

# DIALOGUE OR MONOLOGUE: A STUDY ON PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN URBAN IMAGE COMMUNICATION BASED ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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**Abstract:** The dialogue feature of social media has made it not only a vehicle for communicating the image of a city, but also the rising power of the public, opening new opportunities for the public to work with government agencies to promote the communication of a city's image. As the two main bodies of urban image communication, the communication between the public and government agencies through social media is strengthening. But does this active participation form a dialogue mechanism with government agencies and jointly promote the development of urban image communication, or is it just the public's monologue? Focusing on this issue, this study attempts to understand the impact of citizens' social media participation on the relationship between the subjects of urban image communication, and explores the mechanism for establishing a cooperative dialogue between the two subjects. This study mainly uses the qualitative research method of in-depth interview, combined with the observation method and using the city of Suzhou in Anhui Province as a case study. Based on interviews with public and government new media operators and managers in Suzhou and observations of their social media interactions, we found that the interactive dialogue between the public and government agencies is more convenient and in-depth than in the traditional media period, but no effective dialogue mechanism has been formed, public participation has not been fully valued by the government, and there is a problem of monologue. This study provides new ideas for the formation of a dialogue mechanism between the public and the government in city image communication, and explores the path to solve the monologue dilemma of public participation, to promote the improvement of the effectiveness of city image communication under communication participation and help urban development.

**Keywords:** public participation, government agency, social media, dialogue mechanism, city image communication

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## Introduction

In the context of the development of new media technologies, China's urban structure and social relations are constantly being reshaped, and city managers are constantly enhancing soft power such as city image building and cultural development, while improving hard power (Priporas et al., 2020; Sevin, 2016). A good city image not only enhances the internal and external competitiveness of a city, but also

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influences the future development of the city and the country, making it an important component of the soft power of cities (Zhou & Wang, 2014). The concept of "urban image" was proposed by American scholar Lynch (1964), who pointed out that city image is the impression and feeling given by a city to people, and it is a comprehensive expression of the city from inside to outside, covering economic, political, cultural, ecological civilization, historical heritage, social order, architectural features and other aspects of the city.

Urban image communication presents all aspects of social, political, economic and cultural development and is a public domain. The process of urban image communication is a process of interactive communication between the state and citizens, forming a consensus on the city and promoting its development. In China, the emergence of short videos such as DouYin has opened up new opportunities for the transformation of city image communication. The emergence of self-media platforms, such as DouYin, has changed the single pattern of government-led planning, traditional mainstream media dissemination and passive public acceptance of city image communication (Xu, J., 2020). In the digital era, the public has chosen the Internet as a way to record urban life, participate in public life, and express their interests, while the online virtual space also fulfils citizens' desire to participate and possesses the possibility of equal dialogue and rational negotiation between citizens and forces such as the government and companies, it embodies the core characteristics of the 'public sphere', such as equality and openness, free discussion, rational criticism, concern for the general interest, and consensus (Wei & Cui, 2011). The public uses the self-media platform to produce and export their understanding of the city, and the public's subject position in the communication of the city's image is truly manifested, and the interaction between the public and the government influences the pattern and effect of the communication of the city's image. Therefore, the dialogue between the public and the government needs to build a good order of public discussion in the online society, and the spirit of dialogue and awareness of rules needs to be strongly promoted. Xu, X. (2022) points out that:

“In the age of social media, it is important to move from monologue to communication, to replace confrontation with dialogue, and to resolve disputes in a peaceful manner. Following the principles of dialogue, such as freedom, equality, truthfulness, honesty, openness and listening, we should accept and respect the differences in views and positions between different classes, seek understanding and mutual trust, and conduct a dialogue that seeks common ground while reserving differences. This is a step-by-step process and a long way to go.”

