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**Branding City Destinations**

A comparative analysis of the multimodal discourse in Beijing and London publicity films

**Abstract:** City branding brings immense benefits for megacities to gain international prestige in an increasingly competitive global arena. City publicity films, as an effective method for selling the city through online dissemination, could reach and influence a wider audience. However, the deployment of different semiotic resources in the branding discourse in city publicity films remains under-explored, and in particular, the role of cultural attributes in the construction of meaning in the discourse of city branding through linguistic and non-verbal modalities remains unknown. This paper, drawing on theories of systemic functional grammar and visual grammar, examines the multimodal discourse of publicity films of Beijing and London in terms of representational and interactive meanings achieved through various semiotic resources. It is found that, in verbal and visual discourse, both films share similarities regarding enhancing persuasiveness via emotional branding but exhibit differences regarding how to achieve persuasiveness through different semiotic resources that co-construct meaning. The Beijing publicity film blends functional and emotional values while the London publicity film is prone to being more functional. In addition, possible reasons for the differences observed are discussed.

**Keywords:** city branding; city publicity films; cultural attributes; emotional branding; multimodality

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# 1 Introduction

With booming digital technology, language is not the only “medium of communication” (Halliday 1985: 222) to convey meaning. Instead, different semiotic resources, including language, image, sound, color, and other modes, could collaborate in the generation of meaning, thus changing discourse analysis, which restricts its study to pure language, into multimodal discourse analysis (henceforth MDA). This recognition indicates that the analysis of language in texts and other semiotic resources that operate independently contributes to understanding a multimodal text (Lim 2007). Against this backdrop has emerged the burgeoning growth of the application of MDA in different genres – textbooks, advertisements, paintings, posters, etc. – as evidenced in numerous studies (e.g. O’Toole 1999; O’Halloran 2000; Thibault 2000; Lemke 2002; Kress 2003; Norris 2004; Pang 2004; Royce and Bowcher 2007; Bateman 2008).

Due to the increased competition in the global arena, cities are currently striving to gain international prominence using favorable brand images to become important attractions for investors, new citizens, talents, and tourists from across the world. To meet this challenge, cities must seek strategic marketing techniques to ensure their uniqueness recognized as a distinctive brand (Riza et al. 2012). In fact, the concept of city branding stems from the principles and management of traditional brands developed for products (Yoo et al. 2000). Defined as the “purposeful symbolic embodiment of all information connected to a city in order to create associations around it” (Lucarelli and Berg 2011: 21), city branding brings substantial economic, political, and cultural benefits (Kavaratzis 2004; Balakrishnan 2009).

These benefits explain why recent decades have witnessed the exponential growth of the literature addressing this topic from the perspectives of a city branding concept and measurement (e.g. Zavattaro 2010; Boland 2013), branding strategy (e.g. Peel and Lloyd 2008; Brandt and de Mortanges 2011; Kaplan et al. 2010; Ahmad et al. 2013), and branding culture and tourism (Murphy and Boyle 2006; Northover 2010; Giovanardi 2011). In a digital era where Internet marketing has revolutionized communication efforts, the Internet today breeds tremendous opportunities for enhancing a city’s image internationally (Dobers and Hallin 2009) as a response to encouraging cities to be connected with the global and digitized community (Sassen 2004). Therefore, scholarly attention has gradually shifted to online city branding focusing on tourism marketing and destination branding via the Internet (Law et al. 2010), the effectiveness of the online distribution of tourism-related information

(Gertner et al. 2007; Xiang and Gretzel 2010), and the role of social media as a destination marketing strategy (Hays et al. 2013).

Among the available means of advertising cities, city promotional films, which integrate text, music, sound, animation, and many other resources to present a city's history, lifestyle, and cultural heritage, could serve the function of "selling" to the best. In particular, with the emergence of easily accessible online media, a city's promotional film could have a global reach if disseminated online to provide viewers with virtual tours of a destination.

The multimodal analysis of branding discourse by virtue of publicity films aligns with a social semiotic perspective probing into discourse and communication, which maintains that linguistic and visual choices are deployed as semiotic resources to achieve particular semiotic identity performance (van Leeuwen 2005; Machin and Mayr 2012; Ng 2018). Based on an investigation of the existing literature, there has been little interest in exploring how cultural attributes exert an influence on semiotic choices that constitute the branding discourse via the online publicity film as an important channel for city branding. Therefore, this study, drawing on theories of systemic functional grammar (Halliday 1978, 2000) and visual grammar (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996, 2006), compares the multimodal discourse of publicity films from Beijing and London as two megacities located in the East and the West. By exploring the representational and interactive meanings achieved through various semiotic resources, this paper hopes to shed light on the role that cultural attributes play in the meaning construction of discourse about city branding through linguistic and nonverbal modalities.

