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Communication Practice and Challenges of the Africans in Guangzhou Issues on Chinese Social Media Platforms: A Survey Based on Big Data

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the communication practices and challenges surrounding the “Africans in Guangzhou” issue on Chinese social media through the lens of field theory, using big data–assisted online content analysis to investigate discourse construction, emotional tendencies, and cognitive logics while identifying obstacles in information flows. Drawing on 62,877 valid data points collected from Sina Weibo, WeChat, and Zhihu between October 2009 and January 2024, the analysis shows that the issue generated a multi-thematic framework dominated by negative discourse and consolidated a negative “emotional community.” In this process, patriotism and racism became intertwined, and cultural conflict and identity were mutually articulated, producing a complex dynamic of transmission. Concurrently, poor information flow, the generalization of noise, and the agitation of influence flows intensified the complexity and uncertainty of the public opinion field concerning China–Africa relations. The formation of issue-related habits and representations is shown to arise from the interplay of political, cultural, economic, and technological capital, together with external threat power, within the field; addressing these challenges requires collaborative governance across these forces to build a healthier relational network.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, Guangzhou has become a hub for Africans in China, driven by the industrial development of the Pearl River Delta and the deepening of China–Africa cooperation. Correspondingly, the ‘Africans in Guangzhou’ group has also become a topic of concern

in the media and academia. This has led to a surge in discussions on related issues on social media, generating massive text data that reflects public views and social mentality. In early 2020, during Guangzhou’s COVID-19 prevention efforts, tensions arose between Chinese and African communities. Certain media outlets distorted these incidents, fuelling widespread de-

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bate on social media. The resulting text data revealed public sentiment and collective attitudes, highlighting key issues in online discourse. These discussions exposed significant challenges, offering insights into the dynamics of public opinion on social media, particularly regarding non-state issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The presence of Africans in China has emerged as a significant phenomenon in global development and China-Africa cooperation, becoming a central topic in both international media and local governance. As Adams Bodomo(2014) noted, Africans' experiences in China directly influence how Chinese people are treated in Africa, thereby shaping the broader China-Africa relationship. Consequently, scholars from diverse disciplines have focused on this issue. Early research primarily examined cultural differences and exchanges between China and Africa. However, as the number of Africans in China increased, studies expanded to cover nine core areas: geographical distribution, migration reasons, demographic characteristics, group size, settlement nature, social networks, China-Africa relations, local responses, and social integration (Niu & Zhang, 2018). In 2015, The Journal of Pan African Studies published a special issue titled 'Africans in China: Guangzhou and Beyond,' featuring six papers that explored various aspects of this topic from historical, social, cultural, and linguistic perspectives (Bodun&Liu, 2016).

Guangzhou, the primary destination for Africans in China, has attracted the most research attention. The majority of over 50 journal articles on Africans in China, the majority focus on Guangzhou, highlighting its significance in China-Africa relations (Bodom, 2014). Research on this topic can be divided into two main areas: business-and-trade and the African community in Guangzhou. Scholars have found that Guangzhou's African trade community bridges China-Africa relations, evolving through three stages: emergence, prosperity, and decline. This has led to the forming of three distinct social circles: African merchants, African community organizations, and interactions between African merchants and local Chinese residents (Li & Du, 2012a, 2012b). Additionally, cross-ethnic and cross-cultural intermediary organizations have played a crucial role in China-Africa economic cooperation (Angelo Muller & Wehrhahn, 2013).

Research on the African community in Guangzhou has also delved into cultural aspects, such as cross-language communication (Huamei, 2013), illegal immigration and its links to Christian churches (Haugen, 2013), China-Africa transnational marriages (Ma, 2017), and the challenges faced by second-generation Africans in the city (Liu, 2019). These studies highlight

the complex social dynamics and integration issues faced by Africans in Guangzhou.

Media representation of Africans in Guangzhou has also been a subject of study. Dang (2016) found that local media often portray the African community in a stereotypical and negative light, exaggerating their numbers and focusing on problems while ignoring their contributions to China-Africa trade and China's economic development.

Overall, existing research on 'Africans in Guangzhou' is extensive, covering ethnic characteristics, migration patterns, settlement dynamics, social integration, identity construction, and local governance challenges. However, most studies rely on ethnological, anthropological, and management frameworks, with limited communication-focused research, especially regarding social media. In fact, social media exerts a significant influence on the formation mechanisms of public opinion. First, social media has become instrumental in public communication across political, educational, and cultural spheres. In China, WeChat exemplifies this social function, where its credibility significantly shapes public opinion(Wei, 2018). Social media can combine information with direct interethnic contact, thus creating an online public sphere which has the potential to be ethnically more diverse than the offline public sphere (Shota Gelovani et al., 2025). Second, the circle-based and interactive nature of social media has fragmented social discourse. While enabling like-minded groups to coalesce, this structure fosters opinion diversification and dispersion. Consequently, it manifests the criticized "dystopian" effects: rumor proliferation, group polarization, prejudice accumulation, value disorder, and ethical norm erosion (Keen,2008).

Additionally, while qualitative methods like ethnography and interviews dominate, there is a lack of innovative quantitative approaches using big data. Thus, big-data-based research is essential for a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of how the 'Africans in Guangzhou' issue is communicated on social media platforms.

SOCIAL MEDIA FIELD AS THEORETICAL BASIS

While social media data offers valuable insights into human behavior, it often lacks robust theoretical support (Tufekci, 2014). Journals such as *Media, Culture & Society* and the *European Journal of Communication* have emphasized the need to integrate big data with theory, highlighting the importance of understanding the cultural, moral, and social implications behind the data (Stine, 2017). Big data reveals not only technological usage patterns but also deeper cultural and ethical choices(Brock, 2015). Thus, this study moves beyond descriptive data collection to analyze the theoretical

logic and empirical manifestations of communication practices.

To analyze social media data, this study employs Bourdieu's (1991) field theory, which conceptualizes social practices through the interplay of field, habitus, and symbolic power. Field theory offers a flexible framework for examining both macro-level phenomena and micro-level factors. Bourdieu posits that society constitutes a meta-field encompassing subordinate fields, including the media field, within which the social media field operates as a distinct subfield. Thus, the social media field inherits broader media logic while developing unique characteristics. Applied to social media research, this paradigm yields two key insights: First, social media constitutes an autonomous yet permeable field structured by distinctive interpersonal networks that directly influence individual behavior. Second, this field is increasingly governed by commercial logic and algorithmic governance, which regulate information flows and amplify the "information cocoon" effect through personalized recommendation systems (Peng, 2020).

In the case of the 'Africans in Guangzhou' issue, participants within this field develop topic-specific habitus manifested in discursive practices, affective tendencies, and cognitive schemas. These habitus illuminate the mechanisms underlying communication dynamics, including information diffusion, social cognition, and issue evolution in digital publics.

