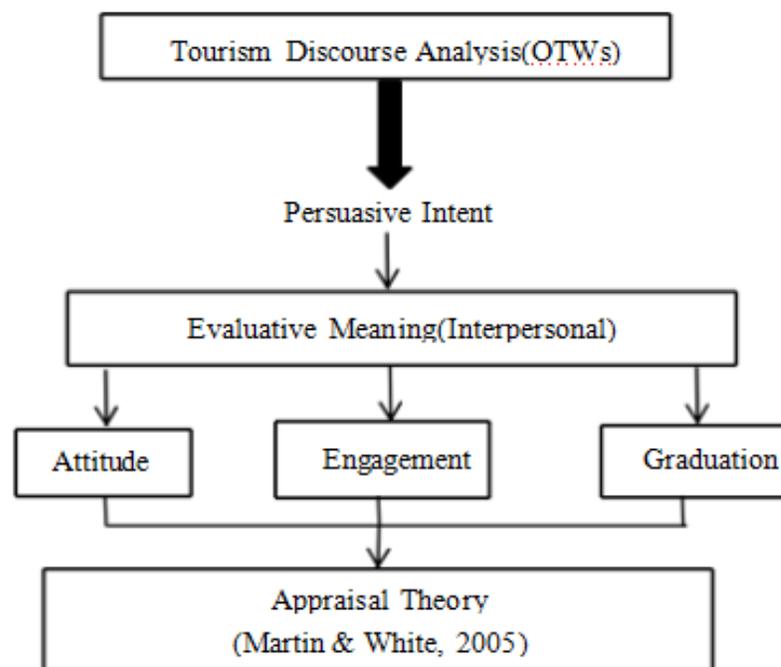


FIGURE 1. Theoretical Framework

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant, appraisal-based discourse analytical approach, supplemented by quantitative frequency analysis. To ensure both analytical rigour and interpretive reliability, the study combines manual annotation with a double-coding procedure and a staged analytical process, encompassing data extraction and annotation framework setup, appraisal-based annotation, and subsequent quantitative and qualitative interpretation.

DATA COLLECTION AND STUDY SCOPE

This study examines how the English tourism section of the Shaanxi Provincial Government Website (<http://en.shaanxi.gov.cn/tourism/>) employs evaluative resources to construct the destination's image and enhance persuasive appeal. The data were manually collected from the website's Top Experience section, which presents curated descriptions of key tourist attractions for an international audience. The dataset consists of eight English-language tourism texts, each describing a representative attraction in Shaanxi Province, including the Terracotta Warriors, Mount Huashan, Hukou Waterfall, and The Longest Day in Chang'an cultural district, totalling 4,756 words.

These texts were originally produced in English by government-affiliated institutions rather than translated from Chinese. Compared with the Chinese version of the website, which primarily focuses on administrative information, the English version places greater emphasis on promotional storytelling and reader engagement, suggesting that tourism information has been adapted for an international audience (G. Wu, 2018). This makes the selected textual data particularly suitable for examining persuasive discourse strategies in official tourism communication.

RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCEDURES

To operationalise the appraisal-based analytical framework, this study followed a structured three-phase research procedure:

Phase 1: Data Extraction and Annotation Framework Setup

This phase focused on constructing an analytically focused dataset suitable for appraisal-based discourse analysis. To ensure analytical focus, functional elements such as contact details, transportation information, and pricing were excluded. While pragmatically useful, such content could distort the identification of discourse strategies due to its limited evaluative value and repetitive structure. The resulting dataset, consisting of 4,756 words, was formatted as standardised .txt files for annotation and analysis.

The predefined annotation scheme embedded in UAM Corpus Tool 3.3 was chosen as the analytical instrument, which operationalises the three subsystems of AT: Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation. As the primary concern of this study is how tourism discourse positions readers and constructs interpersonal alignment, all three types of appraisal resources were included with differentiated units of analysis corresponding to their distinct semantic realisations. Attitude and Graduation resources were identified at the lexical and phrasal levels, as they are selectively realised through evaluative wordings and intensifying expressions. Engagement, by contrast, was analysed at the clausal or sentential level, since it is realised through propositions that position the

authorial voice in relation to other potential viewpoints. Accordingly, all sentences in the dataset were exhaustively coded for Engagement, whereas Attitude and Graduation were annotated only when explicitly realised.