## 2 Theoretical background

### 2.1 Systemic functional grammar

As claimed, multimodality involves combining the use of "various semiotic modes with a socio-cultural domain that yields a semiotic product or result in an event" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 59). This interpretation links multimodality with systemic functional grammar (henceforth SFG), which argues for the social semiotic nature of language (Halliday 1985). In SFG, the choices of a linguistic system organized by the experiential, the interpersonal, and the textual as three metafunctions of language are constrained by the field

(what is talked about), the tenor (who is participating), and the mode (means of transmitting the message).

The ideational metafunction by which we understand reality is the function for construing human experience (Halliday 2000). This metafunction relates to the “grammatical resources involved in construing the flux of experience” through the unit of the clause (Guijarro and Sanz 2008: 1603). The realization of the experiential function is dependent on a semantic system to describe inner and outer experiences, so the role of a semantic system leads to the application of a transitivity system whose choices in the grammatical system are process types, participant types, and circumstances. Interpersonal function involves social relations and participation, depicting the role adopted by speakers in exchanging meanings or interacting with each other. During a specific situation of communication, three syntactic moods, organized as declarative, interrogative, and imperative, assist in expressing illocutionary forces such as statement, offer, question, and directive. In addition to mood, the modality that the speaker uses to convey his/her attitudes or evaluations is another important component of interpersonal meaning. In accordance with SFG, the interpersonal meaning is also embodied in the personal pronoun system, since the choice of different personal pronouns enables the speaker to express his or her attitudes toward something and the relationship among listeners (Halliday 2000: 92).

## 2.2 Visual social semiotics

Building on Halliday’s social semiotics, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) develop a descriptive framework of visual semiotic analysis for visual communication called visual grammar (henceforth VG). Similar to linguistic structures, visual processes within visual structures are also related to the roles of participants in a specific communicative context.

Narrative representation and conceptual representation constitute the dimension of representational meaning. Narrative processes that present unfolding actions and events, processes of changes, and instantaneous spatial arrangement, are connected by vectors. In contrast to narrative processes, conceptual processes are static (no vectors) and do not involve the action or reaction of represented participants but represent them in terms of their “more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class, structure or meaning” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006: 267).

The interactive meaning in VG depicts the relations between image makers, represented participants, and image viewers, giving hints to viewers about the

attitudes toward the represented objects, including people in images (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 52–53). This interactive meaning can be achieved by contact, social distance, perspective, and modality in visual mode (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 67). Contact refers to the relationship established between represented participants and viewers or audiences, which can be realized by two acts, the “demand” act and the “offer” act (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 113). The former relates to represented participants seeking attention or a relationship built up from viewers by virtue of a gaze or eye contact with them, the purpose of which is to obtain information; the latter refers to represented participants’ offering information to viewers by not looking at them directly.

Social distance, as a second dimension of the interactive meanings of images, manifests the degree of intimacy established between the viewers and the represented participants through the framing size of the lens. It is determined by how close the represented participants depicted in images appear to the viewers, thereby resulting in feelings of intimacy or distance. This affinity and relationship can be revealed by a close-up shot implying intimacy, a medium shot denoting social distance, or a long shot signaling impersonal distance.

Perspective refers to the choices of angles that can reflect the attitude and affect how we understand the situation; these angles comprise horizontal and vertical angles. The horizontal perspective manifested with a frontal angle and an oblique angle connotes involvement and detachment from represented participants, respectively. The vertical perspective, realized through high, low, and eye-level angles, implies different levels of power between represented participants and viewers.

Modality refers to the degree of truth through which the real world is reflected. Objects may be filmed as if they are real by resorting to markers such as color, contextualization, brightness, representation, and depth. Color saturation, color differentiation, and color modulation comprise three scales of color, which are graded from full to absence, from maximally diversified to monochrome, and from fully modulated to unmodulated, respectively. It is noteworthy that judging the reliability of color expression depends on different viewers, which characterizes the emotional factor of color (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 163). Contextualization, another subset of modality, involves the image background, graded from detail to absence.

In short, the ideational and interpersonal meanings in SFG and their realization, as well as the representational and interactive meanings in VG and their realization, comprises the theoretical foundations of the present study. As a typical multimodal discourse, verbal and visual mode prevail in a city

publicity film in which SFG will be used to analyze texts in verbal discourse and VG will be used to analyze images in visual discourse.

## 2.3 Data description

Both Beijing and London are deemed metropolises characterized by concentrations of economic, political, and cultural activity. Hence, the data used for analysis come from the two cities' 2014 publicity films on YouTube ranked according to popularity, as indicated by the number of viewers: one is the international version of the Beijing publicity film (henceforth BPF) produced by Ke Zhaolei, and the other is the London publicity film (henceforth LPF) produced by Louis Theodossiou. Narrated by an adult male in Chinese with English subtitles, the BPF lasts 271 seconds, while the LPF lasts 238 seconds, with the voice-over of a young girl.

