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Algorithm-Driven Dispersion: Micro-Influencer Marketing and the Rise of 'Anti-Tourism' Destinations

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Abstract

Driven by the growing overcrowding at traditional travel destinations, "reverse tourism" and seeking "destination dupes" have become significant trends among younger tourist cohorts. However, the exact role that social media algorithms play in shifting these tourist waves remains under-researched. This study adopts a netnographic approach and thematic analysis to examine 100 high-engagement user posts on Xiaohongshu, focusing on the recent viral rise of Jingdezhen, China. The empirical findings reveal a distinct gendered and visual asymmetry in digital marketing. While the platform effectively redistributes tourist flows internally by leveraging viral visual symbols (such as the "Speechless Buddha") and hands-on ceramic experiences, borrowing world-class travel labels like "Kyoto" or "Maldives" triggers a severe authenticity crisis and a psychological expectation gap, which directly leads to negative online reviews. Furthermore, algorithmic recommendations do not eliminate over-tourism; instead, they simply relocate regional congestion into a smaller industrial city, creating a challenging phenomenon of "micro-overtourism" that disrupts local infrastructure and livelihoods. This study concludes that digital platforms function as temporary pressure-relief valves rather than permanent solutions for sustainable capacity management. For long-term viability, emerging destinations must pivot from chasing temporary algorithmic virality to investing in local infrastructure and cultivating their intrinsic cultural heritage.

Keywords

Reverse Tourism; Destination Dupes; Over-tourism; Xiaohongshu; Netnography

1. Introduction

The global tourism industry currently faces the same challenge – Overtourism (Dodds & Butler, 2019). Young tourists (under 35 years old) group start to promote reverse tourism (Månsson, 2021), seeking some destination dupes to avoid large flow of other tourists, for unique and quiet experience. A niche tourist attraction can

become an overnight sensation thanks to online platforms and algorithms (Gretzel, 2018). Today, both tourists' preferences and the methods and efficiency of tourism promotion have undergone tremendous changes. There is very little research in this area in academia, and many people think that diversion is a good thing. Ignoring that it will create "micro-overtourism" and "authenticity crisis".

To address this gap, this study examines the case of Jingdezhen, a historic porcelain city in China that has recently experienced a massive wave of reverse tourism fueled by the lifestyle platform Xiaohongshu. Adopting a netnographic approach and thematic analysis on 100 high-engagement posts, this research pursues a twofold objective: to unpack the digital marketing mechanisms that construct Jingdezhen's online allure, and to critically evaluate the short-term dispersal effects alongside the hidden paradoxes of authenticity loss and micro-overtourism. By doing so, this paper contributes a fresh perspective on the intersection of digital media algorithms and sustainable capacity management.

2. Methodology

The research is using Qualitative Content Analysis and Netnography which is invented by Kozinets(2002). The reason for choosing this method is that this study examines 'digital marketing mechanisms', requiring the author to conduct an in-depth analysis of user-generated text, images and hashtags on social media in order to understand the psychological and behavioural patterns of tourists.

The data is collected from 'Xiaohongshu (also known as RED)'-China's leading lifestyle sharing platform, As Xiang and Gretzel (2010) mentioned, Social media now plays a crucial role in influencing the decision-making of modern travellers. The keywords searched were as follows: 'Jingdezhen Reverse Tourism', 'Jingdezhen Destination Dupe' and 'Speechless Buddha'.Sample selection: The timeframe was set to May 2024–May 2026, and the top 100 most popular posts (including text, images and comments) based on the number of likes and comments were collected.

Thematic analysis is applied to the 100 data points, A study by Braun & Clarke (2006) found that thematic analysis is the most frequently cited guide to qualitative analysis methods in qualitative research worldwide. They have been divided primarily into:

Theme A (Marketing Mechanisms): Extract posts relating to 'visual symbols (the Speechless Buddha)', 'hands-on experiences (ceramics DIY)' and 'low-cost slow living (digital nomads)'.