Phase 2: Appraisal-Based Annotation

Following the principle of double coding (Spooren & Degand, 2010), the annotation procedure was conducted by two annotators: the author and a postgraduate researcher with a background in SFL and prior familiarity with AT. To ensure analytical consistency and interpretive reliability, the process was carried out in three stages.

In the first stage, the Terracotta Warriors description was selected as a calibration text and independently annotated by both annotators.

In the second stage, all discrepancies in the pilot annotation were systematically re-evaluated at the discourse-semantic level. Instead of viewing evaluative expressions as isolated words, this step considered their co-text and broader context. Through this process, ambiguous cases were clarified, and shared annotation principles were established until full agreement was reached.

In the third stage, the remaining texts were annotated independently by the two annotators based on the agreed guidelines. Only annotations on which both annotators concurred were retained for subsequent analysis.

This staged procedure was adopted to enhance interpretive reliability while maintaining the qualitative depth required for appraisal-based discourse analysis.

Phase 3: Quantitative Overview and Qualitative Interpretation

Following annotation, frequency distributions and patterns of appraisal resources were generated using UAM's built-in statistical functions. These quantitative results served as an empirical basis for a qualitative discourse analysis, which examined how evaluative choices function rhetorically to align readers, construct authority, and enhance persuasive appeal. Rather than treating appraisal resources as merely countable features, the qualitative analysis focused on their discursive functions, exploring how different subsystems interact to shape interpersonal meanings and guide readers' attitudes toward the destination. This integrated approach enables a systematic yet interpretive understanding of persuasion in official tourism discourse.

FINDINGS

OVERALL DISTRIBUTIONS OF APPRAISAL RESOURCES

Following independent manual annotation by two annotators and subsequent consensus discussion, the present study identified a total of 583 appraisal resources in the dataset. The overall distribution of these resources across the three appraisal subsystems is presented in FIGURE 2.

As shown in the figure, the three subsystems—Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation—are relatively balanced in proportion, accounting for 34.99%, 33.62%, and 30.19%, respectively. Among them, the Attitude system is slightly dominant, indicating that emotional construction plays a central role in tourism discourse. Within the Attitude system, Appreciation resources overwhelmingly prevail (27.10%), significantly outnumbering Judgement (4.12%) and Affect (3.77%). This bias reflects a tendency in the texts to construct the attractiveness of tourist

destinations through objective depictions of landscape features, aesthetic value, and cultural significance, rather than through moral judgment or inherent emotional appeals.

The Engagement system accounts for 33.62% of all instances, comparable to the Attitude system. Notably, monoglossic statements comprise 21.10%, suggesting a strong inclination toward constructing authority and credibility through factual assertions—e.g., “Huashan is one of China's Five Great Mountains” or “Huashan Mountain is 120 kilometres from Xi'an”. At the same time, heteroglossic resources are frequently employed to create dialogic space, with a clear preference for "expand" resources (8.75%), especially entertain-type expressions involving modal verbs and probability adverbs. These constructions foster a co-constructed meaning environment, thereby increasing reader engagement and textual affinity.

Graduation resources account for 30.19% of the total, with Force dominating overwhelmingly (29.16%). Through the strategic use of quantification (13.04%) and intensification (16.12%) resources, the discourse amplifies both the information and emotional resonance of scenic portrayals. In contrast, Focus resources are used sparingly (1.03%), indicating a preference for adjusting intensity rather than modulating category boundaries. This distribution aligns with the communicative goals of tourism discourse, which seeks to highlight prototypical features and establish clear, authoritative positioning.

In summary, the discourse of Shaanxi tourism demonstrates a systematic orchestration of all three appraisal systems, with each subsystem exhibiting distinct emphases. Taken together, these distributional patterns indicate that persuasive effects in the texts arise through the coordinated use of appraisal resources rather than from any independent persuasive mechanism. The following section, therefore, examines selected examples to illustrate how Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation operate in context to shape evaluative positioning and reader alignment.