The verbal data in the two films are transcribed manually and thoroughly evaluated for accuracy, and the visual data gathered are segmented to obtain static images (O'Halloran 2004) using Storm Media software. The obtained data amount to 141 words (12 sentences) and 97 pictures in the BPF and 223 words (21 sentences) and 70 pictures in the LPF.

# 3 Findings and discussions

## 3.1 Verbal discourse analysis: Ideational and interpersonal meanings

As contended, it is the language that empowers us to conceptualize and describe our inner and outer experience (Halliday 1985). The transitivity system distinguishes between outer (the processes of the external world) and inner (the processes of consciousness) experience; the former refers to material processes and the latter to mental processes. Another grammatical category that generalizes and relates one fragment of experience to another by classifying and identifying is called the relational process. Material, mental, and relational processes are the three main types of processes in the English transitivity system (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014).

### 3.1.1 Transitivity

**Table 1:** Types of processes in the BPF and LPF

Processes	BPF		LPF	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Material	2	17%	3	14%
Mental	6	50%	11	52%
Relational	3	33%	7	34%
Total	11	100%	21	100%

The analysis of transitivity in the verbal discourse of the BPF and LPF shows that the mental and relational processes exhibit a similarly high frequency in the two films, accounting for 50% and 33% and for 52% and 34%, respectively. Recurrent mental processes (*feel, discover* in the BPF; *trust, inspire* in the LPF) represent the sources of cognition (e.g. *feel*) and desire (e.g. *discover*) for the described textual reality. The nature of a promotional film that intends to elicit the viewer's emotional response may explain the high frequency of the mental processes observed. With references to the relational processes used to define the attributes of the cities and to quantify a speaker's feelings (*be* in the BPF and LPF), the descriptive function of the city's great charm has been fulfilled.

### 3.1.2 Mood

The basic types of moods for interpersonal exchanges can be represented by three syntactic forms: commands are usually expressed by imperative sentences, statements by declarative sentences, questions by interrogative sentences. Offerings can be expressed by any of those three forms. The following table (Table 2) demonstrates the distribution of mood structure in the two films.

As illustrated in Table 2, both of the city publicity films are inclined to use declaratives: 92% of the verbal discourse in the BPF and all of the verbal discourse in the LPF are declaratives. The imperative is seldom used, and interrogative sentences never occur. Declaratives are characterized by brevity, through which enough information can be offered to target viewers to fulfill the purpose of publicity films. Only one imperative sentence appears in the BPF, inviting people to pay a visit.

**Table 2:** Distribution of mood structures

Films	Mode Structure	Declarative	Imperative	Interrogative	Total
BPF	Frequency	11	1	0	12
	Percentage	0.92	0.08	0	1
LPF	Frequency	21	0	0	21
	Percentage	1	0	0	1

Some snippets of the verbal discourse from the BPF include the following:

One day, I realized that, even though I was born in Beijing, it feels strange yet familiar.

This is the opening sentence that serves to introduce Beijing by way of a story narration. The narrator intends to change people's perception of old China by directing the audience's attention to how this city looks different in the new era.

It is classic and modern, calm and peaceful, yet high-flying and energetic.

This declarative appears when the narrator concludes with distinctive features of modern Beijing. The information offered aims to persuade the audience to believe that, currently, China is a nation not isolated from the rest of the world but integrated into modernity while still retaining cultural features.

Walking in the Hutongs, I can still feel the aroma of Beijing.

To further illustrate the city's traditional culture, this declarative invites the audience to appreciate the noticeable charm of what could characterize Beijing in ancient times. Hutong not only embodies a period of history but also the cordial lifestyle of the people who live there.

All of you who come to Beijing, let us discover together.

This is the only imperative sentence in the film and brings it to an end. The narrator here invites people from different corners of the world to visit Beijing through an imperative, fulfilling the purpose of a publicity film.

Taken together, it has been observed that the declarative mood occurs most frequently, which corresponds to the purpose of an invitation. The interpersonal meaning of the relationship between the represented participants and viewers is realized via presenting information about this city and describing what it looks like.

By comparison, analysis of the mood in the verbal discourse of the LPF shows a similar preference for choosing declaratives to offer information, as shown in the following examples.

We beg for opportunities; this is why we reside here.

This declarative helps the audience capture the idea that London is a place full of opportunities.

The wheels will keep turning if you stay or if you go.

London's temperament is defined in this declarative. London resembles a UK gentleman, with his modesty and pride, regardless of how many people arrive and leave. This image of a gentleman is well established and is retained as a cultural asset that gains respect and admiration.

We put our trust in London, and London stills our hearts.

In this sentence, the speaker continues to describe the credible core qualities of London. Moreover, the peace and serenity of London are also vividly demonstrated.

As shown in Table 2, all the clauses in the LPF are declaratives, which convey the information about London's characteristics and qualities, building the bond between what is represented in the film and the viewing audience.

