

City walk in a gap day: potential and opportunities for tourism and leisure

Dongdong Wu

Abstract

Purpose – To the best of the author's knowledge, this study, among the first of its kind, aims to offer a preliminary exploration of the "city walk" travel model in the context of China.

Design/methodology/approach – By conducting phenomenological research, it endeavors to comprehend the motivations driving individuals to engage in "city walk" activities through the lens of social psychology, specifically focusing on labeling theory.

Findings – The immersive "city walk" establishes a deeper connection with the urban environment. Participants attach greater significance to their travel experiences, seeking a profound understanding of the city and its way of life, thus pursuing the essence of tourism and leisure.

Originality/value – This study outlines potential opportunities and future prospects for the "city walk" concept within the cultural tourism industry.

Keywords City walk, Gap day, Labeling theory, Demand drift, Tourism and leisure

Paper type General review



Dongdong Wu is based at the College of Tourism and Service Management, Nankai University, Tianjin, China.

在空档日城市漫步：旅游休闲的潜力与机遇

摘要

研究目的：本研究是在中国背景下首次对“城市漫步”旅游模式进行初步探讨的研究之一。

设计/方法：通过现象学研究，试图从社会心理学的视角，尤其是关注“标签理论”，来理解驱使个体参与“城市漫步”活动的动机。

研究发现：沉浸式的“城市漫步”建立了与城市环境更深层次的联系。参与者赋予他们的旅行经历更大的重要性，寻求对城市及其生活方式的深刻理解，从而追求旅游与休闲的本质。

原创性/价值：本研究概述了在文化旅游行业应用“城市漫步”概念的潜在机会和未来前景。

关键词 城市漫步，空档日，标签理论，需求漂移，旅游与休闲

文章类型 一般审查

Paseo urbano en un día de descanso: Potencial y oportunidades para el turismo y el ocio

Resumen

Propósito: Este estudio es uno de los primeros en ofrecer una exploración preliminar del modelo de viaje de "paseo urbano" en el contexto de China.

Diseño/metodología/enfoque: Mediante la realización de una investigación fenomenológica, se esfuerza por comprender las motivaciones que impulsan a las personas a participar en actividades de "paseo urbano" a través de la lente de la psicología social, centrándose específicamente en la teoría de etiquetado.

Hallazgos: El "paseo urbano" inmersivo establece una conexión más profunda con el entorno urbano. Los participantes atribuyen una mayor importancia a sus experiencias de viaje, buscando una comprensión profunda de la ciudad y su estilo de vida, persiguiendo así la esencia del turismo y el ocio.

Originalidad/valor: Este estudio esboza oportunidades potenciales y perspectivas futuras para el concepto de "paseo urbano" dentro de la industria del turismo cultural.

Palabras clave Paseo urbano, Día de descanso, Teoría de etiquetado, Cambio en la demanda, Turismo y ocio

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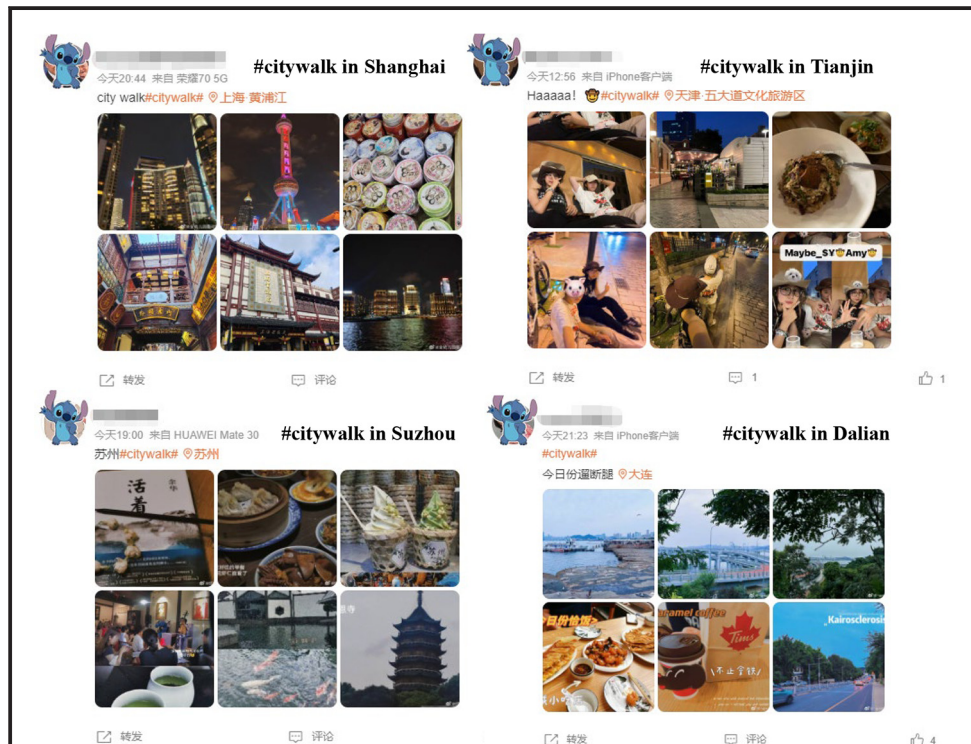
Declarations of interest: None.