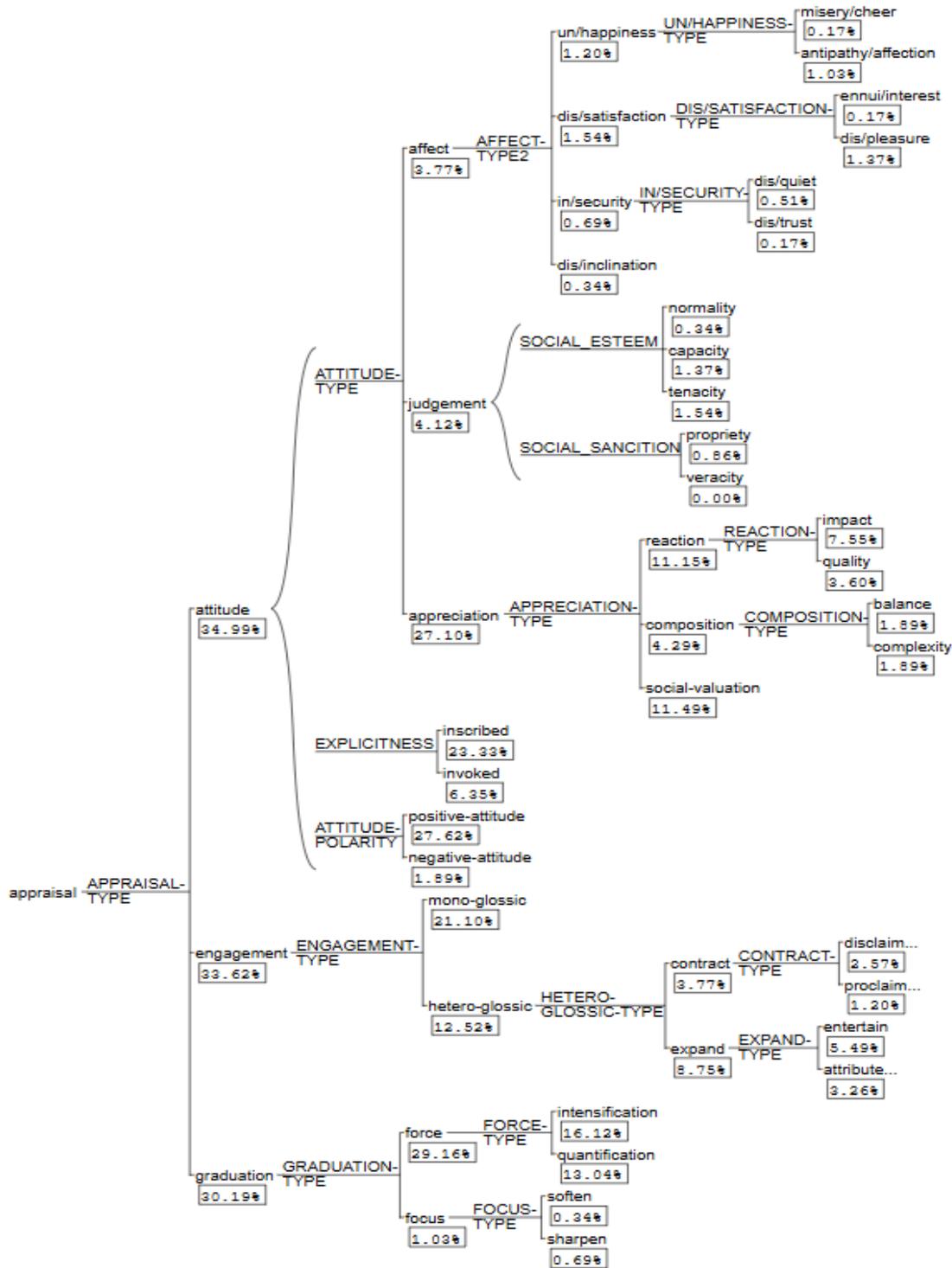


FIGURE 2. Overall Distribution of Appraisal Resources

ATTITUDE RESOURCES AND EVALUATIVE POSITIONING

As the core of AT, the Attitude system comprises three subsystems: Affect, Judgement, and Appreciation, serving to express emotional stances, social ethics, and aesthetic assessments respectively (Martin & White, 2005, p. 42). As demonstrated in TABLE 1, the frequency distribution of these resources in our data reveals distinct persuasive patterns:

TABLE 1. Distribution of Attitude Resources

System	Subsystem	Frequency	Percentage
Attitude	Affect	22	3.77%
	Judgement	24	4.12%
	Appreciation	158	27.10%
	Total	204	34.99%

The Affect system encodes emotional responses across four dimensions: happiness/unhappiness, security/insecurity, satisfaction/dissatisfaction, and inclination/disinclination (Martin & White, 2005, pp. 48-49). In this dataset, Affect resources are sparsely used, comprising only 3.77% of the total. They are mainly embedded in imagined or anticipated tourist responses constructed by the website designers, rather than the genuine emotions of real tourists. Key examples include:

1. Below is a bottomless gulf that makes visitors *shake with fear (affect-in/security-dis/quiet-positive)*.
2. East Peak is the best place to *enjoy (affect-(un) happiness-antipathy/affection-positive)* the sunrise.
3. ...and you are sure to *marvel at (affect-dis/satisfaction-dis/pleasure-positive)* the feeling of being taken back to the days of the Tang.

