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traditional Chinese medical treatments: a study on discussion
forum responses**

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Exploring Hong Kong public attitudes and concerns about traditional Chinese medical treatments: a study on discussion forum responses

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to analyze online responses to gain insights into public attitudes and concerns regarding traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) among Hong Kong residents. By addressing gaps in understanding public sentiment, this study contributes to the development of effective health-care policies.

Design/methodology/approach – Responses were collected from Baby-Kingdom.com using Python, gathering 17,568 TCM-related comments from 2016 to 2023. Analysis involved an eight-theme codebook and sentiment and semantic network analyses with DiVoMiner.

Findings – Most responses expressed positive sentiments and attitudes toward TCM. The analysis revealed recurring topics related to conditioning and specific diseases, including gynecological problems. Clinic service quality, fair pricing and convenient locations were also highlighted.

Research limitations/implications – This study examines the networked public sphere and the Theory of Planned Behavior regarding TCM, emphasizing online forums' impact on attitudes and highlighting gaps in service access, using big data and an interdisciplinary approach.

Practical implications – The findings of this study from Baby-Kingdom.com emphasize the need to improve the accessibility of TCM-related discussions. An official platform for professionals is proposed, with government support for reliable information and partnerships with local universities to expand services.

Originality/value – This study provides valuable insights into the popularity of TCM in Hong Kong, which may encourage uptake and use of TCM services in the health-care sector in not only Hong Kong but also the Greater Bay Area, China and potentially other countries in the future.

Keywords Attitude, Baby-Kingdom.com, Semantic analysis, Text analysis, Traditional Chinese medicine

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) is deemed to provide notable advantages in rehabilitation, reduce long-term effects and minimize the risk of relapse. In recent years, as the global influence of TCM has grown, some countries have increasingly focused on the development of TCM services. Japan, the first country in Asia to introduce and embrace TCM trade, is also the largest importer and consumer of TCM products and services (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). South Korea has been actively promoting the development of TCM trade services. Although trade in TCM has expanded in East Asia (e.g. Singapore) and other countries (e.g. Australia, Switzerland, Spain and the United Arab Emirates), its continued development is essential to support proactive medical policies and action plans that facilitate its integration into health-care systems worldwide (Zhang *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, with an increasing number of patients in different countries seeking treatment through TCM, exploring and enhancing understanding of TCM are vital to improving health-care services (Koh and Goh, 2021). The recent surge in awareness and understanding of TCM has increased its acceptance and use globally. Hence, public interest in TCM is rising, highlighting its growing importance.

The potential of TCM was reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the World Health Organization (WHO) acknowledged its remarkable contribution to global efforts against the disease (WHO, 2022). The use of TCM has become a global phenomenon, with the WHO encouraging its integration into modern health-care systems (Wang *et al.*, 2024). Of the 194 WHO member states, 170 reported using herbal medicines and other forms of TCM (WHO, 2023). The WHO defines TCM as a vast body of knowledge, skills and practices rooted in the beliefs and experiences of various cultures used to maintain health and address physical and mental illnesses through prevention, diagnosis, treatment and improvement (Wang *et al.*, 2024). Recognizing the potential of TCM to contribute to universal health coverage, many countries have taken steps to integrate its practices, products and practitioners into their national health-care systems (Wang *et al.*, 2024).

As an international city with advanced medical services and many talented doctors, Hong Kong provides a unique background for examining the changing concept of TCM as a health-care and body-conditioning option (Ng *et al.*, 2022b). In particular, as of July 2024, Hong Kong had 10,581 TCM practitioners, with less than 10% working in the public health-care system (Department of Health, Hong Kong, 2024). To address this imbalance, the government aims to enhance the Chinese Medicine Division, formulate a comprehensive TCM development plan, expand outpatient services and facilitate collaboration between TCM and Western medicine practitioners (Hong Kong Policy Address, 2023). These initiatives aim to create a professional TCM health-care system. The government has also introduced policies like integrating TCM into the public system; establishing regulations for Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture and massage; and creating the Chinese Medicine Council (Chung *et al.*, 2012). Initiated in 2018, the Chinese Medicine Hospital project is currently in the commissioning stage, with plans to provide hospital services by the end of 2025 (Health Bureau, 2024). Nonetheless, the importance of traditional, complementary and alternative medicine should not be underestimated (Koh and Goh, 2021). Following the global trend and development, TCM has gained a statutory recognition similar to that of Western medicine and emerged as a prominent health-care treatment alternative and a crucial component of medical advancement in Hong Kong.

Although Hong Kong has a cultural affinity with TCM, it considers Western medicine as the mainstream health-care approach (Hung, 2003). According to the Thematic Household Survey Report (Census and Statistics Department, 2024), approximately 43.8% of the surveyed population was in need of regular medical treatment. Among them, the majority

(approximately 84.6%) of the respondents consulted solely with Western medicine practitioners. By contrast, a small percentage (around 7.2%) of the respondents chose treatment exclusively from Chinese medicine practitioners. Interestingly, 8.2% of the respondents reported using Western medicine and TCM, which indicated the use of a combined health-care approach during 2022–2023. The findings highlight the reliance of Hong Kong residents on Western medicine while acknowledging the presence of individuals who integrate Western and TCM practices into their health-care routine. This outcome illustrates that the widespread adoption of TCM faces obstacles, with public concerns being a major hurdle. Therefore, the investigation of TCM integration in Hong Kong is a valuable case study for understanding how to effectively integrate TCM into medical practice based on public concerns.

