Research On Buddhist Temple Enthusiasm Among Young Chinese

The Interaction Between Official Discourse and Spontaneous Folk Behavior

Yinjun He (0085469)

Advanced Data Analysis Python For Social Science (CSSM 502)

Abstract

This research aims to analyze how the interaction works between the spontaneous religious behaviors of young people in Buddhist temples and related official discourse. The main hypothesis suggests that these behaviors are influenced by factors other than Buddhist beliefs. Despite low percentages of adults professing Buddhism or considering religion important in statistical data, there is a noticeable religious enthusiasm among the youth, warranting an exploration of influencing factors. In light of China's atheistic stance and efforts to minimize the role of religion in public life, the study also delves into the intriguing relationship between official media and the religious behaviors of young individuals. Utilizing quantitative research methods, including natural language processing and cosine similarity calculations, the results confirm the correctness of the first hypothesis, but reveal a predominantly negative interaction between official media and young individuals concerning the second hypothesis.

Introduction

The purpose of the research is to analyze how the interaction works between young people's spontaneous religious behaviors in Buddhist temples and related official discourse. The main hypothesis is the spontaneous behavior is unrelated to Buddhist beliefs but is influenced by other factors. Additionally, official news reports have a significant impact on young individuals, both positively and negatively.

From March 2023 onwards, a growing enthusiasm for visiting Buddhist temples among Generation Z became evident. Young people were engaging in practices such as worshipping Buddha, offering incense, and seeking blessings through prayer. This particular phenomenon had gained significant coverage in official media outlets.

On the one hand, in previous studies, even when considering variations in statistical methods and criteria, only 4% to 9% of Chinese adults profess Buddhism as their faith(Pew Research Center, 2023). Similarly, just 13% of Chinese adults say religion is "very important" or "rather important" in their lives(World Values Survey, 2018). What the statistical data shows seems at odds with the religious enthusiasm among young people. Therefore, exploring the influencing factors behind the religious behaviors of young people is crucial.

On the other hand, due to China's long-standing atheistic stance in the official ideology, and the Chinese government's persistent efforts in policy to make religion irrelevant to public life(Cao, 2018), the attitude of official media towards

the religious behaviors of young people has become an intriguing question and a focal point of study.

The research results clearly indicate that the first hypothesis is correct. However, concerning the second hypothesis, the interaction between official media and young individuals is mainly negative.

Methodology

The research utilized web crawlers to acquire data from Weibo (Chinese Twitter) and WeChat, then employed quantitative methods to evaluate the influencing factors behind the religious behaviors and the emotional inclinations portrayed in official reports and exhibited by individuals. Meanwhile, the research also calculated the degree of similarity between the two parities in terms of perceptions and emotional inclinations.

Data Collection

The data was categorized into three datasets: posts, comments, and commentator articles. Irrelevant information, duplicate values and missing values were removed from both comments and posts during data preprocessing.

Data Classification

Weibo Posts: 500 relevant posts were scraped, covering topics such as young people's attitudes towards temples, temple tourism, and praying habits. The dataset includes information on Weibo ID, author details, posting time, engagement metrics, and post contents.

Weibo Comments: 813 relevant comments were obtained from mainstream media coverage, with data including Weibo ID, comment details, user information, engagement metrics, and comment contents.

WeChat Official Articles: 8 long articles were scraped from official media coverage on WeChat, providing in-depth commentary on the phenomenon. Data includes media name, platform, post details, engagement metrics, and article

contents.

Keywords extraction

Word frequency analysis and TF-IDF methods were employed after the data collection phase to extract key terms from posts and commentator articles. This approach aimed to ensure a comprehensive exploration of influencing factors related to religious behaviors.

Sentiment Analysis

The snowNLP model was trained using 100000 labeled data from Weibo, focusing on positive and negative sentiment categories. This trained model was then applied to conduct sentiment analysis on comments and commentator articles. The primary focus during sentiment analysis was on identifying positive and negative emotional inclinations.

Calculation of Text Similarity

To measure the similarity between posts and commentator articles, relative word frequencies were calculated (using relative frequencies to mitigate the impact of dataset size on results). This involved using keywords extracted earlier to form a combined set, and calculating the frequencies of each dataset with respect to the words in this set. Subsequently, word vector calculations based on the relative word frequencies and cosine similarity methods were applied to assess text similarity and identify patterns between the datasets.