1. Introduction

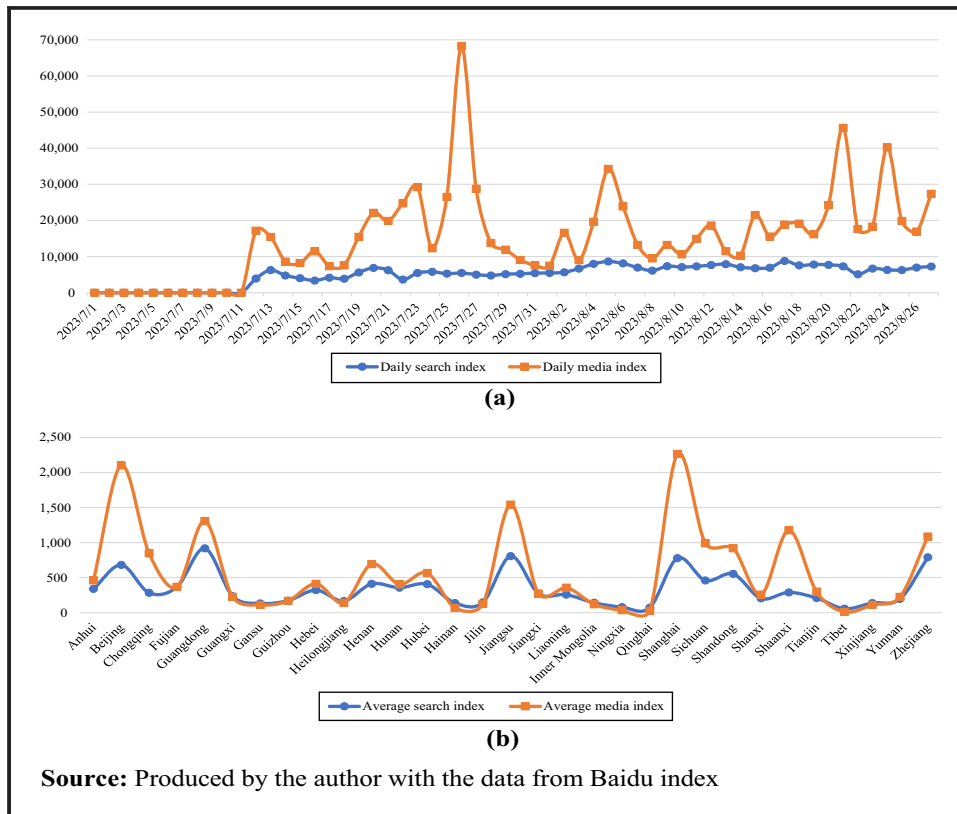
Lately, a novel style of travel known as “city walk” has gained substantial popularity, distinguishing itself from the conventional “special forces-style tourism.” This return to an authentic form of travel has found favor among the younger generation, as depicted in [Figure 1](#). In contrast to the rush of crowded tourist landmarks or the approach of “special forces-style tourism,” the term “city walk” inherently emphasizes an immersive and unhurried experience ([Wen, 2023](#)). Presently, social media platforms such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu and Weibo host hundreds of thousands of posts tagged with #citywalk. The development trends are reflected in Baidu search indices and media coverage, as illustrated in [Figure 2](#). In major cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, organized group tours are cropping up like mushrooms, offering a variety of prices for classic urban walking routes. However, a growing number of young individuals are opting to chart their own paths, exploring cities without any predetermined itineraries.