### 3.1.3 Modality

Modality refers to the intermediate ground of meaning between the positive and negative polarity, consisting of modalization and modulation (Halliday 2000). If the speaker is providing information through utterance, the modality relates to how valid the information is in terms of probability (how likely it is; e.g. possible, likely, probable, certain, sure, etc.) or usuality (how frequent it is; e.g. sometimes, often, usually, always, etc.). If the speaker talks about goods and services, the modality relates to how confident the speaker can be in the eventual success of the speech act. Halliday endows modal expressions with different values, in terms of high, median, and low, to reflect speakers' attitudes and degree of politeness. In commands, the modal space concerns the degree of obligation of the person to carry out the commands, while in offers it regards the degree of the inclination of the speaker to fulfill the offer.

**Table 3:** Distribution of modality structures

	BPF			LPF			
	Type	Number	Percentage	Value	Number	Percentage	Value
Modalization	Probability	1	50%	Median	4	66%	Median
	Usuality	1	25%	High	1	17%	Low
		1	25%	Median			
Modulation	Obligation	0	0		0	0	
	Inclination	0	0		1	17%	Median
Total		3			6		

As illustrated in Table 3, similar patterns of employing more expressions of modalization than modulation to offer information emerge in the BPF and LPF. Additionally, no obligation expression of modulation occurs in both films. Moreover, the expression of probability is preferred over other subsets, with 50% and 66.7% in the BPF and LPF respectively. However, modalization is realized through the high and median value of modality in the BPF in contrast with preferences over the median and low value of modality in the LPF. Furthermore, the distribution of usuality demonstrates differences. The BPF chooses both the high and the median value of modality, whereas the LPF tends to deploy the low value modality to express usuality. It is noteworthy that the inclination occurs once in the LPF, with no counterpart in the BPF.

There is an example from BPF:

Apart from what everyone knows, I can always discover new things in Beijing.

The word “can” suggests a probability that speaks about the validity and certainty of propositions between polarities to provide the audience with some freedom and choices but with expected responses from viewers. In this sentence, the narrator has succeeded in building up connections with the audience by expressing his feelings. The word “can” joined with “always” indicates a high frequency in expressing the meaning of usuality, denoting the truthfulness and reliability of the information that Beijing is a place where numerous unknown excitements are waiting to be explored. Thus, the message is sent out as a lure for potential visitors, intending to persuade viewers by emphasizing the narrator’s feelings.

Some snippets of choice of modality structure in the LPF include the following:

The capital is a beautiful thing, and you’ll *never* forget the sound.

The city *will* inspire you more than you *will* ever know.

In LPF, “will” occurs five times, and four of these instances are expressions of probability and one is of inclination. Furthermore, “never” functions as an expression of usuality. In these sentences, except for the “will” as used in “you will ever know” in the given example, which functions as inclination, the narrator’s choice of the median modal verb “will” showcases the confidence and confirmation of the probability of people’s memory of London. The choice of “will” in these examples leaves room for audiences to make a decision, thus making the information more suggestive. The inclination revealed by “will” in example 2 transmits the idea that the audience would be inspired by London in some way regardless of how much one could expect to experience. “Never” in the given example enhances the emphatic tone of what this capital city can do to impress the audience.

### 3.1.4 Personal pronouns

The specific usage of personal pronouns can uncover interpersonal and attitudinal ideologies toward the relationship concealed in discourse (Halliday 2000). The first-person pronoun “I” signals the addresser or the speaker. The plural form “we,” typically used in an inclusive sense, ideologically reflects a shared stance or opinions between speaker and addressee(s). However, the second-person pronoun “you” reveals a certain distance between the speaker and listener, which may embody power (Stephan 1992).

**Table 4:** Use of personal pronouns in the BPF and LPF

Type	BPF		LPF	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
I	4	44%	0	0%
we	3	34%	2	17%
my	1	11%	0	0%
us	1	11%	0	0%
you	0	0%	10	83%
Total	9	100%	12	100%

Table 4 shows that in the BPF, the frequency of using first-person pronouns, including the singular, plural, and object forms, to a great extent, outnumbers what is observed in the LPF, which prefers the second-person pronoun “you” instead. By articulating the narrator’s feelings and seeking bonds with viewers

by using first-person pronouns (e.g. we and us), the BPF tries to shorten the distance to viewers to influence the audience in a more subtle and implicit fashion. In contrast, the LPF is inclined to highlight that London will impress “you” as an audience, suggesting more objective and explicit messages.