Conclusions

### The influencing factors behind behaviors

In summary, the research comprehensively applied both word frequency analysis and keyword extraction as methods to identify the themes within the dataset. The results indicate that, whether in media reports or individual posts, reality factors rather than the belief itself are considered as the driving forces behind young people's spontaneous religious behaviors. The frequent recurrence of the words "life," "society," and "pressure" strongly emphasizes this viewpoint.

Top 15 Words Frequency (Articles)

Top 15 Words Frequency (Posts)
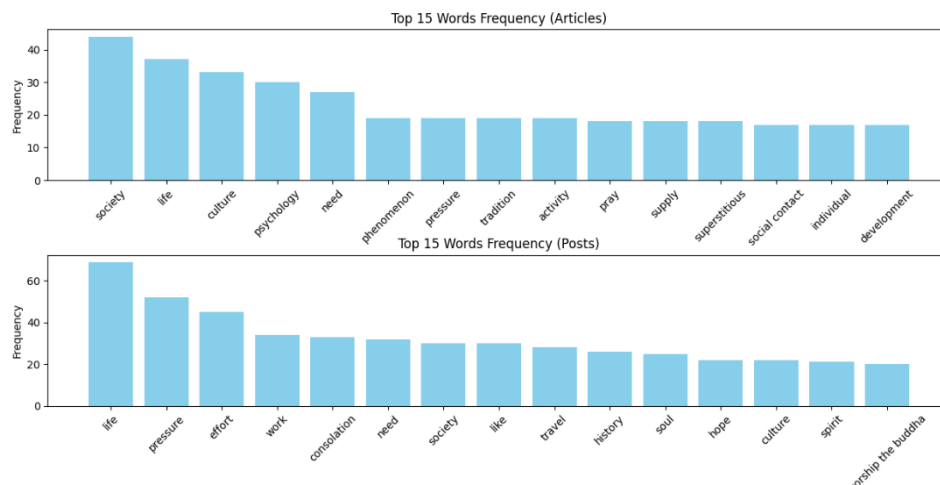
Word Frequency Statistics

Another noteworthy finding is that, whether in individual posts or media reports, "tradition," "culture," and "history" can also be considered as another representative theme. Not only do official media associate this religious behavior with traditional Chinese culture, but young individuals themselves also hold similar views. This may suggest that, in the atheistic backdrop of Chinese society, whether through intentional guidance from official sources or subconsciously held

views by young people, there is a tendency to understand religion from the perspective of cultural heritage. This may also explain why 26% of Chinese adults burn incense to worship deities(China Family Panel Studies, 2018), but a smaller percentage profess Buddhism as their faith.
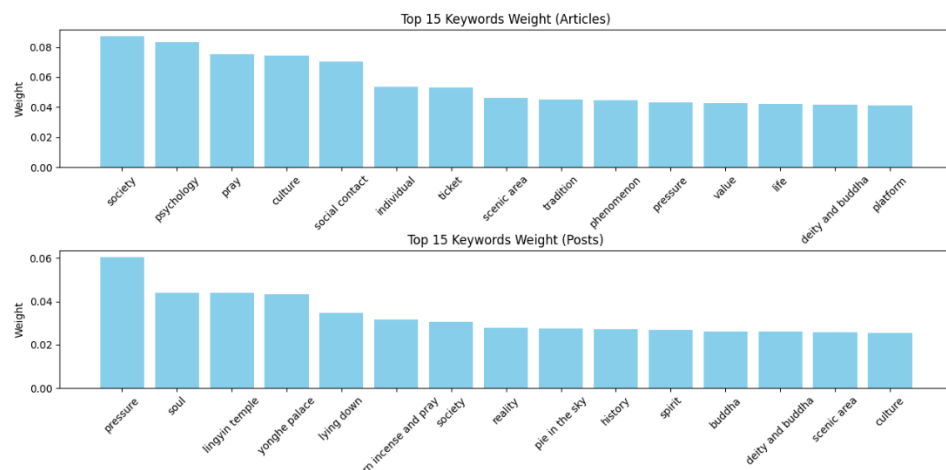
Keywords As theme