First, discourse functions as both the symbolic manifestation of communicative practices and the embodiment of field-specific habitus. Communication, by its very nature, is a social process that relies on shared symbolic systems, with discourse serving as the primary vehicle for meaning-making (Zhang, 2016). Post-structuralist scholars Laclau and Mouffe conceptualize discourse as the fundamental framework through which all social phenomena are constituted (Xu & Chen, 2020). Far from value-neutral, discourse inherently carries cultural meaning and ideological positions (Christians, 2007), reflecting underlying power relations and social structures. As Bourdieu (1991) asserts, discursive exchange constitutes symbolic power relations. Consequently, communicative practice essentially represents a struggle for power and capital waged through symbolic means.

Secondly, emotion is central to discursive expression. People articulate emotions through discourse, and these emotions, in turn, shape social actions, driving interpersonal interactions and even social movements (Turner, 2009). While some dismiss "emotions of

protest" as destructive, scholars argue for their re-evaluation, emphasizing that "justified anger" can advance social justice (Linklater, 2014).

Lastly, cognitive logic underpins emotion. Emotions stem from individuals' cognitive frameworks, which include social interests, knowledge, values, and moral sentiments. For example, Goodwin Jasper argues that anger arises from violations of beliefs in justice, fairness, and dignity, motivating individuals to defend these principles (Goodwin et al., 2001).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Grounded in field theory, this study addresses the following questions:

- 1) How is the 'Africans in Guangzhou' issue communicated on Chinese social media? Specifically, how are behavioral habits manifested through discourse construction, emotional expression, and cognitive logic?
- 2) Are there any problems in the information flow surrounding the 'Africans in Guangzhou' issue on Chinese social media?
- 3) What insights can be drawn from this issue regarding the public opinion mechanism on social media, especially public opinion related to Africa?

METHODOLOGY

This study employs DiVoMiner®, a text big data analysis platform (Zhang & Cao, 2016), to conduct online content analysis. Building on traditional content analysis methods (**Figure 1**) and enhanced by artificial intelligence algorithms and big data technology, this approach systematically and objectively analyzes a large volume of texts. It reveals the communication practices and underlying dynamics of the 'Africans in Guangzhou' topic on social media.

The study focuses on the issue of 'Africans in Guangzhou' as its analytical unit. Data samples were collected from Sina Weibo, WeChat, and Zhihu using keywords such as 'Africans in Guangzhou,' 'Chocolate City,' and 'African City.' The data collection involved two rounds: the first collected posts, and the second collected comments, yielding 62877 valid data points. The data were gathered in January 2024, covering the period from October 2009 to January 2024.

To ensure data quality and research validity, rigorous data-cleaning procedures were implemented. These included removing duplicates, eliminating irrelevant noisy text, and verifying data accuracy through manual

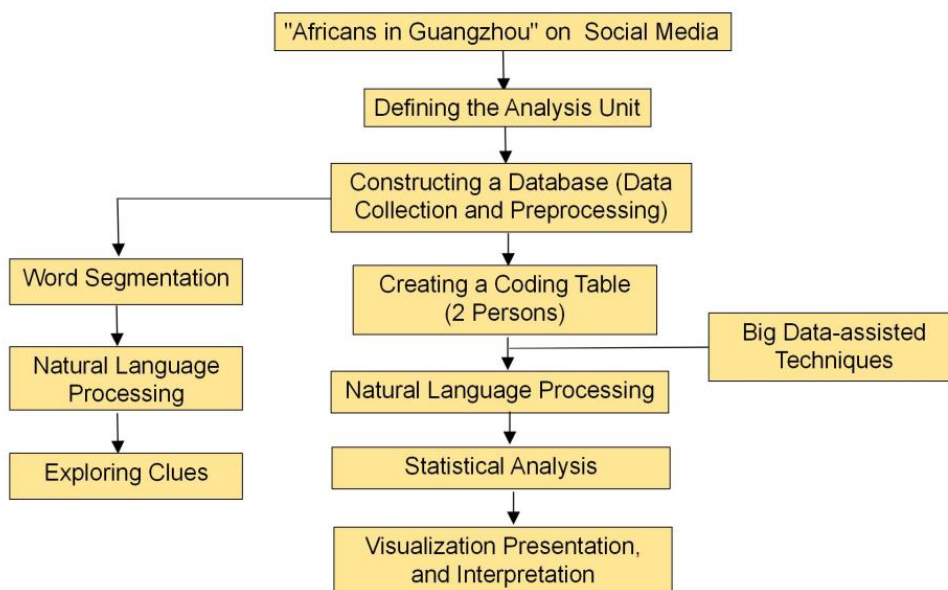


Figure 1 | Steps for Online Analysis Assisted by Data Technology

Table 1 | Coding Table of 'Africans in Guangzhou' Issue

| Category | Options | Keywords |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| Source (single choice) | Wechat/Weibo/Zhihu | - |
| Publisher attribute (single choice) | Mainstream media/Enterprises and commercial media platforms/State organs and institutions/individuals/ others | - |
| Theme (multiple choice) | Cognitive impression of Africa | Poverty OR poverty OR backwardness OR hunger OR conflict OR war OR disease OR AIDS OR colonization OR slavery OR violence OR laziness OR dirty OR disorderly OR stupid OR ugly OR prejudice OR misunderstanding OR hate |
| | Racial discrimination in Africa | Discrimination OR poverty OR garbage OR gene OR disease OR AIDS OR skin color OR race OR Chinese OR black devil OR black green OR Ni dog OR racism OR race OR western adults OR foreign garbage OR virus OR brother OR invasion OR hate OR expel OR virus OR roll OR lick |
| | Africans work in China | Work OR three illegal OR visa OR entry OR residence OR work OR drug trafficking OR immigration OR smuggling OR dirty OR bad OR sexual ability OR birth OR super national OR crime OR fraud OR steal OR steal OR rob OR policy OR employment OR law enforcement OR college entrance examination OR detention OR deportation OR repatriation OR management OR control OR trade OR gold rush OR Arrogant OR rumours OR species OR race OR alien OR race OR culture OR foreign enemy OR small north OR three Li OR Yuexiu area |
| | China and Africa transnational marriage | girl OR wife OR boyfriend OR love OR relationship OR marriage OR feelings OR love OR worship foreign OR easy girl OR Madonna OR black OR mixed blood OR cheat OR regret OR break up OR domestic violence OR derailment OR birth |
| Emotional Tendency (single choice) | Positive/neutral/negative | - |

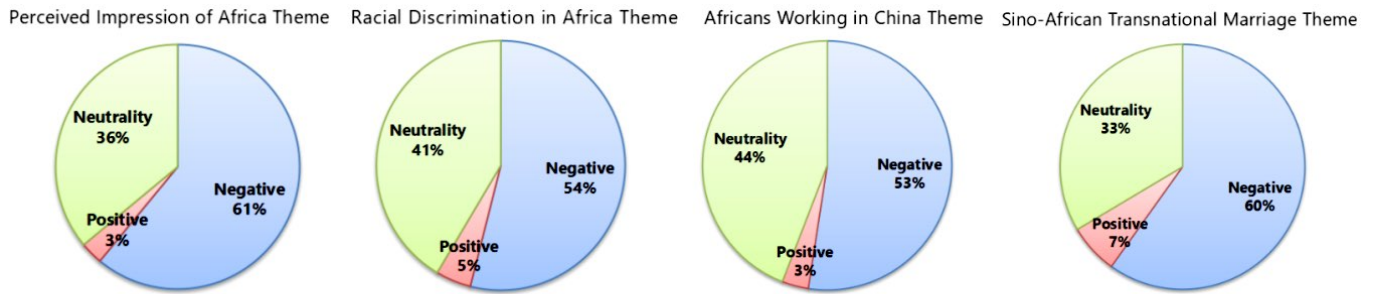


Figure 2 | The emotional proportion of different topics on this issue

review.