While 1 appears to convey negative emotion through “shake with fear,” it constructs a thrilling and adventurous atmosphere, stimulating the reader’s desire for exploration—an example of a positively framed negative emotion. In contrast, 2 and 3 employ positive expressions such as “enjoy” and “marvel at” to evoke fascination with natural beauty and historical imagination, thus reinforcing the affective basis of tourism motivation.

Judgement subsystem evaluates human behaviour and character through two domains: social esteem (normality, capacity, tenacity) and social sanction (veracity, propriety)(Martin & White, 2005, p. 53). Accounting for 4.12%, Judgement resources are predominantly found in mythological or historical narratives, where they serve to enhance narrative engagement and provide moral guidance. For instance:

4. She *carelessly* (attitude-judgement-social sanction-propriety) spilt a little jade wine down from paradise, causing a serious flood below.
5. He *gave a prompt order* (attitude-judgement-social esteem-tenacity) to Deity Juling to go down to *tame the flood* (attitude-judgement-social esteem-capacity). When Deity Juling, *full of vigour and vitality* (attitude-judgement-social esteem-capacity), descended from the clouds, he arrived at the precipitous cliff of East Peak.

In 4, the adverb “carelessly” expresses a negative moral evaluation of the Queen Mother of the West, emphasising the gravity of her actions. While in 5, presents a positive portrayal of the Jade Emperor and Deity Juling through the use of “prompt,” “tame the flood,” and “full of vigour and vitality,” highlighting their decisiveness (tenacity) and extraordinary capabilities (capacity). Such narrative strategies can effectively enhance the mythic appeal of the text and reinforce readers’ alignment with cultural authority and legitimacy.

Appreciation evaluates “things” and natural phenomena, typically within an aesthetic domain. As the predominant attitude resource (27.10%), Appreciation operates through three subcategories: Reaction (linked to affect – e.g., “it grabs me,” “I want it”), Composition (linked to perception – e.g., balance, complexity), and Valuation (linked to cognition – e.g., significance, worth) (Martin & White, 2005, p. 57). A detailed distribution of its subsystem is shown in TABLE 2.

TABLE 2. Distribution of Appreciation Resources

System	Subsystem	Frequency	Percentage
Appreciation	Reaction	65	11.15%
	Composition	25	4.29%
	Valuation	67	11.49%
Total		158	27.1%

As shown in the table, the Valuation and Reaction resources are most frequently used, aiming to evoke aesthetic resonance and cultural appreciation in readers—thus indirectly guiding their tourism decisions. The following four sentences can show how the resources exert influence on the audience.

6. Nowadays, the Tang Dynasty Music and Dance Show is treasured as *a national art* (Attitude-Appreciation-Valuation-inscribe).
7. Guangren Temple, located in the north-west City Wall of Xi'an, is the only *Tibetan Buddhist monastery* (attitude-Appreciation-Valuation-inscribe) in Shaanxi Province.
8. It is the only *magnificent* (Attitude-Appreciation-reaction-impact) yellow waterfall in the world, and the second biggest waterfall in China after Huangguoshu Waterfall.
9. ...you still can enjoy the *vast and gorgeous* (Attitude-Appreciation-reaction-quality) yellow ocean of mist-covered water.

The first two examples rely on valuation to establish cultural authority and symbolic legitimacy. More specifically, 6 elevates the performance to a symbol of national cultural heritage through the expression “treasured as a national art,” endowing it with high cultural value and evoking a sense of collective identity; while the uniqueness of “the only Tibetan Buddhist monastery” in 7 combines religious and regional distinctiveness to appeal to tourists seeking cultural authenticity. In 8 and 9, adjectives such as “magnificent”, “vast” and “gorgeous” are employed to amplify the visual spectacle of the landscape, thus invoking sensory impact and spatial grandeur. These strategies can help highlight the uniqueness and emotional awe, reinforcing both the desirability and memorability of the destination.