Regarding the concerns, determining the most suitable TCM treatment can be challenging for the public. TCM, with a history spanning over 5,000 years (Pan *et al.*, 2014), encompasses various treatments widely used in Chinese communities. These treatments include Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, moxibustion therapy and other treatments, each with distinct principles and practices targeting specific health conditions or promoting overall well-being (Chan and Tsang, 2018). Thus, many individuals seek advice and recommendations from others to make informed decisions about TCM treatments (Ng *et al.*, 2022b). Online discussion forums are one of the common means for getting TCM-related information. Further research should be conducted to obtain meaningful insights, particularly regarding the adoption of TCM (Laureate *et al.*, 2023).

Given the limited understanding of public attitudes and concerns toward TCM in Hong Kong (Ng *et al.*, 2022a), the present study aims to address this gap. This study aims to analyze the responses from a discussion forum to gain deep insights into the public perspectives and reactions to TCM in Hong Kong. Two theoretical frameworks are adopted: the networked public sphere and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The networked public sphere highlights how individuals create content, which is applied here to a Hong Kong discussion forum, illustrating its effect on public discourse. The TPB emphasizes how attitudes influence decision making. By combining these concepts, this study offers theoretical insights into how public discourse and individual attitudes interact. It then addresses three research questions:

- RQ1. What has been the prevailing attitude of Hong Kong residents toward traditional Chinese medicine in recent years?
- RQ2. What are the primary concerns and topics discussed by Hong Kong residents online?
- RQ3. What associations can be identified among the concerns and topics discussed frequently by the public?

These findings offer valuable insights into the advancement and acceptance of TCM within the health-care sector in Hong Kong and provide a model for incorporating public concerns into medical treatment development globally.

Literature review

Two theoretical frameworks are adopted for this study. The first one is the networked public sphere (Benkler, 2006), which describes a communication space where individuals have open access to content creation, in contrast to traditional mass-mediated public. This concept is applied to a general discussion forum in Hong Kong focused on TCM, illustrating how content creation and interaction within a networked public sphere shape public discourse on

TCM. The second framework is the TPB, an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action, which has been a foundational model for understanding human behavior. The TPB emphasizes important constructs such as attitude, subjective norm, intention and behavior (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1970). Attitude reflects an individual's evaluation of a specific action; subjective norm captures perceived social approval; intention indicates the motivation to act; and behavior results from these influences (Ajzen and Fishbein, 1972). The predictive power of TPB stems from its focus on behavioral determinants and its adaptability to various contexts, including technology use and health treatment. Together, these concepts provide a comprehensive foundation for exploring online TCM discussions in the context of a networked public sphere.

Online discussion platform as a networked public sphere

Habermas (1991) claimed that a public sphere is meant to facilitate public debate and emphasized that for something to be considered public, it must be open to all. The public sphere can provide information, facilitate communication and allow access for all citizens. Benkler (2006) conceptualized the networked public sphere as a network of communication spaces in which individuals have open access to content creation. In particular, online platform plays a crucial role in fostering and sustaining peer-to-peer connections. It offers users a dedicated platform to share and disseminate specialized knowledge, which helps create a strong sense of belonging and community among participants (Qian et al., 2023). Gui et al. (2017) added that peer support in online health communities provides members vital informational, emotional and instrumental assistance for managing health and disease, including personal health information disclosure (Karampela et al., 2019) and health knowledge sharing (Zhang et al., 2020a). Members can engage in in-depth discussions, making these interactions valuable for those seeking support (Le et al., 2023).

Analyzing posts on online forums can provide valuable insights into peer interactions within online platforms. However, only a limited number of studies have explored the unique characteristics of online discussions, thus posing challenges for understanding how individuals seek and receive support in the context of TCM (Gui et al., 2017). For instance, the studies conducted by Han (2018) and Chen et al. (2018) demonstrate the applicability of the networked public sphere concept to Weibo, where TCM practitioners, experts and users engage in substantive exchanges. Nonetheless, the situation in Hong Kong differs because it does not have a dedicated online platform for TCM discussions. Instead, the public primarily engages in various general discussion forums to seek health-related advice. Among these, Baby-Kingdom.com emerges as an important platform specifically dedicated to family and health topics; it facilitates help-seeking behaviors and influencing the quality of advice received regarding TCM. Further research is needed to explore how these online interactions shape public attitudes toward TCM and its adoption.

Established in 2002, Baby-Kingdom.com has gained widespread recognition in Hong Kong over the past two decades. According to the information provided on LinkedIn, Baby-Kingdom.com boasts an impressive user base of over 300,000 registered members and a vast database of 300 million messages. Shen et al. (2021) noted that the platform obtained considerable user engagement, with an average of 3,893 posts and 52,175 replies each week. Additionally, the overall public sentiment toward Baby-Kingdom.com is largely positive, and it has the highest consumer confidence levels among online forums, as evidenced by its cumulative consumer confidence index of 12,316 (Shen et al., 2021). Furthermore, the core user base of Baby-Kingdom.com likely comprises parents, expectant parents and other caregivers residing in or closely connected to Hong Kong. The wide range of users, from young first-time parents to experienced caregivers, allows for valuable knowledge sharing

across different life stages and experiences. The data from [Similarweb \(2024\)](#) indicate that the visitors of Baby-Kingdom.com are comprised of 54.85% male and 45.15% female, with the majority falling within the age groups of 25–34 years (21%), 35–44 years (20%), and 55–64 years (20%). As of June 2024, the site attracted around 3.6 million monthly visits, with users averaging nearly 4 h per visit. Visitors come from Hong Kong, Taiwan, the USA, the UK, Canada and other countries ([Similarweb, 2024](#)). Although primarily focused on the Hong Kong context, the forum also attracts users from other parts of Asia or even worldwide who are interested in parenting trends and insights from this major Asian business hub. Hence, the site is a good resource for obtaining valuable insights into public opinions.