In the coding phase, manual reading and word segmentation techniques were used to extract key information, which was then categorized into different classes and keywords to form a preliminary coding table (Table 1)¹ 2. Next, 100 data points were randomly selected for an inter-coding reliability test conducted by two coders using the preliminary coding table. The Holsti index reached 0.89, indicating high reliability. The DiVoMiner® system then extracted 1% of the samples for machine coding based on the coding table, which achieved a manual verification accuracy of 0.92. Finally, all data were machine-coded using the coding table, and the results were reviewed and corrected by coders who had passed the reliability test.

FINDINGS

Behavioral Habitus: Discourse Expression Under the Thematic Framework

After coding analysis, the topic of 'Africans in Guangzhou' was categorized into four thematic frameworks based on the number of posts: Africans working in China (47,500), racial discrimination involving Africans (19,500), cognitive impressions of Africa (12,300), and Sino-African transnational marriages (11,200). Among these, 'Africans working in China' has long dominated discussions and is most closely intertwined with other themes. Notably, negative emotions are prevalent across all four themes (Figure 2), highlighting the emotionally charged nature of public discourse.

The Theme of Cognitive Impressions of Africa: A Central Representation of Cultural Conflict

People's perceptions of social groups emerge from complex interactions between multicultural values and ideologies. When cultural characteristics and values

diverge significantly, cognitive biases and stereotypes frequently arise. While partially grounded in social realities, stereotypes tend to become rigid cognitive frameworks that resist updating with new information. Typically formed through limited exposure, overgeneralization, and subjective assumptions, these stereotypes perpetuate profound misunderstandings and prejudices (Ru,1988). In Guangzhou, Africans have been stereotyped due to their physical appearance, language, and culture, as well as limited social integration.

Analysis reveals that Africa's poverty and underdevelopment are predominantly attributed to national character and colonial history. Approximately 42% of analyzed data points reference descriptors such as poverty, backwardness, disease, colonialism, slavery, laziness, hunger, conflict, and war. Africans are frequently portrayed as inhabiting resource-rich lands yet trapped in a 'resource curse' that cultivates short-term thinking—a perceived lack of work ethic that contrasts sharply with Chinese values of diligence. Moreover, the enduring legacy of colonialism remains significant. Western colonization imposed European-style institutions on Africa, creating systemic mismatches between political structures and economic foundations. This has undermined autonomous development and perpetuated aid dependency, hindering post-independence economic growth (Zhihu,2014a).

Research indicates that the African community in Guangzhou has been labelled as 'illegal' and 'criminal.' Since 2009, issues of illegal entry, residence, and employment have drawn widespread attention, with subsequent security incidents further reinforcing these negative perceptions. Terms like 'lawlessness,' 'crime' and 'violence' appear in 90% of analyzed data. However, official data from the Guangzhou Public Security Bureau show that from 2015 to 2017, only 154 Africans were convicted in Guangzhou, representing just 12% of the total foreign population, with this proportion de-

¹ Mainstream media, including domestic mainstream media and their media accounts, shoulder important political responsibilities and are an important tool for the Party and the government to govern the country. Enterprise and business media platforms refer to business platforms that provide social functions such as information, communication, social networking, e-commerce, and local services; State organs and institutions refer to official accounts opened by state administrative units and institutions at all levels (except media); Individual refers to ordinary Internet users. Others include think tanks, overseas institutions in China, associations, chambers of commerce, foundations, etc.

² The division of emotional tendencies in this issue is judged by the attitude of evaluating Africans.

creasing annually (Mao,2018). Despite these statistics, individual illegal acts by Africans in Guangzhou are still overemphasized, leading to the entire community being unfairly labelled as 'criminal.'

The Theme of Racial Discrimination: Arguments in the Context of Racist Narratives

Racial discrimination refers to an attitude of contempt or exclusion toward people of different races. It manifests more acutely and extremely in speech and behavior than stereotypes. In the realm of online public opinion, such sentiments often simmer beneath the surface, fueling intense debates. Public opinion is sharply divided on whether racial discrimination exists. One group (56%) firmly believes that racial discrimination is prevalent. In this view, both Africans and Chinese are seen as targets and perpetrators of discrimination. The discussion centres on issues like the preferential treatment of Africans, the treatment of overseas Chinese, and the shared experiences of discrimination faced by both communities. The other group (44%) questions the very concept of racial discrimination, arguing that 'there is no discrimination against Africans' or that the issue is merely a rejection of negative behaviors like theft or hooliganism rather than a blanket denial based on race. Notably, racist rhetoric often stems from narratives that make one-sided assessments of Africans' physical characteristics, cultural practices, and national identity. Driven by strong emotions, such narratives can easily devolve into narrow nationalism, exacerbating social divisions.

First, discourse regarding the intelligence and civilization of Black individuals reflects both discriminatory and balanced perspectives, accounting for 28% of analyzed data. Notably, 55% of these statements express negative views, often rooted in prejudicial assumptions. Such claims falsely attribute lower intelligence to Black populations, employing pseudo-scientific justifications while asserting they lack civilizational contributions. Conversely, 45% of voices present neutral or positive perspectives, highlighting African intellectual diversity and challenging overgeneralizations.

Second, evaluations of the nature of 'black people' are overwhelmingly negative, with 94% of analyzed data. Black individuals are stereotypically described as 'brutally violent,' with discussions involving discriminatory terms and historical issues like colonialism and the slave trade. This topic has sparked heated debates on platforms like Zhihu, with questions such as 'Why Are Black People So Often Violent? Is it Safe to Work in Africa?' Furthermore, the rise in Sino-African marriages has sparked discussions about 'second-generation Black Chinese', particularly regarding genetic inheritance and cross-cultural parenting challenges (Weibo,2020).