Previous studies on public social media participation have theoretically explored the connotation, value, significance, obstacles, dilemmas and limitations of online participation, as well as the development conditions and prospects of online participation, the relationship between online participation and government innovation and government decision-making, the mechanisms and paths of online participation, etc.; at the practical level, some forms of online participation have been examined, such as online political questioning and online contribution of ideas and suggestions, etc. (Deng, 2022; Dang

& Wang, 2021). The main research focuses on the relationship between public online participation and government decision-making. Some scholars have used research data from Tianjin, Wuhan and Chongqing as research samples to analyse the impact of participation interaction and government response on urban public trust in government, and to examine the mediating role of public satisfaction and the moderating role of public demand degree, concluding that participation interaction and government response have a significant positive impact on urban public trust in government (Mao & Zhu, 2019). The review of the literature reveals that relevant studies have emphasized the new direction and trend of the public moving from passive information acquisition to active participation, as well as the importance of two-way interaction between the government and the public.

In terms of research on urban image communication, the conversational nature of social media makes it not only a vehicle for communicating city images, but also brings new opportunities for the public to collaborate with government agencies to promote city image communication. City-related UGC content posted by the public has become an important force in the dissemination of city images, and this has been the consensus of many researchers (Sun, 2020; Han et al., 2021; Liu, 2021). With the empowerment of technology, communication between the public and government agencies, as the two subjects of city image communication, is being enhanced through social media (Wang, X., 2017; Wang, H., 2013). Unlike existing studies based mainly on influencing democratic government decisions, the current situation of city image communication is that the public can independently publish information related to city image without being involved in the practices or media activities of government agencies, and this suggests that whether and how the government proactively engages with the public and values public participation has become an important issue.

So, does the active participation of the public form a dialogue mechanism with government agencies to jointly promote the development of city image communication, or is it merely a monologue of the public. These questions have not yet received the attention of researchers. We focus our research on whether there is a change in the interactive dialogue between the public and government agencies in city image communication? Has the role of the public in city image communication been fully explored by government agencies, or is it just a self-talking monologue? Is there an effective mechanism for dialogue between the two? By exploring these questions, an attempt is made to explore the mechanism of establishing a cooperative dialogue between citizens' social media participation and government agencies' urban image communication.

## Materials and Methods

The aim of this study is to gain insight into the use of social media communication by government agencies and the public and to examine the possibilities of establishing a dialogue mechanism. The article attempts to grasp the motivation of the research subjects and analyse their essential characteristics to grasp the subjective meaning. Therefore, this study collected first-hand information through in-depth interviews and observational methods with individual public self-publishers, managers of government agencies' self-media, and mainstream media people. The study takes the city of Suzhou in Anhui Province as a case study and uses a phenomenological research method (Babbie, 2013; Charmaz, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017) of qualitative research methods to dig deeper into the data information. Researchers were interested in learning more about the various shared experiences of this phenomenon from the individuals involved. Qualitative research studies are precisely "the activity of gaining an interpretive understanding of their behaviour and constructing meaning through interaction with the research subject" (Chen, 2000). Phenomenological methods usually require the qualitative process of induction to obtain 'deep' knowledge and perspectives, and to express them from the researcher's perspective (Cui, 2010), reflecting the real state of city image communication between the government and the public in the social media environment. Epistemologically, the phenomenological approach is based on the paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and the research emphasises the importance of presenting and interpreting the views of the interviewees (Xu, H., 2008; Gadamer, 2013b). As such, it helps to provide insight into people's intentions and remove the confusion of assumptions and common sense, and helps to provide some theoretical contributions to this study.

### *Data collation*

After identifying the research topic and designing a semi-structured interview outline around it, the researcher interviewed a total of 18 interviewees in Suzhou Anhui Province, of these, 10 were self-mediators and 8 were media or government agency new media operators and managers, with the information on the interviewees shown in Table 1.