The Baby-Kingdom.com platform has clear discussion topic sections (e.g. childcare, medical care and health), and several scholars used the responses from this forum to represent the Hong Kong public perspective. For example, [Tian and Zhang \(2022\)](#) examined the childcare and health information discussions on Baby-Kingdom.com and discovered that many users shared specific medical advice and recommendations for doctors. Similarly, [Wong et al. \(2024\)](#) analyzed the responses related to breastmilk and breastfeeding collected from Baby-Kingdom.com and found that most of the parents provided informational and emotional support to others. However, their studies are not specifically on TCM. Given the wealth of relevant discussions on the platform, the present study collected responses from the Baby-Kingdom.com forum to assess public perspectives toward TCM in Hong Kong. The active participation on this well-established online community makes it a valuable source for understanding public attitudes and behaviors related to health-care decision-making in the Hong Kong context.

Role of attitude in traditional Chinese medicine utilization

The TPB has been widely used in previous research to examine how attitudes influence various behaviors. In the present study, attitude is defined as an individual's beliefs or feelings toward an object or concept ([Ajzen and Fishbein, 1970](#)). Attitudes are shaped by personal experiences and background, considerably influencing behavior; they are not static and can change in response to external factors ([Ajzen and Fishbein, 1972](#)). Intention, on the contrary, is defined as a state in which an individual is consciously motivated to take action after thoughtfully evaluating the potential consequences of that action based on available information ([Ajzen, 1991](#)). Therefore, attitudes play a crucial role in shaping intentions, with behavior being influenced by a person's attitude toward a specific action and their perceptions of others' expectations ([Chen et al., 2000](#)).

Many prior studies have demonstrated that attitudes are pivotal in the selection and adoption of health treatments. They greatly affect individuals' decisions, including their intentions to receive the COVID-19 vaccine ([Shmueli, 2021](#)), purchase dietary supplements ([Najib et al., 2022](#)), engage in TCM medical travel ([Wang et al., 2023](#)) and adopt mobile health services ([Zhang et al., 2020b](#)). The studies have indicated that positive attitudes toward specific therapies can enhance patients' likelihood of seeking and adhering to those treatments, whereas negative attitudes may deter engagement. Specifically, attitude pertains to one's willingness to use TCM for the relief of symptoms ([Chen et al., 2000](#); [Li et al., 2020](#)). Some studies have supported that attitude toward TCM greatly influences its utilization ([Karimian et al., 2021](#); [Koh and Goh, 2021](#); [Mou, 2017](#)). [Chan et al. \(2015\)](#) further demonstrated that individuals with prior acupuncture experience tend to have a more positive attitude toward TCM, whereas those without this experience often exhibit skepticism; the research finding highlights how personal experiences can greatly influence attitudes and the intention to use TCM. Hence, individuals who demonstrate a positive attitude toward alternative medical treatments are likely to use TCM ([Salah et al., 2020](#)).

Some studies have also shown that the public typically exhibits a positive attitude toward TCM. For instance, in the research of Zhao *et al.* (2023), of the 31,599 patients surveyed, majority (76%) indicated they would use TCM for disease prevention, and over half (67%) would use it for multiple health conditions. As a growing number of people begin to use TCM, their attitudes tend to shift positively; therefore, fostering positive beliefs and attitudes is crucial for influencing the willingness to pay, which can encourage extensive adoption and use of TCM in the future (Koh and Goh, 2021).

Public attitudes and perceptions toward traditional Chinese medicine in Hong Kong

In the case of Hong Kong, several studies have investigated the attitudes toward TCM among its residents (Chung *et al.*, 2012; Holroyd *et al.*, 2008; Ng *et al.*, 2022b; Wong *et al.*, 2006). Researchers primarily approached this topic through qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys. For instance, Lam (2001) conducted in-depth interviews with 29 participants and revealed that although TCM effectively addresses root health issues, it is often perceived as slow-acting compared with the powerful but potentially harmful effects of Western medicine. Rochelle and Yim (2014) found that normative utilization patterns significantly predict trust in TCM. This finding is echoed by Chan and Tsang (2018), who emphasized perceived cost and trust as key determinants in a larger sample of 1,321 residents. Lam *et al.* (2023) explored TCM use among 246 cancer patients aged 15–39 years, with 71% using it to enhance general health and 33% for chronic symptom management. Hung *et al.* (2022) reported that most of their 137 surveyed patients experience symptom improvement and increase energy after TCM use, motivating recommendations to others. Ng *et al.* (2022a) further supported attitudes toward TCM as the strongest predictor of intention to use it. Chung *et al.* (2007) noted that most respondents view TCM positively, believing it has fewer side effects than Western medicine and is effective for minor ailments. However, despite these findings, existing research has predominantly relied on cross-sectional surveys and interviews, leaving gaps in understanding public attitudes and intentions regarding TCM use in Hong Kong (Hung *et al.*, 2022; Ng *et al.*, 2022a). Understanding of public responses to TCM remains limited (Koh and Goh, 2021), particularly in the post-pandemic context. The present study aims to address this gap by analyzing online discussions to gain insights into public attitudes toward TCM as well as specific concerns and factors influencing treatment choices in Hong Kong. The findings can enhance the understanding of public sentiment and inform the development of effective and responsive health-care policies.