The Theme of African Migrant Workers in China: The Idea of 'Ethnic Invasion' is Fermented

As the number of African students and migrant workers in China increases, their biological differences have drawn significant attention, fueling the notion of an 'ethnic invasion.' This has sparked heated debates on issues such as Africans' potential to crowd out social resources, seduce Chinese women, form urban enclaves, and disrupt social security. These discussions often emphasize the 'spectacle' of Africans' physical traits (Guy Debo, 2018)—such as strength, sexual prowess, and fertility—using terms like 'species,' 'race,' 'foreign enemy,' and 'violence' appear in 95% of the analyzed data. However, rather than admiration, these descriptions reinforce negative stereotypes of their 'simple, remarkable, vivid, and highly recognized' characteristics (Hall, 2001), viewing Africans as a sociocultural threat. For example, African children have been derogatorily called 'niggers' in schools. Additionally, the rising number of marriages between Chinese women and African men has led some to express fears of 'racial invasion' and 'gene conquest,' with concerns that Guangzhou could become 'the Detroit of Asia.' In contrast, a few neutral views argue that China's deep cultural heritage would prevent assimilation through intermarriage. It is worth noting that while negatively evaluating the physical and personality traits of Africans, people culturally regarded them as exotic rather than threatening cultural forces (Zhou et al., 2016).

Secondly, the settlement of Africans in China has raised security concerns, constructing a negative image linked to issues like 'three illegal' (illegal entry, residence, and employment), repatriation, visa problems, drug trafficking, and **rumours**. Data show that 94% of discussions focus on these aspects. In 2014, a report by Guangzhou University's Development Research Institute highlighted Guangzhou as the largest gathering place for Africans in Asia, noting an 'unoptimistic' crime situation (Global Network,2014). On social media, negative emotions dominate discussions about Africans, with zero tolerance for illegal activities like drug trafficking and 'three illegal' issues. Concerns about potential 'riots' or demands for minority privileges further deepen social unease. Additionally, the concentration of Africans and their religious beliefs are often seen as sensitive issues, increasing the group's labelling and stigmatization.

Thirdly, discussions about Africans receiving 'super-national treatment' reflect public frustration and anger. Terms like 'super-national,' 'worship of foreigners,' 'calcium deficiency,' 'slave,' 'kneeling' and 'privilege' appear in 87% of analyzed data. The discourse reveals dual perspectives on racial treatment in China. First, it connects the differential treatment of Africans to China's historical trauma, highlighting legal, moral, and social inequalities that foster perceptions of special privilege. Second, these policies are framed as 'reverse discrimination', with critics arguing that racial preferences dis-

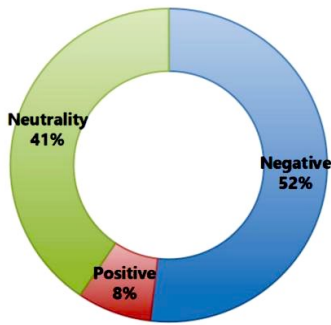


Figure 3 | The emotional proportion of this issue

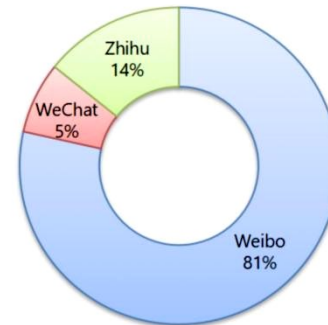


Figure 4 | The platform proportion of negative emotion on this issue

advantage Chinese citizens (Zhihu, 2014b), thereby deepening social fractures.

Moreover, debates on immigration policies have intensified, driven by concerns over 'racial invasion' and China as a non-immigrant country environment. The discussion focused on reconciling openness with national security and developing balanced immigration policies in globalized contexts. Social media analysis shows 95% of relevant posts employ charged terminology like 'alien,' 'deportation' and 'low-end globalization'-defined by McGordon (2018) as transnational flows characterized by minimal capital and informal economies. Unlike professional migration, this phenomenon is tied to developing-world conditions. Public sentiment remains divided, though many emphasize negative impacts, with some conflating globalization with neo-colonialism.

The Theme of Sino-African Transnational Marriage: Discussion on Gender Discrimination and Racial Discrimination under Men's Rights and Women's Rights

The discourse on Sino-African romantic relationships has become a focal point for examining intersecting gender and racial prejudices. Women in these relationships face disproportionate scrutiny, with 36% of analyzed data containing derogatory terms like 'foreigner-worshipping,' 'easy girl,' and 'black second-generation' - reflecting deep-seated structural biases rather than individual choices.

Patriarchal anxieties about lineage preservation have generated particular hostility toward Chinese-African marriages, often framed as threats to 'racial purity' or 'black colonization'. This manifests in gendered slurs ('black girl,' 'under black') and violent rhetoric against women, while similar relationships involving Chinese men escape equivalent censure. Such double standards reveal what critics term a 'gender original sin' mentality that commodifies women's sexuality. Negative perceptions are compounded by stereotypes about African family structures, including perceived lack of paternal responsibility, high rates of single-parent households, and prevalence of polygamy. Just as one comment noted, 'The local men I've known over the

years have a 100% cheating rate, and it's normal here for women to take care of the children' (Zhihu,2014c).

Moreover, sexism and racial discrimination are often intertwined in the critical discourse surrounding cross-border marriages. Accusing women of 'seduction' is a dual expression of sexism and racial discrimination by male chauvinists. The reasons for this emotional confrontation are complex and varied, with different perspectives from men and women. From the male perspective, two main factors drive this criticism: First, China's gender imbalance intensifies mate competition. Second, patrilineal traditions fuel ethnic exclusivity. From the female perspective, the issue is equally complex: First, cross-cultural partner selection is interpreted as a racial hierarchy. Second, western media's persistent emasculation of Chinese men contrasted with idealized foreign masculinity(Zhihu,2021a). This intersection of misogyny and xenophobia demonstrates how relationship choices become politicized battlegrounds for nationalist and patriarchal agendas.

Psychological Habitus: the Emotional Community Shaped by Discourse

As previously noted, the essence of discourse lies in the transmission and resonance of emotions. The public's discourse behavior around the topic of 'Africans in Guangzhou' shapes a unique emotional habitus. Pappacharissi (2015) introduced the concept of 'affective publics,' where the public gathers on social media around a specific issue to form an emotional community through emotion-driven communication. In the case of 'Africans in Guangzhou,' this community is characterized by a predominance of negative emotions (**Figure 3**). Further analysis of this emotional community can be observed from the perspectives of platform and discourse expression.