While less frequent, Composition resources are crucial in shaping the destination image. Such resources often emphasise structural sophistication, organisational logic, or customisation. For instance, “you can get your own warrior statue “personalised with your own face” (attitude-

appreciation-composition-balance). The word “personalised” displays the souvenir’s uniqueness and interactive value, at the same time reflecting its design flexibility and creative potential, shifting it from a generic product to a culturally meaningful experience. Likewise, the Tang Dynasty Music and Dance Show is promoted as being “delicately designed” (attitude-appreciation-composition-complexity) by many Tang history experts, scholars, and artists, highlighting the role of craftsmanship and academic input in reinforcing the show's cultural authenticity and credibility.

In sum, the Attitude system in this dataset serves multiple persuasive functions through layered strategies: Affect resources forge emotional resonance, Judgement resources sanctify cultural authority, and Appreciation resources engineer aesthetic legitimacy. Particularly, Appreciation's dominance synthesises sensory immediacy (“magnificent”), cultural valuation (“national art”), and structural ingenuity (“personalised”) to construct layered destination identities.

ENGAGEMENT RESOURCES AND DIALOGIC ALIGNMENT

Engagement system concerns how the writer positions themselves concerning alternative viewpoints, and how dialogic space is either opened up or compressed. It can be categorised into monogloss (single-voiced assertions excluding other voices or perspectives) and heterogloss (multi-voiced discourse that opens dialogic space) modes. Heteroglossic resources can be further subdivided into dialogic expansion and dialogic contraction. The former enlarges the dialogic space by entertaining multiple voices or referencing external sources, realised through entertain (e.g., “might” “can” “possibly” “it seems”) and attribute (e.g., “it is said” “the report states”, “according to”) resources. The latter, on the other hand, narrows the dialogic space by affirming the authorial stance and suppressing alternatives, primarily realised through disclaim (e.g., “not” “although”) and proclaim (e.g., “undeniably” “of course”) mechanisms.

Statistical analysis reveals a predominance of monoglossic resources (TABLE 3), which are strategically deployed to present objective geographical or historical facts. Examples such as “Huashan Mountain is one of the Five Mountains in China, famous for its steepness,” and “West Peak has very high cliffs standing erect with an altitude of 2,086.6 meters (6,845 feet),” exemplify this pattern. These statements do not acknowledge alternative views or interpretive space, functioning as authoritative monoglossic proclamations.

TABLE 3. Engagement

System	Subsystem	Frequency	Percentage
Engagement	Monogloss	123	21.1%
	Heterogloss	73	12.52%
Total		196	33.62%

TABLE 4. Distribution of Hetrogloss

System	Subsystem		Frequency	Percentage	
Hetrogloss	Contract	disclaim	deny	5	0.86%
			counter	10	1.72%
		proclaim	concur	4	0.69%
			pronounce	2	0.34%
			endorse	1	0.17%
	Expand	entertain		32	5.49%
		attribute	acknowledge	19	3.26%
			distance	0	0

Despite the predominance of monoglossic resources, a notable proportion of heteroglossic resources are present. As shown in TABLE 4, dialogic expansion via entertain and attribute constitutes the primary strategy, aiming to introduce possibilities or external voices that create a more open and dialogic communicative stance; while dialogic contraction through disclaim and proclaim serves to delimit or correct reader assumptions, thereby enhancing the persuasive strength of the discourse. The function of heteroglossic resources can be revealed in the following sentences:

10. You *can* (heterogloss-expansion-entertain) take photographs, *although* (Heterogloss-contraction-disclaim-counter) signs *forbid using* (heterogloss-contraction-disclaim-deny) flash photography (widely ignored) or tripods (also ignored by some).
11. *It is said that* (heterogloss-expansion-attribute-acknowledge) in old days, foreign diplomatic envoys and merchants lived here, then they married and had children...
12. *The legend goes that* (heterogloss-expand-attribute-acknowledge) on March 3rd of the In the Lunar Calendar, a torrential flood destroyed the villages within the Huashan Mountain area.