Influence of online discussions and sharing on attitudes toward traditional Chinese medicine

Several scholars suggested that social influences within the framework of the TPB should be expanded to include informational influence (Azila Mohd Noor *et al.*, 2014). Grajales *et al.* (2014) emphasized the growing importance of social media in the health-care sector, facilitating knowledge sharing, collaboration and driving social change. Specifically, online discussions and sharing of personal experiences related to TCM can considerably shape individuals' attitudes toward TCM. Recent research by Ng *et al.* (2022a) has revealed that approximately 60% of participants obtained TCM information from friends and family, while 42% sourced it from the internet. Additionally, several studies have demonstrated that attitudes toward TCM are largely influenced by experiences shared by others. For example, Ng *et al.* (2022b) found a positive relationship between attitudes toward TCM and its actual utilization, and they emphasized that shared positive experiences are crucial in shaping others' attitudes. Collectively, attitudes toward TCM are influenced by sharing of experiences and personal interactions, which can ultimately affect the adoption of TCM and

related treatments. Online discussions can have diverse effects on attitude formation and usage intention. Positive endorsements shared online tend to foster favorable perceptions, whereas negative or skeptical views can discourage individual and collective adoption of TCM.

Given the considerable presence of parents and caregivers on the Baby-Kingdom.com forum, where users predominantly express concerns about health issues, several studies have used data from this platform for academic research purposes (Ng and Lin, 2024; Wong *et al.*, 2024). However, only a limited number of recent studies have leveraged the generated topics to provide meaningful insights from online data (Laureate *et al.*, 2023). The present study aims to address several key implications arising from the collection and analysis of online responses regarding TCM. First, it aims to provide valuable insights into public attitudes toward TCM, thereby improving the understanding of its effectiveness and facilitating its potential for wide acceptance. Second, by analyzing emerging trends, patterns and concerns reflected in online feedback, the study aims to identify major issues and public apprehensions, which may inform improvements in TCM services. Overall, the findings are expected to contribute to the ongoing development and enhancement of TCM practices.

Methods

Data collection and preparation

Several studies have examined user-generated content through thematic content and semantic analyses, highlighting the influence of online discussions on user behavior across various online communities. For instance, Wright *et al.* (2021) investigated how specific content features affect the quantity and type of responses to posts regarding breast cancer risk. Qian *et al.* (2023) explored how content- and social-related responses influence users' behaviors in replying to posts. With reference to these works, the present study adhered to the methodological steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Koivumäki and Jallinoja (2023). These steps include familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and ultimately producing the analysis. This iterative process involved continually revisiting the data to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the themes and patterns emerging from user interactions.

The first step of this study involved preparing the data set. Online posts from Baby-Kingdom.com, a popular forum in Hong Kong that offers parenting and health-care advice (Wong *et al.*, 2024), served as the primary data source. Users must register as members and be at least 18 years old to access exclusive services such as chat rooms and forums. The registration process includes a declaration to provide accurate personal information, and all members must comply with the terms of use and relevant Hong Kong laws (Baby-Kingdom.com, 2024). This structured membership process enhances the reliability of the data collected because members are encouraged to share their experiences and concerns within a supportive online environment fostered by the forum's administrators. Therefore, the members constituted the sample for this study, and their responses were considered a valuable data set for investigating public concerns regarding TCM.

The second step of this study involved using the Chinese keyword “TCM” (“中醫”) to crawl and gather relevant responses from the Baby-Kingdom.com forum with Python. Data collection focused on responses posted between January 2016 and October 2023, resulting in a total of 21,426 comments. These responses were saved in Excel files and subsequently reviewed. The research team first identified patterns in the collected responses and then removed duplicate and irrelevant responses related to TCM. The data preprocessing included segmenting words, eliminating stop words and excluding irrelevant posts such as advertisements and blank comments. This process yielded a final data set of 17,568 valid

comments, excluding quotes from previous responses and repeated entries, which were used for sentiment and semantic network analyses.

The third step involved performing data preparation with reference to the study by [Chiu et al. \(2021\)](#). Manual and machine coding were combined using DiVoMiner – a computational tool developed for data cleaning, filtering, analysis and visualization ([Chang et al., 2020](#)). DiVoMiner uses machine learning algorithms to identify simplified and traditional Chinese text ([Ao et al., 2022](#)). For example, [Zhou et al. \(2021\)](#) used DiVoMiner to gather Weibo posts from 2013 to 2021, resulting in 1,164 valid data points related to HPV vaccines. Their findings demonstrated the effectiveness of DiVoMiner in extracting topic-specific information from large-scale social media data. Similarly, [Dong et al. \(2023\)](#) analyzed corporate social responsibility messages from Fortune 500 companies on Twitter and Weibo using this tool. The capabilities of DiVoMiner enable researchers to efficiently mine text data for insights, providing evidence of its efficacy as a content analysis tool in the context of this study. Additionally, the research team's decision to use DiVoMiner was influenced by the tool's specialized capability to analyze sentiments in Cantonese (traditional Chinese). This language is distinct from others, such as Putonghua (Mandarin Chinese), with unique expressions commonly found in written Cantonese. Several scholars demonstrated the effectiveness of DiVoMiner in analyzing written comments extracted from discussion forums in Hong Kong. For instance, [Chang et al. \(2020\)](#) used DiVoMiner to retrieve and filter Facebook user data for health communication analysis. [Chang et al. \(2021\)](#) used it to automatically label obesity-related traditional Chinese keywords and generate classification results through algorithmic coding. These studies have provided additional evidence supporting the efficacy of DiVoMiner as a sentiment analysis tool, particularly in analyzing online responses from Hong Kong.