Weibo and Individual Users have become the Most Affected Areas of Negative Emotions

An in-depth analysis of the distribution of negative emotions regarding the issue of 'Africans in Guangzhou' across various platforms (**Figure 4**) reveals that Weibo is the primary hub for negative sentiment, followed by

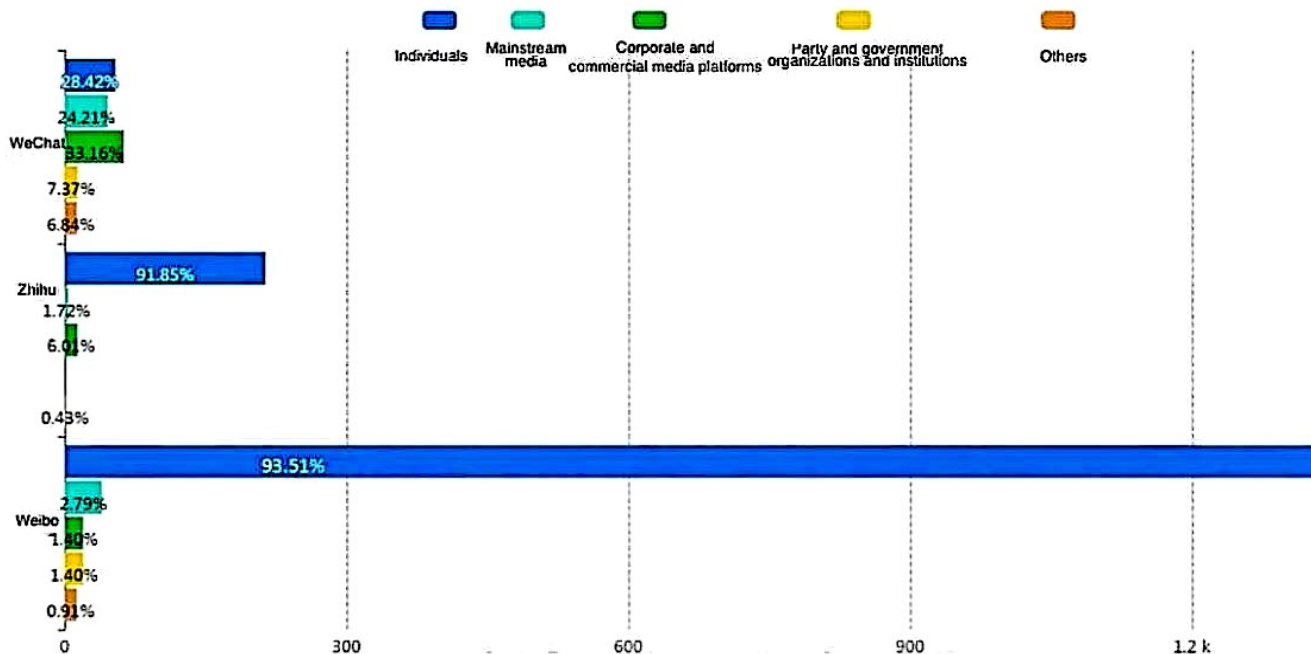


Figure 5 | The subjects on different platforms on this issue

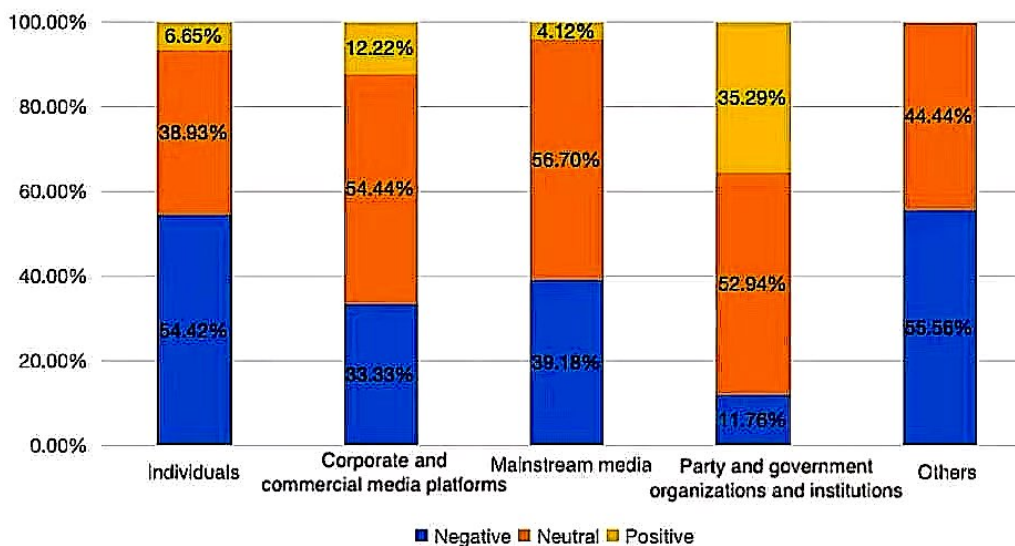


Figure 6 | The emotional proportion of different subjects on this issue

Zhihu, with WeChat being less significant. This pattern is closely tied to the nature of content creators on these platforms, with individual users dominating Weibo and Zhihu (93.5%) (Figure 5). In terms of emotional expression (Figure 6), individual posts tend to be negative (54.4%), characterized by subjective, emotional, and casual language, often including abusive or insulting terms. In contrast, WeChat’s mainstream media, enterprise, and think-tank accounts, which are the main sources of information release (71.6%), exhibit a more neutral and positive emotional tone (65.6%). Their discourse focuses on rational analysis, objective state-

ments, and in-depth insights, providing a more stable and constructive space for public discussion.

Expressions of Negative Emotions Include Abuse, Irony and Exclamation

In the linguistic communication around this topic, emotional expression often overshadows rational expression, frequently employing rhetorical devices such as analogy, exaggeration, irony, and rhetorical questions. Analysis of negative emotion posts reveals three main ways negative emotions are expressed:

- 1) Direct Abuse: This involves the straightforward use of abusive language to express anger and dissatisfaction, such as words like 'roll,' 'lick,' 'disgusting,' 'trash,' and 'nigger.'
- 2) Humorous Irony: This uses humor and irony to subtly convey anger and dissatisfaction. Examples include phrases like 'Dare to say that black adults are bad?' 'Dare to compete with black and green?' and 'Dare to challenge black brother?'
- 3) Helpless Sigh: This type of expression uses words that convey worry, fear, or frustration (e.g., 'ah,' 'haha') to reflect feelings of helplessness, sadness, and anxiety. Though more subtle, it captures the complex emotions and sense of powerlessness felt by the speaker.

Psychological Habitus: the Cognitive Logic in the Depth of Emotions

Discourse and emotions serve as crucial indicators for understanding the underlying psychological mechanisms and cognitive logic. They are not only the sources of affective expression and discursive flows but also key to interpreting cultural ideologies, values, and moral frameworks. These elements coalesce to shape field-specific communicative practices. Moving beyond syntactic analysis to semantic examination reveals five cognitive patterns:

First, the current situation of Africans does not align with the civilized imagination of 'Western modernity,' which is the underlying logic influencing public cultural perceptions of Africa. Niu&Zhang (2018) have noted that some Chinese prejudices and stigmatizing perceptions of Africans stem from an expectation that foreigners conform to Western European and American cultural standards. In this framework, symbols associated with Western modernity are seen as markers of civilization. Influenced by this historical legacy, emerging countries often critique their societies through the lens of modernity while distancing themselves from similar critiques of non-Western groups. This is evident in the stereotypical and racist narratives about Africa. Many Africans in Guangzhou work in low-tech commodity trading, reinforcing perceptions of poverty and backwardness. In contrast, South Koreans, better educated and economically advantaged, enjoy a higher social status in China. This highlights how economic disparities between African and other foreign communities contribute to differing social evaluations (Zhou & Zhou, 2018).