*Table 1: Information of Interviewees*

Code	Gender	City image communication role	Identity
1	Male	self-mediators	University student
2	Female	self-mediators	University student
3	Male	self-mediators	Software engineer
4	Female	Government new media operator	New media editor
5	Male	Government new media manager	Civil Servant
6	Female	Media Practitioner	Journalist
7	Male	Government new media manager	Civil Servant
8	Male	self-mediators	Civil Servant

9	Female	Media Practitioner	Journalist
10	Male	Media Practitioner	Presenter
11	Female	Media Practitioner	Presenter
12	Male	self-mediators	Citizen
13	Male	Government new media manager	TV Choreographer
14	Male	self-mediators	Citizen
15	Male	self-mediators	Teacher
16	Female	self-mediators	Teacher
17	Female	self-mediators	University student
18	Male	self-mediators	Civil Servant

The interviewer flexibly adjusted the questioning style and the order of questions according to the actual situation at the time of the interview, and developed personalised follow-up questions according to the background of the interviewees. Due to the impact of the epidemic, in-depth interviews were conducted using a combination of face-to-face interviews and video interviews, with data recorded by audio, video or transcript. At the same time, the researchers used the observation method to observe the interaction behaviour of self-publishers and government agency users on the Douyin platform, recording their message posting and interaction to analyse their interaction status.

### ***Data analysis***

In terms of overall interviews, the researcher contacted and interviewed as many of the 18 interviewees as possible, reaching saturation of data collected at the 15th interviewee. This was a conclusion based on a combination of data saturation as well as class saturation. In the interviews, the researchers kept repeating what was obtained from listening to and reading the interviews (Grady, 1998; Jackson et al., 2015), forming the interview transcript.

Once the data collection was complete, the researchers numbered all observation and interview subjects in order and transcribed and corrected the audio and video interview data in a timely manner, and compiled the observation data, paying attention to memo writing in the process to promote a deeper understanding of the data obtained. Based on the format of the transcription, and checked and revised by both authors to ensure correct machine transcription, the in-depth interview data amounted to over 200 A4-sized pages.

All textual material was then imported into the qualitative analysis software NVivo12 for coding, which followed a six-step approach to thematic analysis (Virginia & Victoria, 2006), namely familiarising with the material, initial coding, finding themes, checking themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting results. Coding was agreed between the two authors during consultation, with the first round of coding using open-ended coding to derive themes relevant to the research objectives, and subsequent rounds of coding further analysing themes for fit and redundancy until a clear definition was reached.

In the data analysis, coding matrix was generated and text analysis for the purpose of triangulation was applied. After the range of codes or themes could be largely determined, only content that duplicated existing codes or themes was uncovered from the newly collected data, no new codes or themes emerged, and the codebook has become relatively stable (Urquhart, 2013; Hennink et al., 2017b).

The process from data encoding to the formation of themes can be divided into three stages: The first step was to code the acquired data to obtain initial categories of data. The coding process remains open to the possibilities in any data, extracting all meaningful text in its entirety. At this stage, the researcher used the interview questions as an outline to sort and extract interview and observation data and related information on a per-respondent basis, and the researchers coded the acquired data and memos in Nvivo to form "nodes". The initial codes were coded into a master category based on the research questions, with a large number of repetitive codes with similar semantics being merged, meaningful codes being analysed and redundant information being removed. Some nodes were renamed to achieve clean and ordered nodes to obtain the initial codes.

Secondly, the researchers created sub-themes based on the research questions and objectives. Based on this, the codes were again heavily aggregated and filtered, with codes pointing to the same class grouped together, and codes that had little to do with the topic or were more obviously reflective of social desirability removed to create a list of sub-themes. In this process, the researchers identified codes that apply to a sufficient number of respondents based on changes in codes and categories, looking for trends and discovering where the findings are heading.

Thirdly, further categorisation was done to form themes that begin to outline the content and form of the initial analysis through focused coding. Sub-themes were aggregated to obtain core themes.

The findings presented in this paper are based on a verbatim analysis of interview data from participants as well as observational data and information obtained by the researchers, and also rely on the coding process described above. In summary, the researchers identified and categorised important statements from all the data obtained, reflecting the research claims. At this stage, the categories were tracked against the research questions posed, continually coded and eventually developed into core themes.

## **Results and Discussion**

The presentation of the results is based on the themes that emerged from the data analysis. The researchers returned to the interviews with research questions to refine the theory and the cycle continued until a relatively complete theoretical framework was developed. Based on this, the main findings of this study are the following.