Coding

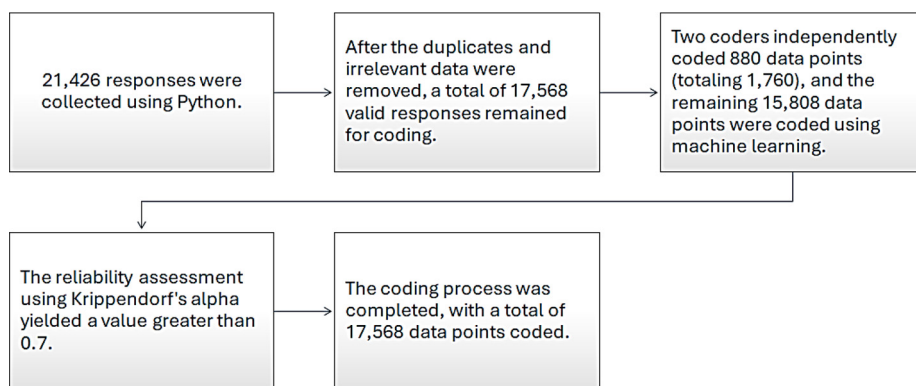
To facilitate coding with DiVoMiner, the research team developed a codebook by analyzing the frequency of keywords associated with various themes with reference to the studies of [Wang et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Zingg et al. \(2023\)](#). Initially, the team consulted a TCM practitioner to ensure accurate classification of keywords. Subsequently, a codebook was created to train two research assistants on the coding guidelines. The codebook identified eight distinct categories: price, location, referrals and recommendations, treatment, effect, specific diseases, reservation and booking and other topics. The “specific diseases” category was further subdivided into four subcategories: physical illnesses, psychological conditions, gynecological issues and health and wellness, chosen for their relevance to user discussions. Keywords that did not align with the other seven themes were classified as “others,” including terms such as “clear customs” and “internship,” which were deemed irrelevant to the study's focus. [Table 1](#) presents the themes alongside corresponding examples in Chinese and their English translations, highlighting the comprehensive approach taken in developing the codebook.

Each coder reviewed all collected comments and coded 880 responses. After reconciling their work, they produced a total of 1,760 manually coded responses, representing approximately 10% of the overall data. These coded responses were then assessed by two professors for further evaluation. Intercooder reliability was measured using this 10% sample, yielding Krippendorff's alpha values between 0.76 and 0.84 across the eight themes. Following the manual coding phase, DiVoMiner was used to code the remaining responses. The reliability of this machine coding was also evaluated with Krippendorff's alpha, which ranged from 0.78 to 0.82, indicating good reliability and acceptable agreement with the manual coding because it exceeded the 0.7 threshold. The machine-coded data were then imported into SPSS Statistics 23 for further analysis of the response content. The coding process is depicted in [Figure 1](#).

Table 1. Coding themes and examples

Category	Examples of keywords (Chinese)	English translation
Theme 1: Price	診金 藥費 免費	Consultation fee Medication cost Free
Theme 2: Location	地址 旺角 元朗	Address Mongkok Yuen long
Theme 3: Referrals and recommendations	推薦 介紹	Recommendation Referral
Theme 4: Treatment	鍼灸 把脈 開藥	Acupuncture Pulse diagnosis Prescribing medicine
Theme 5: Effect	有效 改善	Effective Improvement
Theme 6: Specific diseases	懷孕 安胎 感冒 濕疹 調理	Pregnant Maintain pregnancy Cold Eczema Conditioning
Theme 7: Reservation and booking	預約 登記	Reservation Registration
Theme 8: Others	過關 實習	clear customs Internship

Source: Authors' own work



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 1. Coding process

Data analysis

The data analysis following the coding process comprised two main components, aided by DiVoMiner. First, a sentiment analysis was conducted to categorize the comments as positive, negative or neutral, using a codebook with seven distinct themes. Second, these

seven themes were used to create a structured framework for organizing and understanding the concerns and topics addressed in the responses. To gain a deep understanding of the TCM-related content, semantic network analysis was performed to identify the co-occurrence patterns among the 70 most frequently used words. Valuable insights into the keywords’ interconnectedness and associations were gained by examining the relationships between the keywords, which led to a comprehensive understanding of their collective meaning and effect. The techniques enabled the research team to thoroughly examine the TCM-related responses from the public in Hong Kong.

Results

RQ1: What has been the prevailing attitude of Hong Kong residents toward traditional Chinese medicine in recent years?

The sentiment analysis yielded several noteworthy findings on responses toward TCM. A large proportion of the comments, specifically 7,691 (around 43.8%), showcased a positive sentiment toward TCM. By contrast, 4,603 (26.2%) comments expressed a negative sentiment toward TCM. The difference between the number of positive and negative sentiments, which amounts to 3,088 (approximately 17.6%), demonstrated the diverse range of opinions and experiences related to TCM and a notable inclination toward positive sentiment and TCM adoption.