Theme B (Traffic Diversion Effect): Extract posts mentioning 'not wanting to join the crowds at Huangshan or Hongcun', 'escaping traditional, overcrowded tourist attractions' and 'off-the-beaten-track tranquillity'.

This research is subject to the ethical considerations, According to Kozinets (2020), netnographic research must strictly adhere to the principle of harm minimization; while obtaining individual informed consent is not strictly mandated for publicly.

3. Findings

3.1. Demographic Profile and Engagement Analysis

The empirical analysis of the 100 sampled posts on Xiaohongshu reveals a highly remarkable digital engagement volume, underscoring the immense online traction of Jingdezhen as a reverse tourism destination. In total, the dataset generated 149,362 likes and 9,550 comments, translating into a substantial average of 1,493.62 likes and 95.5 comments per post. These robust interaction metrics justify the selection of the sample, confirming that the analyzed user-generated content (UGC) represents high-impact digital discourse rather than marginal online activity.

In terms of demographic composition, the data exhibits a distinct gender asymmetry. Female content creators heavily dominate the dataset, accounting for 92.00% ($N=92$) of the total sampled population, whereas male creators comprise a mere 8.00% ($N=8$). This overwhelming gender imbalance suggests that the digital narrative of reverse tourism on Xiaohongshu is predominantly constructed and consumed through a gendered lens, reflecting female-centric travel aesthetics and community interactions.

Furthermore, a cross-analysis of post formats and textual content unveils specific algorithmic and user preferences. Formally, posts embedded with rich visual images yielded significantly higher engagement in likes and comments compared to text-only narratives, reinforcing the visual-driven nature of contemporary digital marketing. Content-wise, captions containing emotionally resonant keywords such as "slow living" and "summer retreat" garnered the highest popularity. This alignment indicates that the algorithmic visibility of niche destinations is deeply intertwined with the psychological well-being of Z-generation travelers, who actively seek digital escapism to mitigate urban burnout.

3.2. Theme A: Digital Marketing Mechanisms and Symbolic Construction

Within the 59 posts categorized under Theme A, the data shows that Jingdezhen's sudden rise is not driven by traditional, text-heavy tourism advertisements, but rather by user-generated visual stories that feel authentic and relatable.

A key finding here is the way visual symbols, particularly the "Speechless Buddha," are actively re-created by tourists. Simply writing text reviews about the museum or the Buddha status does not generate much engagement. Instead, the real viral triggers are the actual photos taken by users captured at specific angles to highlight the Buddha's "eye-rolling" expression, often accompanied by humorous, self-deprecating captions about work stress. Furthermore, tourists frequently share photos of their tangible souvenirs, such as small Speechless Buddha ceramics or fridge magnets they purchased. These physical objects serve as concrete proof of their trip, transforming a digital meme into a material souvenir. By posting these photos, tourists create a visual chain reaction on Xiaohongshu that makes others

want to visit and buy the same items.

Beyond these visual symbols, the hands-on experience of making ceramics (24 posts) acts as another major draw. The narratives frequently mention the low cost of pottery-making—often around 30 RMB—and emphasize the therapeutic feeling of touching raw clay. In these posts, getting one's hands dirty at a local workshop is framed as a sensory escape from the digital fatigue of city life. Similarly, spaces like Sanbao Village and the 740 Factory are represented as ideal, laid-back communities for slow living. Rather than focusing on grand historical narratives, the sampled UGC highlights micro-experiences: drinking coffee in a renovated factory, strolling through night markets, and chatting with local artisans. Together, these elements turn Jingdezhen from a fading industrial city into a trendy sanctuary for burnt-out young travelers.

3.3. Theme B & C: Traffic Dispersal Effects and the Paradox of Negative Reviews

The 38 posts under Theme B confirm that destination displacement is heavily driven by a clever strategy on Xiaohongshu: tagging Jingdezhen as a "dupe" for world-class travel hotspots. Our data reveals that captions explicitly using labels like "the dupe for Altay" (emphasizing healing nature), "the dupe for Kyoto" (highlighting historic artisan vibes), or even "the dupe for Maldives" attract far more views and likes than generic travel tips. By borrowing the reputation of these luxury or highly popular landmarks, micro-influencers create an instant, vivid image of what Jingdezhen offers. This tactic works exceptionally well during major holidays, acting as a digital detour that intercepts frustrated travelers who want to avoid the massive crowds at traditional scenic spots like Huangshan or Hongcun.