## 3.2 Visual discourse analysis: Representational and interactive meanings

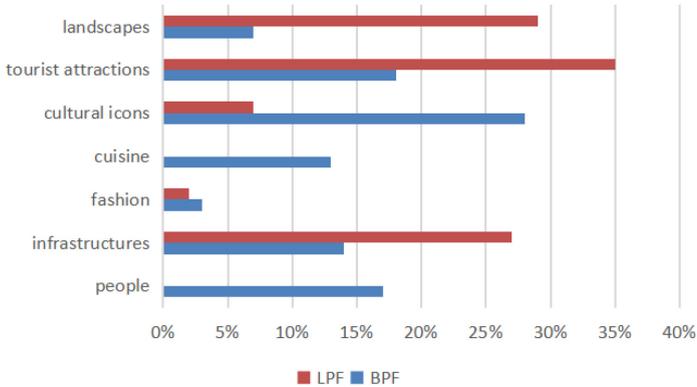
For dynamic multimodal discourse, in fact, visual images are the primary carriers of the discourse’s core meaning to render information.

### 3.2.1 Representational meaning

In line with what is presented in the BPF and LPF, three umbrella categories, encompassing human, inanimate objects, and spatial representations, and seven subcategories can be identified: 1) people and local residents (e.g. locals, everyday life, recreation); 2) infrastructures (e.g. skyscrapers, transportation); 3) fashion (e.g. clothes, accessories, shopping centers); 4) local cuisine and dining (e.g. food, drinks, restaurants); 5) cultural icons (e.g. cultural heritage, traditional events); 6) touristic attractions (e.g. historic buildings, scenic spots, works of art); and 7) natural landscapes.

**Table 5:** Represented participants in the BPF and LPF

Category		BPF		LPF	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Human	1	16	17%	0	0%
	2	13	14%	19	27%
	3	3	3%	2	3%
	4	12	13%	0	0%
	5	27	28%	5	7%
Spatial Representation	6	17	18%	26	38%
	7	9	7%	18	25%
Total		97	100%	70	100%



**Figure 1:** Comparison of represented participants in the BPF and LPF

The differences in these two films lie in that the BPF chooses represented participants in terms of people (17%), inanimate objects (58%), and spatial representations (25%), whereas the LPF only involves inanimate objects (37%) and spatial representations (63%), without any human participants. Moreover, the BPF tends to describe cultural icons (e.g. Chinese knot, calligraphy, tea culture), while the LPF is inclined to demonstrate infrastructures, tourist attractions, and landscape. To be more specific, in the BPF, human activities are instantiated in the scenes involving serving Chinese tea, a Peking Opera performance, and ordinary people's lives, especially young people's lives. For inanimate objects, the transportation system, cultural icons, and food and cuisine are described in great detail. However, in the LPF, for inanimate objects, only infrastructures, such as skyscrapers, and fashion are identified using recognizable scenic spots and landscapes, and these are depicted for spatial representations.

Moreover, we found that narrative images (67%) predominate in the BPF, whereas conceptual images (85%) prevail in the LPF. The BPF uses actional and reactional images (Image 1 describes a girl playing the guitar and Image 2 suggests the enjoyment of tea) to inject the film with vitality. As shown in Image 3, which depicts a girl's hand touching colorful bubbles, the symbolic meaning of Beijing as a place of different colors waiting to be felt and experienced is revealed in this conceptual process.



Image 1 (actional)



Image 2 (reactional)



Image 3 (symbolic)

By comparison, the landmarks or modern buildings filmed using conceptual processes dominate in the LPF, as instantiated in Image 4. This image reflects a classification process, with the London Eye being more salient than other buildings, conveying a panoramic night view of London. Image 5 utilizes the shining red light as represented participant, embodying hopes in London.



Image 4 (classificational)



Image 5 (symbolic)

### 3.2.2 Interactive meaning

#### 3.2.2.1 Contact

In the BPF, there are 16 scenes involving human participants, in which only 4 demand information enacted from the viewers through eye contact, as illustrated in Image 6. The construct of “demand” signals the engagement of viewers by virtue of an invitation. However, in the LPF, the director chooses to portray London by exhibiting London’s scenery rather than involving any human participant, as illustrated in Image 7.



Image 6 (demand)



Image 7 (offer)

In the BPF, Image 6 depicts an elegant lady dressed in a Chinese cheongsam introducing the Chinese tea ceremony with a smile. She makes direct eye contact with the audience to elicit their response and interaction, thereby sending an invitational message. By contrast, Image 7, as one of London's renowned landmarks, offers information about London's beauty and magnificent architecture but with no intention of communicating with the viewers.

Therefore, both publicity films resort to offering images to introduce cities in a more direct fashion, especially London, which is in keeping with the main feature of publicity films, namely, to offer as much information to the viewers as possible. However, the Beijing film somehow more purposely engages the audience in short-term interaction to send an invitation in a slightly warmer way, in contrast with London's Promotional Film, which centers more on tourist attractions that highlight sightseeing experiences.

### 3.2.2.2 Social distance

As revealed in the BPF, the more frequent use of medium shots and close-up shots than long shots enhances the engagement of viewers. By contrast, there are more long shots and medium shots in the LPF, in which no animate participant is engaged; instead, it has a rich display of magnificent buildings. Thus, it can be concluded that the BPF mainly construes a personal and social distance, while the LPF scores high in social and impersonal relationship.