Table 2 presents examples of the expressed attitude and the corresponding sentiment analysis results. Individuals with a positive attitude toward TCM typically shared their personal experiences with others and recommended its use. By contrast, individuals with a neutral attitude expressed a desire to try Chinese medicine and sought information and insights from experienced individuals. Among those with a negative attitude, some tried TCM but did not

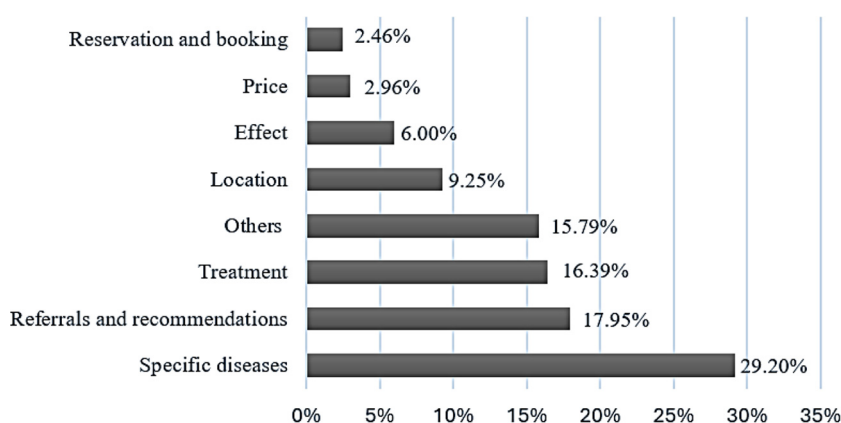
Table 2. Summary and examples of traditional Chinese medicine sentiment assessment

Keyword		Responses/Comments	
		Positive (%)	Negative (%)
Traditional Chinese medicine (中醫) (Total: 15,382 data)		7,691 (43.78%)	4,603 (26.2%)
Examples of comments	Examples (Chinese)	Translation (English)	
Positive	依家真系覺得精神體力好左, 婦科病都好左好多, 真系覺得好值得。	Now, I genuinely feel that both my mental and physical strength have improved significantly, and my gynecological health has also shown remarkable progress. I truly believe that it was all worth it	
Neutral	問過西醫, 話有藥可以止口乾。中醫都係話肝腎不足要滋陰調理, 但需要時間。	I sought advice from a Western doctor, who informed me that there is no medication available to relieve dry mouth. A Chinese medicine practitioner explained that it may be attributed to insufficient liver and kidney functions and regulating treatment is necessary, but it will take time	
Negative	唔該曬你呀! 我唔敢再食啦! 都係睇返西醫好D!	Thank you so much, but I dare not continue taking it (Chinese medicine). It is better to go back and consult a Western doctor	
Source: Authors' own work			

observe any serious or negative effects, whereas others held negative views about it because of their lack of knowledge and experience. Despite the varying attitudes, the positive comments were the most common among the collected responses (i.e. the proportion of the negative comments was much lower than the proportion of the positive and neutral comments).

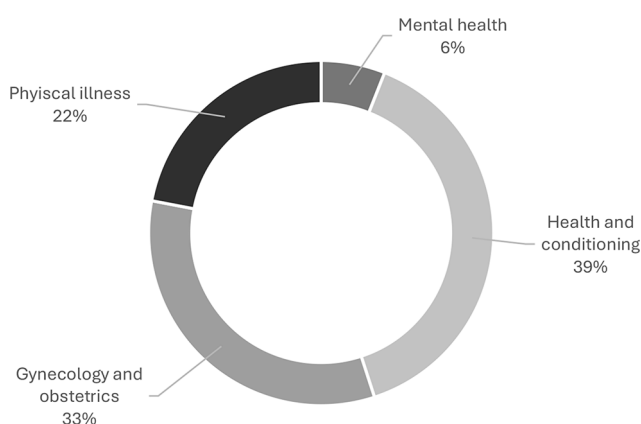
RQ2: What are the primary concerns and topics discussed by Hong Kong residents online?

As mentioned previously, a codebook was used to categorize the specific keywords into the distinct themes. The results in Figure 2 show that the majority of the responses was related to specific diseases, followed by referrals and recommendations. To understand the results, the research team further analyzed the data on specific diseases and found that a large proportion of the comments focused on specific symptoms related to health and conditioning, followed



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 2. Major concerns and topics across eight themes



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 3. Special diseases

Downloaded from <http://www.emerald.com/ijphm/article-pdf/doi/10.1108/IJPHM-05-2024-0039/9752858/ijphm-05-2024-0039.pdf> by Vocational Training Council Hong Kong user on 29 April 2024



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 5. Semantic network: co-occurrence-based associations between different keywords

Three key routes were noted. The first route (Category 1), shown in dark gray, encompassed various keywords that reflect the logistical and emotional dimensions of seeking health care. For example, certain nodes emphasized various physical and health issues, including gynecological concerns (like “pregnancy,” “maintain-pregnancy” and “menstruation”), allergies and colds, linked to keywords such as “recommend,” “improvement” and “help.” Another connection involved different nodes, such as “worry,” “experience,” “consultation,” “government,” “clinic,” “registration,” “reservation,” “fee”

and “service,” highlighting the complexities of medical booking processes and the need for enhanced support in accessing health care. These concerns also appeared in the second route (Category 2), depicted in medium gray, which focused on the factors influencing TCM service concerns. Keywords like “fee,” “clinic” and “information” highlighted the financial and informational aspects related to different treatments. The final route (Category 3), represented in light gray, captured key concepts related to health outcomes and specific medical concerns. Keywords such as “success” and “improvement” reflected the positive results patients seeking through various interventions. Additionally, words like “gynecology,” “menstruation,” “eczema” and “pregnancy” pointed to important aspects of women’s health, emphasizing a focus on reproductive health issues.