Sentence 10 opens with the modal “you can”, a typical entertaining resource that suggests possibility and invites reader involvement, aligning with a dialogically expansive stance. The use of “can” encourages the reader to imagine themselves as participants in the scene, fostering experiential engagement. However, the contrastive conjunction “although” signals the insertion of a countering voice, narrowing the dialogic space by introducing institutional constraints on behaviour—namely, the prohibition against flash photography. The clause “signs forbid using flash photography” further enacts a denial, directly negating a potential behaviour, thus asserting a strong institutional stance. Notably, the subsequent phrases—“widely ignored” and “also ignored by some”—soften the force of the prohibition, implying pragmatic leniency or enforcement gaps. This layered use of Engagement resources achieves a nuanced rhetorical effect: while maintaining an authoritative tone, it mitigates resistance by subtly acknowledging common practices, thereby enhancing the text’s persuasive appeal.

Different from 10, the writers employ attribution to external sources both in 11 and 12—thereby distancing themselves from direct endorsement of the information. This strategy blurs the boundary between subjective evaluation and objective narration, allowing room for cultural storytelling without committing to factual verification. It is particularly effective in the context of mythological or folkloric content, where direct authorial assertion might undermine the discursive tone or audience expectations. By transferring evaluative responsibility to an unspecified collective voice, the author enhances the narrative richness while maintaining a stance of neutrality.

GRADUATION RESOURCES AND EVALUATIVE INTENSIFICATION

As the center of the appraisal system, the graduation system functions as a scaling mechanism, enabling speakers to amplify or diminish the intensity of evaluative meanings. It modulates evaluative intensity through Force (dealing with intensification of quality or process and quantification scaling Number, Mass, and Extent) and Focus (sharpening the semantic degree or softening presenters' value positions) (Martin & White, 2005, p. 137). In this dataset, Graduation resources are widely employed, with Force dominating in frequency (see TABLE 5), primarily to enhance visual impact, evoke historical depth, and project cultural authority. The following sentences can illustrate how such resources function effectively within the discourse:

TABLE 5. Distribution of Graduation

System	subsystem	frequency	percentage
Graduation	force	intensification	94 16.12%
		quantification	76 13.04%
	focus	sharpen	4 0.69%
		soften	2 0.34%

13. The Xi'an City Wall of the Ming Dynasty is *the biggest* (force-intensification-upscale) ancient city wall that has been preserved *the most intact* (force-intensification-upscale) in China.
14. West Peak has *very* (force- intensification-upscale) high cliffs standing erect with an altitude of 2,086.6 meters (6,845 feet)(force-Quantification-number)
15. The Mountain is also home to *several* (force-Quantification-number) influential Taoist temples, where *many*(force-Quantification-number) emperors of *past dynasties* (quantification -extent-time) took part in Taoist activities and sacrifices to the god of the mountain.

The above three examples employ both intensification and quantification resources of Force to amplify evaluative meanings, thereby enhancing the perceptual impact and cultural authority within the discourse. In 13, the use of “biggest” and “most intact” represents classic cases of maximal intensification, highlighting the unparalleled scale and preservation of the Xi'an City Wall. In 14, the phrase “very high cliffs” combined with the precise figure “2,086.6 meters” integrates subjective intensity with objective measurement, enabling readers to simultaneously visualise the grandeur and perceive the geographical authenticity of the site. Sentence 15 utilises expressions such as “several”, “many”, and “past dynasties” to construct a sense of temporal and quantitative depth. These quantification resources emphasise the site's enduring significance in Taoist traditions and imperial rituals, thus aligning with visitors' expectations for historical depth and religious authenticity.

Although less frequent compared with Force, Focus resources function as strategic highlights, drawing attention to key propositions and amplifying emotional engagement at critical points in the discourse. For instance, in the introduction of Huashan Mountain, the text states : “Almost (focus-softening) halfway up the North Peak trees are luxuriantly green...” Here, “almost” can help soften the spatial boundary and avoid absolute positioning, creating a plausible but flexible mental image, thus reducing potential misinterpretation and aligning expectations with experience. Similarly, the snacks in the Muslim Quarter were described as “real (focus-sharpening) enjoyment for you to eat it on a hot summer’s day”. In this case, “real” sharpens the affective boundary, affirming the authenticity of the emotional experience.