Second, the long-term media portrayal of Africa has shaped public perceptions and reinforced national identity through racist discourse. A prejudiced cognitive framework toward Africa has quietly formed through selective media reporting. Africans in Guangzhou are often labelled as violent, diseased, or criminal, and these stereotypes have spread widely on social media.

Historically, official media depicted China as a generous aid provider while portraying Africa as a backward aid recipient (Saavedra, 2009). Market-oriented media have further reinforced these stereotypes by replicating Western portrayals of Africans (Li&Rønning, 2013). Although mainstream media later shifted to more positive and constructive reporting (Fan&Li, 2020), past stereotypes persist. Instead, to a certain extent, Africa's contributions to the Chinese economy have been ignored (Niu & Zhang, 2018). This has led to a racial hierarchy and normalized racist discourse, which has become a spontaneous expression of national identity, strengthening subconscious biases.

Third, mutual respect between ethnic groups is built on two-way interaction. Many people adopt a retaliatory attitude ('an eye for an eye') in response to perceived disrespect from Africans, such as online defamation, physical abuse, or criminal activities involving Africans. Although these incidents are rare, they challenge national dignity and are easily amplified, leading to increased estrangement and misunderstanding between Chinese and African communities.

Fourth, preferential treatment of foreigners undermines social fairness and cultural confidence. Public opinion often views preferential treatment as 'reverse discrimination' against Chinese citizens, violating principles of fairness and equality. Such incidents quickly become focal points of public debate, triggering a re-evaluation of traditional virtues like tolerance and magnanimity. While these values are important, unconditional tolerance can be seen as a sign of weakness, leading to contempt rather than respect.

Fifth, social security is a key factor influencing public acceptance of foreign groups. Stereotypes of Africans as 'illegal,' 'criminal,' or 'violent' have raised concerns about social safety, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This has led to a peak in negative public sentiment toward Africa. In contrast, other foreign groups, such as Koreans and Japanese, face less rejection due to their perceived law-abiding nature and higher quality (Zhihu, 2020). This highlights the importance of social security in shaping public attitudes toward foreign communities.

Overall, negative discourse and emotions toward Africa often emerge when cultural identity, dignity, fairness, and security are challenged. Patriotism and racism are intertwined, and cultural conflicts are closely linked to identity recognition. Through the analysis of discourse, emotions, and cognitive logic, we can understand the complex picture of public opinion surrounding the 'Africans in Guangzhou' issue on social media. However, the formation of this picture is influenced by intertwined factors such as information flow, noise, and influence. Misleading remarks and prejudices continue to intensify, providing a comprehensive perspective for objectively interpreting this issue.

COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES: UNSMOOTH INFORMATION FLOW, GENERALIZATION OF NOISE FLOW, AND TURBULENCE OF INFLUENCE FLOW

Public discourse on Africa-related issues reflects both governance challenges and communication dynamics. Rogers' (2003) dual-track information theory distinguishes between factual transmission ('information flow') and attitudinal shaping ('influence flow'). Hu Baijing (2014) extends this model to crisis contexts by identifying a third element—disruptive 'noise flow'—which collectively create three communication dilemmas: unsmooth information flow, turbulence in influence flow, and the generalization of noise flow. Unsmooth information flow results from the dissipation of meaning, hindering effective circulation and exchange of information. The generalization of noise flow involves a cacophony of voices that distract from the truth. Turbulence in influence flow refers to uncontrolled communication elements causing systemic disorder. Applying this framework through a field theory lens reveals specific communicative challenges in the 'Africans in Guangzhou' discourse.

Unsmooth Information Flow

In addressing this issue, several communication challenges have emerged, including the dilution of journalistic integrity and the lack of professional knowledge dissemination. Among the content creators, mainstream and commercial media account for only 11%, while individual users make up 83%. Unlike traditional media, such as television and radio, social media platforms allow anyone to publish information at any time. This has led to issues like the decline of professional knowledge authority, the spread of rumours, and the non-transparent management and filtering of user activities by social media algorithms (Gerlitz, 2013). These factors contribute to the erosion of journalistic standards and the obstruction of valuable information exchange. For example, concerns about the African community in Guangzhou are often exaggerated due to inflated population numbers and a lack of objective understanding of globalization's inevitability. How to maintain journalistic professionalism—or what Bourdieu calls 'elitism'—on social media is a critical question for the current era.

Generalization of Noise Flow

Firstly, rumours spread rapidly. Emotionally charged online environments accelerate rumor propagation. During COVID-19, certain media exploited policy knowledge gaps to misrepresent China's 'equal treatment' principle as racial discrimination and misused Guangzhou's 2019 immigration statistics (350,000 entries) to falsely claim a 300,000 'resident African popula-

tion'. Such fabricated narratives jeopardized diplomatic stability and provoked unwarranted public anxiety.

Secondly, foreign forces disrupt information flows. To understand the issue of racial discrimination, we must consider its social context. While the public may have some reservations about African communities, these are mostly due to stereotypes, online pressure, and cultural differences rather than the deep-seated racism seen in some Western countries. China and Africa share many common experiences and have a history of diplomatic friendship. So, how does the context of racial discrimination arise? Africa-related issues are international topics closely tied to the global political environment. Studies show that mainstream media in the UK and the US pay little attention to 'Africans in China' but often distort China's development in Africa and China-Africa cooperation (Yu, 2014). Foreign actors systematically weaponize isolated incidents (e.g., illegal activities by individuals) as racial issues fabricate narratives like "Chinese discrimination against Africans" during crises. While lawful governance of misconduct is necessary, vigilance against artificial racialization of administrative matters, and external provocation of interethnic tensions.

Influence Flow Turbulence

Firstly, rumours have eroded Institutional credibility. In recent years, persistent rumours about Guangzhou's African population (e.g., inflated claims of 300,000-500,000 residents) have fostered perceptions of governance failure. Despite official demographic clarifications, confirmation bias sustains distrust in authorities - a classic case of misinformation overshadowing factual corrections.

Secondly, a crisis of negative information preference has emerged in social media. Negative news—characterized by themes of backwardness, conflict, suddenness, irritation, ambiguity, and confusion—often captures the audience's attention (Deng, 2002). Research in communication psychology shows that negative news elicits higher emotional arousal and is more likely to incite emotions (Li & Su, 2014). This preference reinforces cognitive rigidities and discourse polarization (Xie, 2016). This creates a self-perpetuating cycle where emotional catharsis substitutes rational deliberation, ultimately degrading public reasoning capacity.