**Firstly**, the important role of city image communication for urban development and the dominant role of government agencies in city image communication are recognised.

The results of the data show that both the public and managers of government agencies or media operators believe that city image communication plays an important role in raising the visibility of cities, promoting socio-economic and cultural development, and attracting external resources and tourists. They believe that city image communication "can expand a city's visibility and present its characteristics to a wider audience", "create a city's unique IP", "promote the cultural progress of the city and promote social development ". It can "bring a city to life and give it its own name card"; it can "attract more external resources and customers to the city"; and it can "contribute to the development of the city's economy". This suggests that the public and the government share a common perception of the value of communicating the city's image and raising its visibility, and therefore provides a basis for interaction and dialogue between the two.

With regard to the role of government agencies in city image communication, the interviewees believe that the government is still in a dominant position, describing government agencies as "dominant and leading" and "central, it has a certain authority. The role and path of the government in the communication of city image is far-reaching," "it has a supervisory and regulatory role," "the role of gatekeeper," "the guide and enabler ". Regarding the role of government agencies in city image communication in the social media environment, respondents believe that "government agencies are more involved in urban image communication for the public" and "the government guides the public to participate in city image communication, and the public cooperates with the government to communicate the urban image". Government agencies are the "decision makers" in the positioning of the city's image, which influences the effectiveness of the communication of the city's image.

It is worth noting that the role of government agencies as 'communicators' and 'interlocutors' did not enter the interviewees' perceptions, which is not very different from the perceptions of the role of government agencies in urban image communication during the traditional media period (Mo, 2013; Pan, 2012).

**Secondly**, the public is more likely to engage with city image communication, and interaction between the public and government agencies has increased in the age of social media.

In the communication of urban image, the government and the public are "indispensable to each other". According to the social media operators of government agencies interviewed, Some respondents believe that "the people should be the direct embodiment of the city's image" and "the source of the city's spirit and image"; "the public should play the main role in the process of promoting the city's image to the outside world". Respondents who are involved in city image communication believe that public

communication about the city's food and beauty can "attract people (local people) to travel" and also attract people from neighbouring cities to "go to the city and learn about the city's culture".

In the age of social media, it is easier and more widespread for the public to participate in the communication of the city's image. The self-publishers interviewed have accounts on multiple platforms such as Weibo, DouYin and Toutiao, as well as accounts on DouYin only, and have been operating for three years to a few months. The first reason for their participation in the dissemination of the city's image was that they wanted to "record the development of Suzhou in their own way, and at the same time let more people know about Suzhou in a small way", while some of the interviewees said they did it mainly out of "their own hobby". The content is mainly a casual record of life, and also conveys positive energy, such as the call for people to "bring a good mask" in response to the epidemic, or the "new buses running in Suzhou" in Suzhou. More often than not, the content is dedicated to the city's landscape, representative places to visit in all seasons, tourist attractions, food, etc.

The public is much more likely to connect with government agencies. Respondents felt that the 'propaganda films' used to communicate the government's image of the city during the traditional media period, in which government agencies carried out 'propaganda', could guide the public in specific behaviours as residents, but were a kind of 'indoctrination I say ". The use of social media platforms has increased the chances of contact between government agencies and the public, with " DouYin topic competitions, topic showcases, and some online short video competitions, which are more interactive and participatory for the public", and "the connection between government agencies and the public has become closer".

Combined with the use of management experience, the interviewees believe that the communication of the urban image of government agencies "has enriched the content and form of communication compared to the traditional media stage, and has expanded the degree and scope of democracy in the public's exposure to the government's image".

"Like our platform will post some job information, the public if they follow our account, they can access this information directly from our platform". (Code 4)

"The content we post is very much commented on by the public. The public is very active and this brings out the wisdom among the public to the fullest". (Code 5\11)

The public, as self-publishers, also believe that their work is "adopted" by new media operators of government agencies with the support of social media, and that "the interaction and dialogue between government agencies and the public is progressing, the government is more responsive, and there are many channels for the public's voices to be heard." "In contrast to the past, the areas of cooperation are now broader, the content is more in-depth and the forms are becoming more diverse".