The origins of “city walk” can be traced back to “London walks” in London, UK. “City walk” refers to a guided exploration following a preplanned route led by a guide, with an emphasis on experiencing the city’s history, culture, landscapes and more in-depth aspects. In many international metropolises where “city walk” are popular, specialized tour companies often develop unique travel routes that capture the essence of the city. Thus, this urban travel approach is not as casual or aimless as it might seem. Unlike traditional urban tourism, “city walk” offers an immersive experience of city life. From the quick, superficial check-ins at famous landmarks to delving into the daily lives of city residents and savoring the true essence of the city, cool youths on “gap days” seek to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural context of the city ([Hu, 2023](#)).

Figure 1 The trend of #city walk on the Weibo platform



Source: Produced by the author with the material from Weibo platform

Figure 2 Baidu search index and media index

Compared to other forms of travel, “city walk,” where travelers immerse themselves in the pace and cultural ambiance of urban life, possess their distinctive cultural advantages. Travelers gain a profound sense of vitality from their surroundings, including history, geography, culture and customs, moving beyond the superficial “sightseeing” of iconic landmarks. If “special forces-style tourism” represents the ultimate pursuit of efficiency and value, then “city walk” can be seen as the subtraction of focus from goals and outcomes, prioritizing the process itself. “Special forces-style tourism” tends to attract college students who are primarily interested in “checking off” famous landmarks, emphasizing the essence of budget travel. Their disposable time is often ample, but their economic resources are limited. The appeal of “city walk” to working young adults might stem from their busy work schedules, leaving them with little time to explore locally. The rise of this travel mode reflects a shift in young travelers’ attitudes, as they embrace a warmer, more relaxed and slower-paced way of life.

This study is among the first to offer a preliminary exploration of the “city walk” travel model in the context of China, attempting to understand the motivations behind youths’ participation in “city walk” activities from a perspective of social psychology. Furthermore, this study presents potential opportunities and future prospects for “city walk” within the cultural and tourism industry.

2. Understanding #citywalk from a social psychological perspective

In recent years, there has been a trend on the internet of assigning labels to various things, and #citywalk is a prime example of this phenomenon. Labeling theory is a framework that explains how deviant behaviors emerge and evolve (Wikipedia, 2023). According to this

theory, everyone engages in “primary deviance,” behaviors that go against mainstream societal values (Bernburg, 2019). However, it’s only when others within social relationships label a specific individual as a “deviant” and firmly attach a “label” to them that the primary deviant might transition into a “deviant career” (Barrick, 2017). The younger generation is breaking away from the traditional “checklist-style” travel approach, and it is when other social groups stereotype them as “deviants” and apply a “label” that they embark on a “deviant career” in the realm of tourism and leisure.

Diverging from the passive labeling elucidated by this theory, travelers also engage in “active labeling” to articulate their lifestyles and values. Though the majority of young people still prefer crowded and fast-paced environments, contemporary youth also seem to gradually have a limited tolerance and adaptability to crowded environments. Hence, opting for spontaneous strolls seems like a win-win approach that allows them to experience the city’s ambiance while avoiding the crowds. As individuals awaken to self-awareness, they are forsaking superficial sightseeing in favor of a genuine “reading of the city,” immersing themselves in deep interactions with urban environments.

Labels are a quintessential cognitive phenomenon, where perception often outweighs reality. This signifies that the facts themselves are inconsequential; what matters is the cognitive framework within people’s minds. When facts diverge from perception, individuals might even refute the facts and present alternative examples to uphold their cognitive stance. For instance, postpandemic consumers favor travel and leisure options that combine “affordable prices with enjoyable experiences.” “City walk,” with their relatively budget-friendly experiential nature and attributes of social and cultural awareness, precisely align with the consumption preferences of today’s youth. Essentially, within the context of “downgraded consumption,” travelers are reshaping their self-perception and actual behaviors, achieving a form of “upgraded consumption” for personal experiences.

“City walk,” as an urban walking activity, aims to encourage individuals to explore and appreciate a city’s culture, history and landscapes on foot. “City walk” inherently carries qualities of romance, social interaction and healing. It provides an avenue for individuals to embrace freedom and alleviate feelings of loneliness at minimal costs. This activity offers a distinctive environment that allows people to observe and experience the historical culture, architecture and crowds of the city. This departure from the ordinary environment stimulates senses, ignites curiosity and fosters a desire for exploration, thereby influencing psychological states (Chen *et al.*, 2023).