In summary, the graduation system operates through a tripartite mechanism —intensity modulation, semantic calibration, and cognitive guidance—to optimise persuasive efficacy in this tourism discourse. Force resources amplify scenic grandeur, historical profundity, and cultural significance, constructing an authoritative image while enhancing affective appeal. Conversely, Focus resources, though limited, strategically manipulate evaluative boundaries: semantic softening accommodates interpretive flexibility while sharpening intensifies experiential authenticity, thereby elevating textual credibility and receptivity. Through their synergistic interplay, Graduation can dynamically modulate evaluative intensity and semantic precision, maximising discursive control over tourist perceptions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how official tourism websites strategically deploy evaluative language to construct destination images and achieve persuasive effects. By adopting an appraisal-based discourse analytical approach, the study reveals that evaluative language in official tourism websites constructs destination images through institutional discourse strategies rather than overt emotional expression or dialogic interaction. It also reveals that persuasion in this context emerges primarily from the controlled orchestration of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation resources.

Within the Attitude system, the overwhelming dominance of Appreciation indicates a strong preference for aesthetic, cultural, and historical valuation over explicit emotional expression or moral judgment. In contrast, Affect and Judgement resources are markedly underused, particularly those capturing tourists' emotional responses, resulting in a discourse tone that tends to be detached and overly formal. This finding aligns with earlier appraisal-based studies of tourism discourse. For instance, G. Wu (2018), in a comparative appraisal analysis of tourism texts on Hangzhou and London from a paradigmatic lexical perspective, found that Appreciation resources overwhelmingly outnumbered Judgement and Affect, with the latter being virtually absent, suggesting a systematic avoidance of overt emotion and personal evaluation. Similarly, Isti'anah (2020) reports that Appreciation was the only Attitude category identified in destination highlights on the official Indonesian tourism website, where evaluative meanings were strategically confined to positive portrayals of places rather than people or emotions. Taken together, these findings suggest that official tourism websites tend to privilege aesthetic and cultural valuation as a low-risk persuasive strategy, reinforcing positive destination images while maintaining an impersonal and authoritative tone.

This tone is further reinforced at the level of dialogic positioning through the Engagement system, where monoglossic assertions predominate and enact an institutional voice that prioritises factual presentation and discursive control over dialogic negotiation. By presenting information as taken-for-granted and indisputable, monoglossic statements consolidate the authority already established through the extensive use of Appreciation resources, thereby projecting credibility and informational reliability. Although heteroglossic resources—particularly entertain and attribute—are employed to introduce dialogic openness, their relatively low frequency limits opportunities for reader alignment and interactive positioning.

Within the Graduation system, Force functions as the dominant mechanism of intensification, frequently realised through superlatives, quantifiers, and amplifiers that heighten visual salience and cultural prominence. These resources work in tandem with monoglossic assertions to amplify authoritative claims and foreground prototypical destination features. Focus resources, though comparatively sparse, play a complementary role by sharpening or softening evaluative boundaries at critical points, guiding interpretation while maintaining overall semantic stability and textual coherence.

Theoretically, this research extends the Appraisal framework to Chinese tourism discourse, enriching cross-cultural understandings of evaluative mechanisms in persuasive genres. It provides systemic-functional evidence for how language orchestrates affective, ethical, and aesthetic appeals. Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for tourism copywriting and cultural communication: destination promotion could strategically integrate emotional resonance, rational validation, and cultural identity into a tripartite discursive framework, optimising precision and impact in image construction.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. Firstly, the data is confined to a single website, with a relatively limited sample size and regional scope. Future research could expand the dataset to include multiple regions and multilingual platforms to increase generalizability. Secondly, the analysis focuses primarily on verbal texts, without incorporating multimodal elements such as images or videos, which also play a significant role in persuasive tourism discourse. Further studies could explore the integration of other semantic systems in SFL (e.g., Mood, Modality) to uncover interpersonal dynamics, or adopt reader-response approaches to assess how evaluative resources influence audience perception and engagement-bridging linguistic analysis with communication practice.