From the interviews, it can be seen that the traditional media period, when the public received the image of the city more passively through government propaganda and their opinions and suggestions on the communication of the city's image were not easily 'heard' (Xu, N., 2012), has changed significantly. The emergence of social media platforms such as Douyin, WeChat and Weibo has increased the rate and scope of information dissemination and provided the possibility of interaction and dialogue between subjects and audiences (Clerc, L., 2015), and the two main actors of urban image communication have also become more interactive and communicative on social media, with a significant increase in the participation of the public of urban image communication.

**Thirdly**, the extensive participation of the public and the increased interaction with government agencies has not changed the monologue of their participation through social media platforms.

According to Kent and Taylor (1998), the quality of dialogue should be assessed both in terms of the technology and design of mediated dialogue, but also in terms of measuring the 'quality' of dialogue from the public's perspective. According to dialogue theory, the possession of social media accounts by government agencies does not naturally imply effective 'government-public dialogue'. "Dialogue" is not just a "back-and-forth" form of communication, and the "two-way flow" of information is not necessarily dialogical. Only when the participants are genuinely concerned for each other's well-being, open to dissent and willing to negotiate their own views can the interaction be called "dialogic interactions" (Kent & Taylor, 1998). The data reflect that public participation in the communication of city images has not completely changed their monolingual status.

The public perceived the effectiveness of personal social platforms in communicating city images as having but little effect. They mentioned that the followers of their accounts are mainly from Anhui province, such as Suzhou, but also include locals living in other neighbouring provinces and cities as well as abroad. In the comments on their social media content, members of the public mention "I didn't know about this place until I read your content", or send private messages asking for the location of attractions. "The content that is disseminated has a small effect on the city's image, but not much", and "the self-publishers may trigger some small spots, especially those that are not too noticeable, which we may have filmed to draw (people's) attention, and then the officials will promote them positively. ". On this level, the public wants "more cooperation" with government agencies.

However, in the interaction and dialogue between government agencies and the public, there are "many responses that are not timely enough, resulting in a certain degree of negative public opinion". This is also consistent with the observation. Some interviewees stated that:

"Firstly, the interactive platforms do not form a system; secondly, the content of responses on the relevant platforms may not be in-depth and professional enough; and thirdly, some conversations are superficial and suspected of being for show." (Code 1/6)

Based on interviews and observations, government self-media account operators did not actively engage in basic social media interactions such as liking, commenting and retweeting the city image communication content on their personal self-media, and this behaviour was mainly seen in the public's communication content on government self-media. Government agencies and their self-media platforms mainly attract public participation by launching competitions, essays and other activities, but often do not directly interact with the public's active social media content, while in the social media environment, however, the wider public participation is still a gradual daily posting of social media content, which is not given enough attention. Taken together, this has resulted in a persistent problem of public social participation in the monologue of city image communication.

**Fourthly**, the exploration of dialogue mechanisms for urban image communication between the public and government agencies.

According to Li (2007), dialogue is the biggest difference between the Internet and other electronic media such as radio, film and television. In dialogue communication, there is no subject and no object; and the two parties involved do not necessarily have to agree. In urban image communication, the establishment of such an open and negotiated communication process is crucial to the development of in-depth knowledge of the city and the development of city image resources.

However, from the interviews so far, it appears that in an ordinary city like Suzhou, a better long-term dialogue mechanism between government agencies and the public has not been developed. Most of the self-publishers have participated in different forms of social media platforms initiated by government agencies, but there is basically no dialogue between the public and government agencies on social media platforms, and the interviewees' content published in Douyin "has not been liked and commented on and retweeted by government media". "For example, Douyin's 'Discover Anhui' has used my footage of Anqing and Suzhou to edit and publish my work many times; my photos have been used by mainstream media such as China Youth Daily and Anhui Daily". The interviewees of some of the self-publishers were not satisfied with the respect for the public's labour in this kind of material adoption process by government agencies, "at least write who took this photo, or issue a certificate". Therefore, this kind of official-led "dialogue" still not establish communication in the sense of dialogue theory, and "the general level of participation is not too high".