**Table 6:** Distribution of social distance

Type	BPF		LPF	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Close-up shot	43	44%	16	23%
Medium Shot	36	37%	17	24%

Type	BPF		LPF	
Long shot	18	19%	37	53%
Total	97	100%	70	100%



Image 8 (close-up shot)



Image 9 (medium shot)



Image 10 (close-up shot)

As exemplified in Image 8, the close-up shot that depicts a girl smelling the hotpot establishes an intimacy between the viewers and the represented participant through bringing viewers into the scenario. This approach can stimulate viewers' desire to sample this Beijing specialty. Images 9 and 10 show the Imperial Palace filmed from long shots moving toward close-up shots,

creating an effective visual impact by converting frames, with whose help the majestic royal building as a whole and with the details of exquisite carved designs are presented.



Image 11 (medium shot)



Image 12 (close-up shot)



Image 13 (long shot)

By comparison, Images 11 and 12 showcase the clock in One Canada Square, the iconic landmark in London, with a medium and then a close-up shot that highlight the fast-moving hands of the clock. The conversion of the frames from medium to near embodies the concept “time is money,” which accords exactly with the theme of the skyscraper. The long shot instantiated in Image 13

indicating impersonal distance showcases the attraction of London Bridge being united with its surroundings. Taking these differences into account, the BPF endeavors to forge closer relations with the viewer, whereas the LPF seems to influence the viewer more objectively within an appropriate distance. This approach is indeed quite in keeping with the perceived nature of the two nations: Chinese people are warm and hospitable, while English people are serious and polite.

**3.2.2.3 Perspectives**

The following table (Table 7) shows the distribution of the perspectives in the two city publicity films.

**Table 7:** Distribution of perspectives

Horizontal	Vertical	BPF		LPF			
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage		
Front	High	8	8%	16	23%		
	Low	6	7%	50%	8	11%	65%
	Eye-level	34	35%		22	31%	
Oblique	High	17	18%		18	26%	
	Low	5	5%	50%	2	3%	35%
	Eye-level	27	27%		4	6%	
Total		97	100%		70	100%	



Image 14 (front, low angle)



Image 15 (oblique, high angle)



Image 16 (front, eye-level angle)



Image 17 (oblique, eye-level angle)

In the BPF, Images 14 and 16 are clear instantiations from the front angle, whereas Images 15 and 17 are filmed from an oblique angle, denoting different levels of engagement of viewers. The majesty of the Imperial Palace is demonstrated in Image 14 by virtue of the low angle, whereas the vividness of the insect and the spice of life are revealed in Image 15 via a high angle. Touring tricycles in the streets of Beijing suggest what common people's daily life looks like, eliciting shared feelings of working hard for a better life. An oblique angle in Image 17 is used to convey the message of harmony between human and nature.



Image 18 (oblique, low angle)



Image 19 (front, eye-level angle)

Likewise, a low angle is used to evoke the viewers' admiration when presenting magnificent buildings, as seen in Image 18. However, an eye-level angle and front angle would be chosen to invite viewers to become part of the scenario, as what is seen in Image 19 is Oxford Street, the world-famous shopping area, which greets and embraces international visitors.

In line with what is presented in Table 7, we find that both front and oblique angles are preferred in the BPF, while the front angle is favored in the LPF. Comparatively speaking, a high angle (49%) occurs more frequently in the LPF than in the BPF (26%). In addition, both films are inclined to convey equality with the viewers by their use of a large proportion of eye-level angle shots. In particular, in the BPF, when an intimate relationship is construed, the viewer is either empowered or positioned equally to make them feel respected.

### 3.2.2.4 Modality



Image 20 (high modality)



Image 21 (low modality)

Image 20 from the BPF and Image 21 from the LPF, though they exhibit different modalities in color, intend to grasp the viewer's attention with meaning construction to either “energize or calm people” (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002: 349). The former shows a higher modality in terms of color saturation, color differentiation, and color modulation with red and black, while the latter displays tranquility with the color blue. Pictures of higher modality usually have a visual impact on the audience, which in turn influences their emotions. The two images shown here serve different purposes: in Image 20, the red Chinese knot, as an auspicious cultural symbol, adds a festive feel of excitement; by contrast, Image 21 depicts a different facet of London in peace at dusk, quite different from its bustling life in daytime.



Image 22



Image 23

Interestingly, a message of hope is conveyed similarly in the two films by making the background prominent in contextualization. In Image 22, the male as a represented participant from the BPF highlights the background, especially the sun rising from the mountains, which symbolizes hope in the citizens' hearts. Likewise, in Image 23, the bright light shining as a represented participant denotes hope in London as well.

A close examination of the two films reveals that the Beijing film plays around a higher modality of color by using bright colors such as red, yellow, and orange, in contrast to that of the LPF with its dominant colors of blue and gray due to time-lapse cinematography featuring fast-moving images to create the illusion of motion. Moreover, the BPF uses more abundant contextualization, suggesting that the BPF has more substantial content and well-made details.