Thirdly, driven by commercial interests, social media sees an imbalance between autonomy and heteronomy. Bourdieu's field theory highlights journalism's susceptibility to economic pressures (Bourdieu, n.d.). He suggested that maintaining legitimacy requires a balance between autonomy and external influences. In social media contexts, platform algorithms prioritize engagement over truth. The spread of negative information about Africans in Guangzhou, through sensationalism and exaggerated figures, has stoked social panic while

overlooking their contributions to China-Africa trade and China's economic development (Zhou & Zhou, 2018). This commercialized heteronomy transforms ethnic discourse into clickbait commodities, systematically neglecting nuanced reality.

DISCUSSION

The cognitive logic of the discourse on Africans in Guangzhou reveals that gender, ethnicity, race, culture, history, politics, and the international environment shape discursive meanings. These meanings are constructed through historicization, socialization, and institutionalization, endowing them with communicative and dissemination value. Fundamentally, socialized meaning formation entails individual and organizational actions regulated by institutional norms, sparking power, capital, and ideological competitions. This dynamic creates communication obstacles across all information flow stages. Effective solutions require accounting for the social structural forces exerted by various field actors and developing approaches rooted in social norms.

Social Forces Involved in Solving the Problem

According to field theory, the formation of issue-related habits and representations results from the interplay of various social forces within the field, including political capital power, cultural capital power, economic capital power, technological capital power, and external threat power.

First, the Power of Political Capital. Bourdieu defined political capital as a crucial part of social capital, referring to social resources amassed via stable, institutionalized interactions. In certain social systems, it serves as a foundation. For instance, in socialist countries, controlling collective resources (like the Communist Party's role) yields significant benefits (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004). In social media, state organs, public institutions, and mainstream media represent political power. Though they contribute only 4% of Africa-related content, their posts dominate positive public opinion guidance and rational China-Africa relations perception. However, technological advancements challenge traditional political power's methods.

Second, the Power of Cultural Capital. Bourdieu regarded cultural capital as informational capital with embodied, objectified, or institutionalized forms. In social media, ordinary users are both information producers and consumers, shaping social culture and democratic supervision. Yet, capital influence, audience psychology, and societal civility undermine public supervision. Media, as key information producers and opinion guides, embody supervisory cultural capital.

Third, the Power of Economic Capital. In field theory, economic capital aligns with traditional economic capital; more economic capital enables greater conversion to other forms, leading to intense competition. When it

enters the media, it faces issues like weak platform self-regulation and non-compliant actor behavior.

Fourth, the Power of Technological Capital. Study data are incomplete due to limited user participation and platform data restrictions (e.g., algorithmic filtering and manual screening on Weibo and WeChat). Technological capital, an extension of political, economic, and cultural capitals, serves as a discourse-power-competing tool, exerting influence via gatekeeping.

Fifth is the Threat of External Forces. In global social media, foreign political interference and cultural erosion are prevalent. These forces hype sensitive issues, spread rumours, and aim to undermine a country's ideology and power. For example, 90% of 'Afroophilia' accounts are part of foreign-funded business activities, and their primary aim is profit-making (Zhihu, 2021b).

These actors' competition shapes the social media field configuration. Power, capital, and ideological contests during discourse formation cause information-flow communication problems. To solve them, we must restructure the field, promote collaborative governance, negotiate disputes, balance interests, and protect the public good, with specific strategies to follow.

Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

Utilization of Political Capital

Firstly, the establishment of robust rules and the leveraging of government public power should be enhanced. For social media users, implementing a real-name system can help regulate public supervision more rationally. For the news editing and publishing industry, strict entry principles should be standardized to prevent non-public capital from interfering with mainstream public opinion for profit. This will create a favorable public opinion environment for China-Africa relations. Regarding illegal and criminal activities by Africans in China, both prevention and punishment are necessary. In addition to strict law enforcement, appropriate reporting should convey the principle of 'equality before the law,' reducing negative perceptions of preferential treatment and avoiding the sensitization of such issues through suppression, which could lead to public speculation and misunderstanding.

Secondly, information transparency and government engagement should be promoted. Insufficient information disclosure is a major reason for the ineffectiveness of official public opinion guidance. Enhancing the government's ability to engage with information is crucial for shaping its credibility and exercising the public opinion guidance role of political power. The government should shift from passive to active dissemination, clarifying its dominant position in the field. Proactive responses to negative information and timely release and disclosure often yield better results, helping to gradually make the public's perception of Africa more concrete, real, comprehensive, and profound. This can also improve irrational perceptions and enhance the public's

ability to make objective judgments and rational analyses regarding Africa-related issues.

Thirdly, public opinion monitoring and active response to public demands should be advanced. The public opinion monitoring system should be continuously improved, including data mining, analysis, and storage. Utilizing data visualization technology to analyze and present the dissemination landscape and habitual representations of relevant issues can help assess and judge the development trends of public opinion. Gradually building a warning index and emotional attitude model for Africa-related online public opinion is essential. Timely and moderate guidance should be provided to enhance the scientific nature and relevance of the guidance.

Utilization of Cultural Capital

Firstly, cultivating public rational thinking and self-discipline is essential. Enhancing the public's intellectual capacity and improving their understanding of Africa-related issues will help. The public should be guided to understand the international order, the importance of China-Africa relations within it, and the inevitability of issues in the development of these relations. This will enhance their awareness of cyber security and political sensitivity, improving their rational and comprehensive understanding of China-Africa relations. The public should also be guided to correctly view cultural identity and acknowledge the social existence of Africans in China. In cross-cultural interactions, Chinese society's cultural identity can continuously build and optimize its new multiple identity structures on the basis of its core culture, forming a more attractive, cohesive, and influential cultural identity that meets national interests and the demands of the times.

Secondly, promoting value identification and standardizing discourse usage is crucial. Habermas argues that different social participants achieve understanding and consensus through 'discourse,' with an understanding based on mutually recognized valid claims. These 'mutually recognized valid claims' can also be understood as 'shared value identification.' Therefore, guiding value identification is particularly important for standardizing discourse usage. Many discriminatory, insulting, and provocative statements in the Guangzhou African issue stem from problems of value identification.

Thirdly, influencing individual cognition through the media environment and constructing China-Africa identification and consensus is essential. Adjusting the setting of issues to guide a comprehensive understanding of Africa is also important. In fact, the Chinese public's understanding of Africa and the formation of racial consciousness rarely come from direct interactions but are mostly derived from media reports. The bias and balance of media issue-setting directly determine public attitudes. The tone of reporting should be balanced, emphasizing the mutually beneficial and complementary relationship between China and Africa, with equal

emphasis on moral righteousness and mutual benefit. Reports should balance the negative and positive impacts of Africans in China, providing comprehensive coverage to avoid focusing solely on the security and economic threats posed by Africans while ignoring their contributions in trade, technology, and culture. Additionally, media reports should pay attention to the grassroots nature of social media dissemination, shifting the focus to Chinese people in Africa and Africans in China and telling 'China-Africa stories' through personal examples. For instance, exploring a female perspective on Africa can help guide rational choices in China-Africa cross-border marriages, alleviating gender conflicts in Africa-related marriage issues.