The public publish content related to the city's image on the Douyin platform, and their followers like, retweet and comment on the videos they are interested in, all of which can enhance the dissemination of the city's image. However, some of the official media are confined to traditional thinking and have yet to raise their awareness of active dialogue with the public. There is a problem with the management mechanism: government media "generally cannot republish individual works without special requests",

and for quality videos they will "contact the author to use the work". However, they generally do not directly like, retweet or comment on individual accounts.

Nevertheless, the public still hopes to change the monologue in city image communication through the establishment of certain dialogue mechanisms, and to strengthen the dialogue with government agencies to jointly promote urban image communication. "If possible, I am still very much looking forward to more cooperation with government agencies in city image communication, because government agencies' can provide more resources and possibilities, and can provide me with a bigger platform to showcase my work, as well as allowing me to see more content that I would not normally be able to access and understand on my own."

Interviewees felt that the government media platform "could create a long-term column to repost some of the content posted by ordinary people on a weekly or regular basis, which would supplement the content of the government accounts, and I think it would be a good incentive for creators". Some interviewees felt that "email submissions" might not be effective for interactive dialogue because people are busy or don't know how to use it, and that "it would be better if there was a small app". "I think it would be easier for the public to participate if there was a portal (on government social media accounts) for users to contribute, like a 'private posting' portal (which can be accessed by clicking on it), for example. "

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this study combines interviews with and observations the Suzhou public and government agencies' self-media operators and finds that the interaction between government agencies and their audiences has changed in terms of channels and depth of interaction compared to the traditional media era. However, the public's participation in government agencies' self-media activities is still predominant, with government agencies' active "liking" of self-media content on the city's image being rare, and the monolingual public expecting conversational interaction. The changing depth and breadth of public social media engagement and the public's perception of the value of government agencies' roles provide the basis for the establishment of a dialogue mechanism between the two. Therefore, this paper makes several limitations for the establishment of a dialogue mechanism.

Firstly, government agencies need to change their thinking and develop a sense of dialogue. The purpose of dialogue is to discover better perspectives and to communicate effectively. With this clarity, government agencies and their self-publishing operators can take a more scientific view of the public's urban image communication behaviour and potentially inspire greater potential.

Second, establish channels for dialogue on social media platforms. On top of existing activities and opinion-gathering, social media can be more fully utilised, such as setting up fixed sections on social

media accounts or small apps to receive and forward quality city image communication content from individual self-media, as mentioned by interviewees. This process should of course establish effective methods of utilisation and respect for copyright and labour.

Thirdly, improve the management mechanism and strengthen the normality of the dialogue. Government agencies and self-media platforms can improve their management mechanisms and strengthen the audit of individual self-media content while enhancing tolerance, for example by establishing special online participation platforms and implementing a real-name registration system to guarantee that information publishers are responsible for the content they publish. In addition, a city image database of the puliv can be established, incorporating publics who consistently provide quality resources into the database and can continue to be recommended by them for quality public accounts; for city image content published by accounts in the database, government agencies' self-media can forward it with one click, thus improving the effect of city image communication, accumulating city image communication power and helping city development.

Human communication itself is a process of information-mediated social interaction, in which people interact and communicate with each other, forming different social interactions. The likes, comments and favorites of users on the Douyin platform are all forms of social interaction. With the participation of a large number of people and the re-dissemination by the official government media, the communication of Suzhou's city image can combine the power of these two communicators and achieve better results.

In addition, this study has the following shortcomings: Firstly, the sample of this study is not representative enough, and the selection of interviewees involving government managers is not broad enough, and subsequent studies could use a more representative sample to examine the dialogue and interaction in urban image communication; Secondly, as a case-based study, the scalability and sustainability of the findings need to be continuously verified, and the scope of the study needs to be further expanded, which is also the direction of this study's subsequent expansion.

### **Declaration of Interest Statement**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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