To summarize, in accordance with the analysis of representational meanings in the BPF, Beijing not only celebrates its rich cultural heritage as a historic city by displaying iconic buildings and cultural symbols but also promotes itself as a regional and global hub of business and economy with images of skyscrapers in financial centers and of developed transportation systems. This approach could be conducive to representing Beijing as a megacity characterized by tradition and modernity. For the interactive meaning realized in the BPF, Beijing also endeavors to use an emotional appeal to elicit viewers' feedback through a gaze or more personal relationships.

It is claimed that, similar to product brands, functional and emotional needs are two constituents that a city could satisfy (Morgan 1999), but “the attributes that satisfy those needs need to be orchestrated into the city’s unique proposition” (Kavaratzis 2004: 66). The last decade has witnessed a shift from strategies of city branding underlining functional attractions such as infrastructures, local services, and natural landscapes, to promoting emotional elements such as culture, people, and lifestyle (De Chernatony 2006; Fetscherin 2010) to sell the distinctive aura of a tourist destination. In this sense, the BPF seems to incorporate both functional and emotional values. Nevertheless, the LPF primarily accentuates sightseeing experiences by presenting scenic spots, which tend to be tinted with a more functional value. Time-lapse cinematography narrates London’s stories via fast-moving scenes, depicting the vicissitudes of this city in a diachronic sense.

### 3.3 Why similar and different?

#### 3.3.1 Convergence: Shared strategy of emotional branding

Human cognition, to a great extent, relies on the experience that derives from having a body with different sensorimotor capacities (Rosch 1991) and thus being shaped by recurring bodily experience or embodiment (Gibbs 2006). This phenomenon may explain why people’s understanding of the world is sometimes universal regardless of different culture contexts since people across cultures share basic cognitive processes as demonstrated in similar ways of categorization, causal analysis, and inference (Nisbett 2003).

As we know, tourist destinations seek to promote themselves as a place that is friendly, enjoyable, and unique to compete with other destinations for a limited pool of tourism. Publicity films could be a significant resource and visual gateway to attract potential visitors, especially those who are geographically remote, to acquire the information they may need and, in the meantime, boost a city’s image. In verbal discourse, the frequent use of mental and relational processes regarding transitivity succeeds in eliciting positive affective emotional responses by virtue of describing a narrator’s experience with the city and depicting the city’s charm. Furthermore, declaratives in mood as a means of offering information facilitates the persuasive function. In visual discourse, more numerous images also accord with the ultimate purpose of a publicity film. Moreover, a large number of eye-level angle shots is used to

create a sense of equality for the target viewers to evoke positive feelings of respect.

All of these approaches serve the communicative function of a promotional film but above all the “emotional branding” purpose (Morgan 2004). Emotional branding derives from the idea that it is the emotional aspect – for example, positive feelings aroused or the personality or identity of tourist destinations – that distinguishes them (Blain 2005; Ekinci 2006). Thus, to establish emotional ties with visitors, thereby influencing potential tourist decisions, becomes critical (Mohammed et al. 2018). It thus becomes apparent that both the films studied here resort to mental and relational processes to evoke viewers’ emotional response by defining cities’ uniqueness, especially when homogenization – “the practice of selling places may even generate sameness, blandness” (Philo and Kearns 1993: 21) – has long been recognized in tourism.

### 3.3.2 Divergence: Cultural attributes

Culture is defined as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (Hofstede 2005: 39). It is argued that culture is of vital importance in recognizing a specific cultural background in which different psychological cognitive styles are embedded (Shweder 1991) to understand the cultural variations observed. Easterners view the world in a more “holistic” way, whereas people from the west are more “analytic” (Nisbett 2003: 76). Briefly explained, the holistic way of thinking is characterized by an emphasis on context and the situations in which people, objects, and relationships between objects and people are involved. By contrast, Western people have a preference for salient objects and a rule-based categorization of objects, focusing on “a single dimension or aspect and a tendency to disentangle phenomena from the contexts in which they are embedded” (Grossmann and Na 2014: 8). This difference could explain why, in terms of what was chosen to be filmed, the BPF tends to group people, objects, and the natural environment together to create harmony, whereas in the LPF, people are considered an insignificant element, while inanimate objects are regarded as more salient.

Hofstede’s cultural typology is one of the most valid differentiators that describe the interplay between the influence of culture on a society and society members’ behaviors (Bochner 1994; Simon 2000; Grossmann and Kross 2010). The individualism and collectivism index (IDV) defines the relations between members and the groups to which they belong. An individualistic society construes individuals as distinguishable from their social affiliations and as

separate entities, thus aligning them with fulfilling personal needs. However, collectivism blurs the distinction between individual and group, focusing on mutual dependence, the interests of the group, and relationship-building as hallmarks (Hofstede 2005).