REFERENCES

- Abrahamyan, S. (2024). Evaluation as means of persuasion in English political discourse. *Foreign Languages for Special Purposes*, 23-44.
- Carroll, J. A., & Wilson, E. E. (2012). *Four by Four: Practical Methods for Writing Persuasively*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.
- Del Vasto-Terrientes, L., Fernández-Cavia, J., Huertas, A., Moreno, A., & Valls, A. (2015). Official tourist destination websites: Hierarchical analysis and assessment with ELECTRE-III-H. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 15, 16-28.
- Doolin, B., Burgess, L., & Cooper, J. (2002). Evaluating the use of the Web for tourism marketing: a case study from New Zealand. *Tourism Management*, 23(5), 557-561.
- Du, S., & Cheong, C. Y. M. (2025). Beyond the scenic view: a multimodal discourse analysis of sustainable tourism imaginaries on TikTok in Anhui, China. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12(1), 1-14.
- Dvorak, J. D. (2016). "Prodding with prosody": Persuasion and social influence through the lens of appraisal theory. *Biblical and Ancient Greek Linguistics, Volume 4*, 4, 85.
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. Longman.
- Hamby, A., & Jones, N. (2022). The effect of affect: An appraisal theory perspective on emotional engagement in narrative persuasion. *Journal of Advertising*, 51(1), 116-131.
- Hood, S. (2006). The persuasive power of prosodies: Radiating values in academic writing. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 5(1), 37-49.
- Hunston, S., & Thompson, G. (2000). *Evaluation in text: Authorial stance and the construction of discourse: Authorial stance and the construction of discourse*. Oxford University Press, UK.
- Isti'anah, A. (2020). (Re) evaluating language attitudes on Indonesian tourism website: A study on ecolinguistics. *Studies in English Language and Education*, 7(2), 622-641.
- Istianah, A., & Suhandano, S. (2022). Appraisal patterns used on the kalimantan tourism website: An ecolinguistics perspective. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 9(1), 2146928.
- Jabeen, I., Hameed, A., & Afzal, N. (2022). The wake of modernistic tourism in the kingdom: a multimodal analysis of online discourse. *Journal of Education Culture and Society*, 13(1), 385-401.
- Jalilifar, A., & Moradi, Y. (2019). Tourism discourse revisited: An analysis of evaluative strategies in tourist brochures from a systemic functional linguistics perspective. *Journal of English Studies*(17), 211-232.
- Kress, G., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. Routledge.
- Lakoff, R. T. (1982). Persuasive discourse and ordinary conversation, with examples from advertising. *Analyzing discourse: Text and talk*, 25-42.
- Lee, W., & Gretzel, U. (2012). Designing persuasive destination websites: A mental imagery processing perspective. *Tourism Management*, 33(5), 1270-1280. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2011.10.012>
- Maci, S. M. (2013). *Tourism discourse: Professional, promotional and digital voices* (Vol. 11). Ecig.
- Manca, E. (2016). Official Tourist Websites and the Cultural Communication Grammar model: analysing language, visuals, and cultural features. *Cultus*, 9(1), 2-22.
- Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. (2005). *The language of evaluation* (Vol. 2). Springer.
- McCarthy, M. (1991). *Discourse analysis for language teachers*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mitto. (2024). *Omnichannel Communications for the Hospitality and Travel Industry: Unlocking Better Customer Experiences*. Retrieved April 2, 2025 from <https://mitto.ch/omnichannel-for-travel-industry-cx/>

- Perloff, R. M. (2017). *The dynamics of persuasion: Communication and attitudes in the 21st century*. Routledge.
- Qiu, C. (2019). *On Persuasion in Product Launch Presentations of Apple and Samsung under the Guidance of Appraisal Theory [Unpublished Mater thesis]* Southwestern University of Finance and Economics.].
- Spooren, W., & Degand, L. (2010). Coding coherence relations: Reliability and validity. *Corpus Linguistics & Linguistic Theory*, 6(2).
- White, P. R. (2025). Appraisal theory and the analysis of point of view in news and views journalism—unpacking journalistic “persuasiveness”. *Language & Communication*, 100, 95-107.
- Wu, G. (2018). Official websites as a tourism marketing medium: A contrastive analysis from the perspective of appraisal theory. *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management*, 10, 164-171.
- Wu, H., Bakar, K. B. A., Jaludin, A. B., & Awal, N. M. (2025). Analysis of Attitudinal Resources in China-Related News in The Star Online. *3L: Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 31(1), 15-30.
- Zakhaova, G. (2020). Search for persuasive strategies in tourism advertising discourse. *Journal of Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University*, 7(3), 7-18.
- Zhang, J. (2016). *A Study On APPRAISAL And Its Persuasive Function In Business English Correspondence [Doctoral dissertation, Shanghai Jiao Tong University]* <https://link.cnki.net/doi/10.27307/d.cnki.gsjtu.2016.003073>