For instance, it serves as a direct form of exercise that contributes to improving physical health (Buckley, 2023). Engaging in leisurely walks can relax the mind and body, consequently reducing stress and anxiety. Moreover, it enhances attention and concentration by simultaneously observing and adapting to diverse surroundings. “City walk” promotes social interactions and fosters interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, it boosts creativity and imagination, as individuals draw inspiration from the diversity of the city and its surroundings.

3. Opportunities and prospects of #citywalk in the cultural tourism industry

First, the social media sharing behavior of travelers engaging in “city walk” activities present an opportunity for reshaping the destination’s image. Unlike the previous tendency to solidify the destination’s image, travelers in the context of “city walk” convey the “emotional” image of the destination that they project during the process of “reading the city.” As one of the ways travelers deeply immerse themselves in urban culture, “city walk” activities provide inherent momentum for the restoration and transformation of historical districts within the context of urban renewal trends.

Second, the surge in popularity of city walk activities also reflects a “drift” in consumer demands, where travelers emphasize emotional value needs. amid the fast-paced and

high-pressure lifestyle, the perception of travel among the younger generation has shifted. Instead of chasing hurried paces, they seek a sense of relaxation, short-distance exploration, leisurely discovery and cost-effective enjoyment. City walk's popularity emerges as a collective outlet for young individuals to alleviate the pressures of life when they lack sufficient time, energy and resources for extensive travel and social interactions.

Third, "city walk" activities underscore the significance of personalized and customized services, placing new demands on personalized travel recommendations and route designs. The attention to detail and personalization within "city walk" necessitates thorough planning by individuals well-acquainted with the destination. Various specialized "city walk" groups have emerged as a result, with offerings like Airbnb's local experiences (Li *et al.*, 2023) and more sophisticated one-on-one personalized travel route designs.

Fourth, mining deep-seated user needs and precise demographic profiles from "city walk" activities present a promising business opportunity. Exploring users' posted images within #citywalk themed tweets, for instance, holds significant potential value. Analyzing whether and how themes like people, history, landscapes and art depicted in these images impact the usefulness of the tweets is crucial. Understanding the overall profile of enthusiasts of "city walk" activities aids in precision marketing on social media platforms.

Fifth, "city walk" activities open up limitless possibilities for this form of travel and leisure, with the potential for a "city walk+" trend to emerge in the future. Supported by digital technology, "city walk+pet," "city walk+reading," "city walk+dating," "city walk+sports" and more could become new fashionable variations. The prospects for the development of digital cultural tourism are indeed vast (Li and Wu, 2024; Wu *et al.*, 2023b).

4. Conclusion

From the high-paced "special forces-style tourism" to the leisurely "city walk," the popularity of diverse travel modes reflects the evolving perspectives and mindsets of contemporary youth, along with distinct pursuits in life (China Daily, 2023). Since the World Health Organization declared the end of the pandemic in May 2023 (Wu *et al.*, 2023a), people have shifted their focus to "high-quality" travel and leisure activities, particularly beyond the conventional tourist spots.

In fact, the Chinese Government has recognized this phenomenon and has outlined development plans (Chinese Government, 2022). These plans aim to enhance China's tourism and leisure environment, improve public service systems, elevate product and service quality, enrich the essence of tourism and leisure and foster the integration of related industries. Notably, attention has been given to the role of digital technology in collaborative urban transformation, as it revitalizes both material and sociocultural structures (Marques and Borba, 2017).

The emerging consumer demands brought about by the "city walk" travel model offer opportunities for the development of novel leisure formats within China's cultural tourism industry, the implementation of "high-quality" tourism and leisure services and the creation of new digital cultural tourism consumption scenarios (Zheng *et al.*, 2023). In addition, while preserving historical aspects of ancient architecture and streets, the focus on embracing contemporary culture aids in crafting new urban landmarks, infusing city neighborhoods with a vibrant touch of the modern era. Last but not least, exploring "city walk" travel patterns in different cities worldwide could prove to be a valuable research avenue.

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About the author

Dongdong Wu is a PhD candidate at the College of Tourism and Service Management, Nankai University, China. He is also a visiting scholar at the School of Sport, Tourism, and Hospitality Management, Temple University, USA. His research primarily focuses on sustainable tourism, corporate social responsibility, tourism firm restructuring and digital cultural tourism. Dongdong Wu can be contacted at: dwu@mail.nankai.edu.cn

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