Thus, the Chinese culture, which falls under collectivism, is characterized by an emphasis on relationships with a group and on cherishing tradition and cultural heritage that bind members as a group together. However, British culture, which is characterized by individualism, is more task-oriented rather than relation-driven, and the “other world” brought about by detachment aligns with their individual preferences as independent persons. Therefore, in verbal discourse, preferences for the median and low value of modality in the LPF compared with the high and median value of modality detected in the BPF denote that the British director is apt to make the information offered more suggestive, leaving space for individual choices. In addition, in visual discourse, eye contact and more frequent close-up shots intending to build up intimate relationships with viewers are more frequent in the BPF, echoing an “ingroupers” collectivist preference. Moreover, cultural icons such as tea culture, Chinese knot, opera, etc., as distinctive cultural symbols are in full display in the BPF, strengthening the ties of Chinese cultural identity.

It is noteworthy that though “the rate at which particular personal pronouns are used in a language, for example, use of first-person pronouns index individualism,” which asserts one’s viewpoint (Uz 2014: 1671), and this must be carefully interpreted in context. As demonstrated in this case under discussion, the narrator in the BPF definitely prefers the first-person pronoun, the purpose of which is to exert influence on viewers’ perceptions and emotions by way of conveying his intense feelings about Beijing. This approach forms a striking contrast with the narrator’s choice of the second pronoun “you” in the LPF, which highlights feelings being brought to audiences, and in fact signals that collectivist culture believes that personal feelings have the power to influence others with information credibility if a relationship is solid (Lau et al. 2004).

The avoidance of uncertainty, as another cultural dimension, is defined as “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by the ambiguous or unknown” (Hofstede 2005: 86). Compared with Britain, China scores lower in this index and thus falls into the lower degree of the avoidance of uncertainty. We tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity, and the possibility of extreme situations must be minimized. That phenomenon is why the LPF is likely to express itself directly by deploying more frontal angle shots, to be straightforward and explicit, while the BPF tends to show itself much more implicitly using both front and oblique angles as a safer way of transmitting information. It is worth

noting that front angle shots suggest “involvement” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006), but as discussed earlier, the LPF merely intends to depict inanimate objects such as skyscrapers, shopping centers, or landscapes in an impressive and persuasive manner by filming them from front angles to make the film more functional.

Taken together, we understand that, aside from shared bodily experiences coming from an interaction with the world that makes people develop similar cognitive mechanisms, cultural attributes do have a substantial role to play in shaping different nations’ perceptions of the world. In this sense, our findings are consistent with those studies that recognize cultural mediators in carriers of meaning realized through verbal and visual semiotic resources (Baldry 2000; Baldry and Thibault 2006; Hagan 2007; Matthiessen 2007). There is no doubt that differences in a verbal text genre (prose in the BPF vs. poetry in the LPF), cinematography, and aesthetics between the East and the West should also be taken into consideration.

## 4 Conclusions

The main contribution of this study illuminates the similar attributes shared by cities’ promotional films and how these films differ in their multimodal branding discourse for constructing a city’s image by drawing on linguistic analysis and providing a new lens to unmask preferences of cities in narrating their stories within a cultural context. In verbal and visual discourse, both the BPF and LPF share similarities in terms of fulfilling the communicative function of a promotional film whose persuasiveness would be greatly enhanced via emotional branding. However, these films exhibit differences regarding how to achieve persuasiveness through different semiotic resources that co-construct meaning. Based on the different layers of analyses in the multimodal branding discourse of these two films, it can be seen that the BPF blends functional and emotional values, while the LPF is prone to be more functional. Nevertheless, due to space limitations, this paper does not examine the textual and compositional meanings and collaborations of the different modalities in the meaning construction of the discourse. We envisage that future work on these aspects may provide new insights into the interplay between cultural attributes and the deployment of semiotics in city branding discourse across cultures.

Faced with regional, national, and global competition, Beijing and London, as two megacities in the East and the West, both seek new ways to promote themselves to galvanize economic development and to attract tourism,

investment, and talents. In promotional films, Beijing is framed as a city with tradition and modernity, whereas London is branding itself as a city of a modern and cosmopolitan character. There is no denying that a publicity film, as one of the city branding channels, can serve to communicate the city's competitive advantage on the one hand and to set cities apart from the fierce global competition on the other hand, based on the construction of a symbolic image that could be transmitted both locally and internationally. Therefore, as the sum of promotional and communicative activities, cities' publicity filmmakers should ask questions such as "What is this city endowed with?" "What would make this city different?" and "Who is the intended audience of this film?" to retain a unique and distinguishable city image to entice visitors or investors. In this sense, strategies for the best trajectory to distinguish a city's characteristics are vital in communicating a city's image and identity. More importantly, city branding should be disseminated online, taking full advantage of social media in particular as a more effective, low-cost platform, thus enhancing "world-cityness" in global space and networked time.

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