Utilization of Economic Capital

Strengthening the self-regulation of social media platforms is essential. The profit-seeking nature of social media markets leads them to relax self-regulation to cater to market demands, disregarding morality, civilization, and humanity, and ignoring the consequences of distorted information and misleading public opinion. This has resulted in serious ethical issues in the Guangzhou African issue, such as the proliferation of rumours, malicious hype, stigmatization, and defamation.

Utilization of Technological Capital

Advocating a value orientation of 'technology for good' is crucial. Technology is a key force in determining whether a field's ecosystem is balanced. The imbalance in the social media ecosystem is mainly manifested in the imbalance between technological and humanistic emphasis. The root cause of these problems is the improper use of technology by various social actors who act as gatekeepers, particularly in communication practices. In the case of the Guangzhou African issue, the public's negative emotional tendencies and cognitive biases, the media's focus on traffic-driven reporting, and the insufficient self-regulation of social media platforms are all closely related to the irrational use of technology. 'Technology for good' means that the instrumental rationality of technology should serve value rationality, aiming to achieve humanistic care. Firstly, social media platforms must incorporate public interest, moral ethics, and core social values into their algorithm rules to curb false and malicious dissemination and enhance the authenticity, reliability, and usefulness of information. Secondly, platforms should break free from algorithms and market dependencies that solely satisfy personalized user needs, reducing the 'information cocoon' and 'echo chamber' effects to provide users with more diverse information sources. This is crucial for changing the exaggeration, distortion, and dissemination of negative events related to Africa on social media and for improving the situation of negative preferences, emotional polarization, and opinion imbalance.

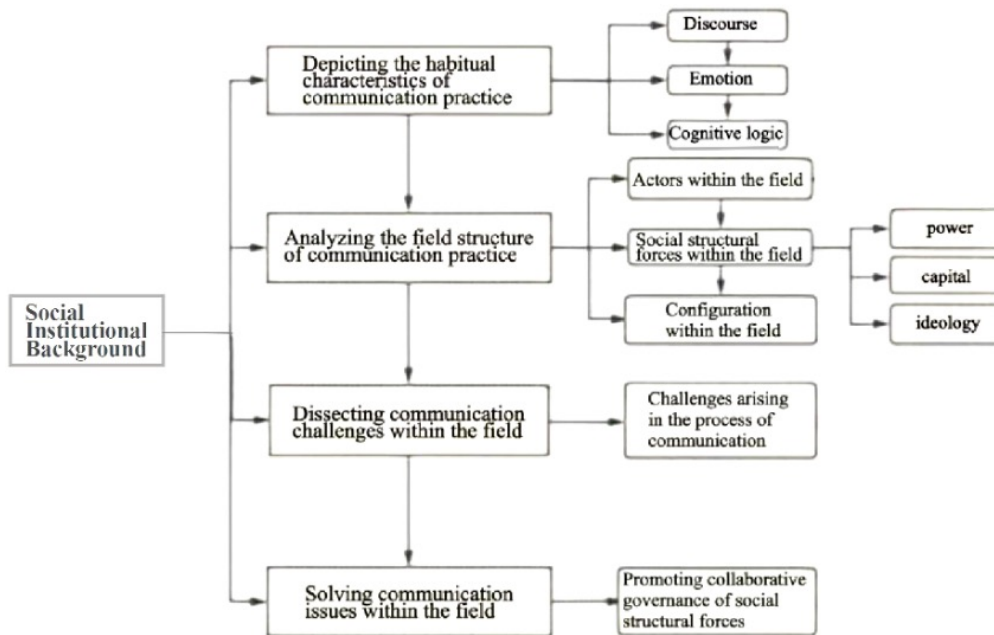


Figure 7 | The Basic Model for Analyzing Social Media Communication Practice from the Perspective of Field Theory

CONCLUSION

It can be seen that as China-Africa relations deepen, African immigrants will likely have a more significant impact on Guangzhou's culture and economy. This may foster more positive discussions about Africans on Chinese social media. However, due to the inclination towards negative information and the 'information cocoon' effect, existing negative perceptions and stereotypes could be further entrenched, causing pronounced polarization. Additionally, social media discussions have revealed the intricate interaction among Western influence, historical racial perceptions, and contemporary social dynamics. This will heighten the awareness of the necessity to tackle racial biases and promote inclusivity.

By examining the communication practices surrounding the 'Africans in Guangzhou' issue on Chinese social media, we can apply media field theory to social media and develop a basic framework for analyzing specific issues, events, and topics (Figure 7).

Communication practices are shaped by their social and institutional contexts. To study African-related controversies on Chinese social media, it is essential to consider China's political, cultural, historical, and social background. This macro-level understanding allows for deeper micro-level analysis of communication practices and specific issues.

Field theory suggests that during communication practices, actors develop a 'system of dispositions,' or habitus, which influences both behavior (discourse) and psychological processes (emotion and cognitive logic). Habitus, shaped by subjective and objective factors, provides a framework for actors' practices within the

field. To analyze communication practices on social media, we can examine habitus at three levels: discourse (surface), emotion (middle), and cognitive logic (deep). Discourse reflects emotion, which can be rational or irrational, while cognitive logic—rooted in social interests, values, and beliefs—underpins both. Thus, discourse, emotion, and cognitive logic serve as the surface, middle, and deep codes of habitus, respectively.

In the case of the 'Africans in Guangzhou' issue, social media discourse often revolves around themes like perceptions of Africa and racial discrimination, constructing a 'media reality' rather than reflecting actual social reality. These themes collectively shape the cognitive logic of public discussions, touching on identity, cultural belonging, dignity, fairness, security, and development.

As habitus is socially constructed, it is influenced by both social structures and individual factors. In communication practices, habitus reflects the interplay of power, capital, and ideology within the field. To fully understand social media communication, it is crucial to identify which social forces shape habitus, through which actors they operate, and how they configure the field.

In African-related controversies, diverse actors represent various power dynamics, capital, and ideologies, forming a relational network within the field. However, this network may not always function healthily, as actors' practices can disrupt the flow of information, leading to communication challenges.

To address these issues, solutions must consider both institutional and individual factors. By regulating the actors representing social forces and fostering collaborative governance, the field can develop a healthier

relational network. This, in turn, can enable habitus to generate more effective practice strategies for actors.

Finally, the theoretical framework and research methods employed in this article are not only applicable to this specific issue but also offer insights into the communication practices of other topics on social media. The research on the 'Africans in Guangzhou' issue demonstrates the potential and significance of applying this theoretical interpretation more broadly.

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