In sum, the nodes reflected a strong emphasis on body conditioning and highlighted concerns regarding gynecological diseases, with individuals expressing a keen interest in receiving TCM recommendations. Specific concerns about clinic services – such as registration, reservation, consultation fees and practitioner experience – demonstrated the economic feasibility, fairness and quality of TCM services. These factors were crucial for patients to make informed decisions regarding appropriate treatment options. Moreover, the attention given to appointment and registration in relation to government-related clinics signified the public demand for convenient access to TCM services.

Discussion

Several findings obtained after the sentiment and semantic network analyses could address the research questions. For *RQ1*, the majority of the responses demonstrated a positive sentiment and attitude and emphasized the enhancement of physical conditions and overall health. Keywords such as “improve/improvement” and “success” reflected the perceived efficacy of TCM treatments. However, some responses still showed a lack of specific knowledge and could not confirm the effectiveness of TCM because it may take longer to demonstrate positive effects, resulting in a neutral stance. The findings align with previous studies (Chung *et al.*, 2007; Ng *et al.*, 2022b), which indicate that the public in Hong Kong generally holds a positive attitude toward TCM.

Regarding *RQ2*, the analyses revealed several common TCM-related concerns and discussed topics. First, the keyword “conditioning” emerged as a point of focus. Conditioning is a vital concept in TCM, which refers to health promotion by balancing body equilibrium. TCM practitioners typically assess body condition by palpating the pulse and recommend treatments such as herbal medicine, diet therapy and acupuncture to restore balance and enhance body condition (Koo, 1984). Second, the findings showed that specific diseases are of concern among Hong Kong individuals who discuss TCM. Gynecological problems are prominent, which aligns with the findings of previous studies that have highlighted such problems as common conditions for which TCM treatment is sought in Hong Kong (Chiu *et al.*, 2021). The responses expressed a preference for TCM approaches for addressing gynecological issues, body toning and skin problems. Third, many of the responses indicated the need for reliable referrals and recommendations for experienced TCM practitioners. Some individuals specifically requested referrals in certain locations. Finally, in terms of treatment, many of the responses displayed individuals’ interest in various techniques, particularly, acupuncture. Some individuals inquired about the duration of treatments and expressed curiosity about the necessity of extended periods for taking Chinese medicine. The findings shed light on the common concerns and discussions related to TCM and, thus, provided valuable insights for further research and practice in the field.

Regarding *RQ3*, several keywords with a high DC were associated with body conditioning and recommendations. In addition, the discussions frequently mentioned the quality of clinic

services, which encompassed factors such as a dependable appointment system, fair pricing and convenient locations. The terms “clinic” and “recommend/recommendations” suggested conversations revolving around recommending and introducing reputable TCM clinics and medical institutions perceived to be reliable and esteemed providers of high-quality TCM services. In addition, considerable attention should be paid to the appointment registration process of government-owned clinics. Concerns about the accessibility of Chinese medical services were common. Such clinics are expected to offer convenient appointment and registration options to meet the increasing demand for TCM services.

Theoretical implications

In relation to the findings discussed above, this study presents important theoretical implications for TCM research by integrating the networked public sphere and the TPB with interdisciplinary approaches and big data analytics. The first implication pertains to the networked public sphere, where online discourse considerably shapes public opinion and health behaviors (Le *et al.*, 2023). The present study suggests that online discussion forums play a crucial role in disseminating information about TCM, thereby influencing collective attitudes and behaviors (Gui *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, the findings indicate that despite a favorable attitude toward TCM, gaps in understanding practical aspects of accessing TCM services – such as appointment procedures and practitioner qualifications – may hinder the intention to use these services and actual usage. According to the TPB, attitudes and subjective norms influence individual intentions and behaviors (Chen *et al.*, 2000). This theory underscores the need for formal mechanisms to enhance awareness and understanding of TCM, effectively bridging the gap between intention and action. By addressing the identified knowledge gaps and leveraging positive attitudes toward TCM, stakeholders, including government entities, can foster an integrated approach to health care that promotes informed health choices. Ultimately, these implications underscore the importance of improving public understanding of TCM to boost its usage.

Moreover, the convergence of TCM, big data analysis and social network analysis creates a robust framework for understanding health behaviors and public perceptions. This study illustrates that interdisciplinary research facilitates the integration of theories from diverse fields, offering a holistic approach to analysis (Brewer and Cunningham, 2023) and expanding methodological diversity (Newman, 2023). This collaboration fosters the emergence of new insights and facilitates the identification of novel research questions, enriching researchers’ understanding of the complexities inherent in traditional issues. Furthermore, this study highlights major public concerns, such as the need for basic information about public and private clinics for appointments, which can be addressed through enhanced communication strategies. By leveraging big data, researchers can gain extensive insights into user preferences and uncover previously unnoticed patterns, ultimately informing the development of innovative products, processes and business models (Alsmadi *et al.*, 2023). Such advancements not only drive creativity within the academic community but also enhance practical applications in TCM research.