Finally, the impact of the tourism cannot be ignored. Keywords in the posts include "Yonghe Palace(雍和宫)" and "Lingyin Temple(灵隐寺)," which are two of the most well-known temples in China, renowned for their fancy souvenirs on social media. Besides the pressures of reality and spiritual needs, the allure of these temples is driven by the pursuit of tourist hotspots. This further distances the motivations behind young people's behavior from the ultimate goals of Buddhist belief—nirvana and liberation from the cycle of reincarnation.
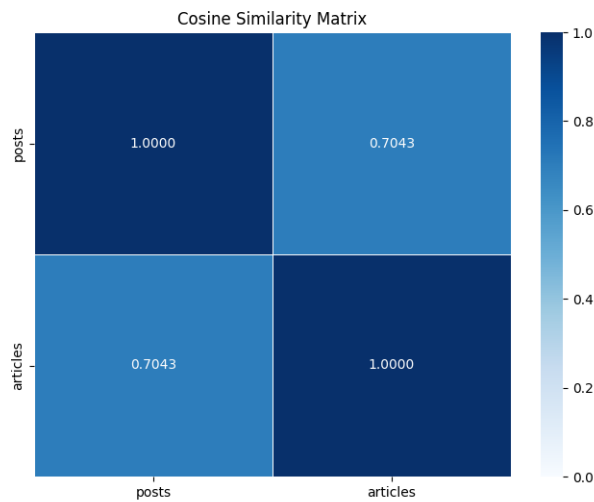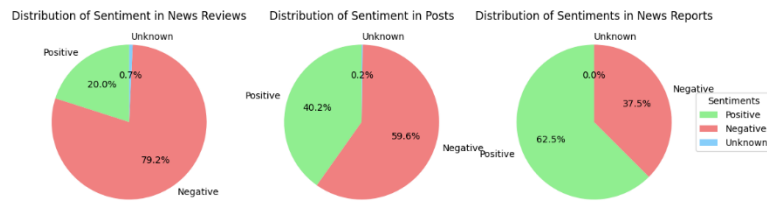
The Result Of Text Similarity Calculation

As indicated by the results of calculating cosine similarity based on relative word frequencies, the text similarity between posts and media articles is as high as 0.70. This suggests a significant level of consistency in the perception of the spontaneous religious behaviors between official media and individuals.

The Emotional Inclinations

From the results of sentiment analysis, If the emotional inclination in posts is considered as individuals' attitude towards the behavior, the emotional inclination in official media reports is seen as the stance of the official media, and the comments from individuals on reports are viewed as responses to the media attitude, An interactive relationship is formed among the three.

Distribution of Sentiment in News Reviews   Distribution of Sentiment in Posts   Distribution of Sentiments in News Reports

The Result Of Sentiment Analysis

It is evident that the media's attitude appears more positive, while the individual's own attitude tends to be negative. Moreover, the attitude of individuals towards the official media is particularly negative. This may reflect, on the one hand, the impact of individuals' concern and worry about real-world issues on their own emotional inclination. On the other hand, it also reflects the resistance of young people to official discourse intervention.

Especially considering the severity of the real-world issues faced by young people, it is closely related to the governing capabilities of the Chinese government. The official intervention in such societal issues undoubtedly provides an opportunity for young people to express their views on the government through these issues.

Therefore, the research supports the first hypothesis and refutes the second one. The interaction between official media and young individuals is mainly negative

Recommendations

At present, there is no existing research directly examining the interaction between young individuals and the state on the topic of religion. Therefore, this research is significantly lacking in references to previous achievements. Future research should integrate a broader range of sociological and psychological theories to study this phenomenon.

In terms of data acquisition, constrained by web crawling policies and post deletions, the sample size is not large. Future research should consider incorporating data from other social platforms in China simultaneously.

In terms of data processing, future research could consider employing topic modeling and deep learning to extract themes from the dataset. Additionally, other machine learning models could be used for classification and sentiment analysis, allowing for a comparison of the effectiveness among different models.

References

Cao, Nanlai. "Chinese Religions on the Edge: Shifting Religion-State Dynamics." China Review, vol. 18, no. 4, 2018, pp. 1–10. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26535088. Accessed 20 Jan. 2024.

Pew Research Center. "Measuring Religion in China.", 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/08/30/measuring-religion-in-china/

Haerpfer, C., Inglehart, R., Moreno, A., Welzel, C., Kizilova, K., Diez-Medrano J., M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen (eds.). 2022. World Values Survey: Round Seven - Country-Pooled Datafile Version 5.0. Madrid, Spain & Vienna, Austria: JD Systems Institute & WVSA Secretariat. doi:10.14281/18241.20, https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp

Institute of Social Science Survey, Peking University, 2015, "China Family Panel Studies (CFPS)", https://doi.org/10.18170/DVN/45LCSO, Peking University Open Research Data Platform, V42