Practical implications

The findings on Baby-Kingdom.com in Hong Kong underscore the critical need for enhanced online discussion forums, particularly in terms of improving the archiving, indexing and recommendation of experiential knowledge from existing discussions. This aligns with previous studies aimed at enhancing the identification and preservation of high-quality responses on online platforms (Gui *et al.*, 2017). Specifically, establishing dedicated categories for TCM topics within health sections is recommended. These

categories can include information on public clinics and treatments for specific conditions, such as gynecology and obstetrics. Furthermore, the findings indicate a current lack of official online discussion forums specifically for TCM in Hong Kong. Prior research has also demonstrated the risks associated with the spread of inaccurate medical information online, highlighting the importance of medical professionals staying informed about misconceptions to educate the public effectively ([Alnashwan et al., 2023](#); [Cole et al., 2016](#)). To address this gap, professional organizations should consider establishing an online platform that invites TCM graduates and experienced practitioners to engage with the public by answering questions. This initiative can not only enhance access to accurate information about TCM but also foster a community for sharing knowledge and experiences, greatly contributing to improved public understanding and fostering positive attitudes toward TCM practices.

Although discussion forums can offer valuable information, not all sources are trustworthy or current. To address this problem, the government should invest in promotional initiatives that inform the public about reliable information sources, including official websites and verified platforms. These measures can assist residents to access accurate and timely information about TCM services, enabling them to make informed health-care decisions. Therefore, another key practical implication is the enhancement of the government's role in proactively addressing the health-care needs of residents through targeted strategies. Central to this effort is the provision of detailed and accessible information about public TCM clinics. The government should ensure that information regarding clinic services, appointment systems and consultation fees is readily available online. When individuals can easily obtain information online, their ability to access TCM services improves considerably ([Ng et al., 2022b](#)). Another critical implication is the need to improve communication channels because many residents rely on government clinic services. Establishing reliable communication pathways is essential. As [Zingg et al. \(2023\)](#) suggested, bi-directional communication between providers and patients can effectively address concerns. Thus, the government should establish dedicated webpages and hotlines, potentially incorporating chatbots, to address residents' inquiries about TCM services. This initiative can enhance transparency and reliability in accessing information, ultimately increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of communication ([Harahap et al., 2023](#)).

Moreover, developing policies to promote the integration of Western and TCM is essential. [Mohammed et al. \(2023\)](#) indicated that combining TCM with Western medicine can considerably enhance therapeutic effectiveness. To alleviate public uncertainty regarding private clinics, the government should consider establishing guidelines that encourage collaboration between Western and TCM practitioners as well as between public and private clinics. A practical approach is to create a list of government-affiliated private clinics that offer TCM services. By making this list accessible to the public, the government can help build confidence among individuals seeking TCM treatment and facilitate their selection of reputable private clinics. This initiative can enhance the accessibility of TCM services in the private sector.

Finally, collaboration with local universities offers a pivotal opportunity to expand TCM services within the community. By partnering with institutions that have established TCM programs, the government can use their expertise to provide a broader range of services to local residents. These collaborations can enhance access to TCM treatments and foster valuable research and knowledge exchange between academia and government, potentially leading to advancements in TCM health care. By actively promoting the integration of different medical systems, the government can also provide residents with comprehensive

and holistic health-care options, ultimately improving health services across Hong Kong and the Greater Bay Area (Zhang and Shang, 2023).

Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that must be considered. First, the data collection was conducted online and focused on a single discussion forum, which may have led to an overrepresentation of young individuals and specific forum users. This limitation may have introduced selection bias and overlooked the participation of older individuals and those who are not members of the forum. Thus, the findings of this study on Hong Kong residents' attitude toward TCM may not accurately represent the broad population, such as the elderly. Second, content and semantic network analyses, which are based on word frequency, have inherent limitations. They may not fully capture the complexity of semantic relationships and contextual information. Specifically, low-frequency words or domain-specific vocabulary may be disregarded, despite their potential inclusion of important domain knowledge or specific concepts. By ignoring such words, the analysis may result in an incomplete or biased understanding of the semantic relationships and contexts. Although this study provides valuable insights, the limitations associated with the online data collection method and the semantic network analysis technique based on word frequency should be acknowledged. Future research should explore a variety of data collection methods, leveraging responses from multiple local and global platforms for comparative analysis. Additionally, using advanced semantic analysis techniques can help overcome existing limitations and enhance the validity and comprehensiveness of the findings.

Conclusion

By analyzing TCM-related online responses on Baby-Kingdom.com, this study finds that the overall attitude of Hong Kong residents toward Chinese medicine is positive, and an increasing number of individuals are opting to take TCM in the future. This finding also signifies the popularity of TCM in Hong Kong communities. The level of interest in the potential of TCM in general health conditioning and gynecological problems is high. It also highlights Hong Kong residents' specific needs and preferences regarding TCM and serves as a basis for promoting personal health and women's well-being. Furthermore, this study reveals that some individuals have a relatively limited understanding of TCM clinic appointment procedures, the qualifications of TCM practitioners and treatment methods. Most individuals on the site express concerns about the consultation fees and locations of TCM clinics, which can influence their choices when seeking TCM services. In general, the public is deeply concerned about accessing TCM treatments from government-owned clinics and has expressed a desire for more information. Many individuals rely on shared experiences and recommendations from others to gather additional insights. Consequently, the government should take a proactive approach in developing a TCM health-care system by collaborating with various stakeholders, particularly local and international universities. Learning from successful practices in other countries and fostering cooperation are essential for integrating TCM with the Western medical system.

In summary, to encourage individuals to consult TCM practitioners, marketing efforts should focus on raising awareness of practitioners' professional qualifications and disseminating scientific and clinical evidence that supports the effectiveness of TCM treatments. Additionally, learning from successful practices in other countries can inspire innovative strategies for promoting TCM. By combining a well-established medical system with targeted marketing campaigns to promote TCM services and treatments, these

initiatives can create a comprehensive and appealing local health-care plan that collaborates with other cities in China and internationally.

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