However, the most surprising finding comes from Theme C, which involves the 3 negative reviews in our sample. Typically, complaints about poor local transit or over-commercialization are expected to drive tourists away. Yet, on Xiaohongshu, these negative posts triggered a unique "reverse marketing" effect.

Instead of agreeing with the criticism, the comment sections of these negative posts quickly turned into defensive hubs. Dozens of ordinary users stepped in to counter the complaints by uploading their own beautiful, unedited photos of hidden local spots, arguing that the original poster simply visited the wrong places. This spontaneous defense by the online community did two things: it disproved the negative claims and generated a fresh wave of highly authentic, positive UGC. Ultimately, these 3 negative posts did not hurt the destination's image; instead, the heated debates they caused pushed the posts higher into the platform's algorithm, unintentionally driving even more traffic and interest toward Jingdezhen.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study bring to light a complex paradox regarding how digital

platforms reshape tourist waves and destination images. On one hand, the decentralized nature of Xiaohongshu clearly helps redistribute tourist flows within the destination itself. While iconic hotspots like the Speechless Buddha and Sanbao Village initially attract massive online attention, users who share detailed itineraries and niche discoveries—such as the 740 Factory—gradually nudge subsequent travelers toward these lesser-known pockets. In a way, this user-generated guidance acts as an internal pressure-relief valve, preventing the absolute saturation of Jingdezhen's primary urban center.

However, this algorithm-driven popularity comes with a significant cost to the destination's long-term sustainability. The common practice of riding on world-class travel IPs, such as branding Jingdezhen as the "dupe for Kyoto" or "Maldives," creates a severe authenticity crisis. While these labels act as highly effective clickbait in the short term, they dilute Jingdezhen's unique identity as a historic porcelain capital. When travelers visit with a "Kyoto mindset," they actively look for foreign, replicated aesthetics rather than appreciating the town's authentic ceramic heritage. This misalignment creates a fragile foundation for sustainable tourism. Moreover, projecting the imagery of Kyoto or the Maldives onto an industrial Chinese town inevitably triggers a psychological gap. When the reality fails to match these exaggerated digital expectations, tourist dissatisfaction spikes, which directly explains the negative reviews and backlash observed in our sample.

On a broader scale, our results challenge the romanticized narrative that digital marketing can cure over-tourism. Instead, what we see here is a classic case of spatial displacement driven by algorithmic convergence. Xiaohongshu's recommendation loops might successfully steer thousands of people away from overcrowded traditional mega-scenic areas like Huangshan or Hongcun during major holidays, but it simply dumps that massive volume into a former industrial city that lacks the infrastructure to handle it. The sudden influx leads to gridlocked traffic, skyrocketing accommodation prices, and local inflation. Ultimately, digital marketing does not eliminate over-tourism; it merely relocates and compresses it into a smaller urban space. This shift creates a intense form of "micro-overtourism" that yields negligible long-term benefits for the destination, while severely disrupting the daily lives and well-being of Jingdezhen's local residents.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study concludes that decentralized digital platforms are powerful engines driving contemporary reverse tourism, particularly among the younger generation. However, relying purely on one type of digital ecosystem has its limits. Our findings show that the current discourse surrounding destination marketing is heavily skewed toward female-dominated platforms like Xiaohongshu. To tap into an underserved market and drive more diverse tourist flows, destination managers should consider diversifying their digital channels. Actively expanding promotional

efforts onto male-dominated platforms—such as Hupu or similar community-driven forums—could bridge this gender gap and attract a broader demographic of travelers who are also looking for alternative travel experiences.

Furthermore, this research offers a critical reality check for content strategy. While viral memes like the "Speechless Buddha" or highly commercialized spots like Sanbao Village generate quick online buzz, they are not as sustainable as previously expected. Instead, what truly resonates with young travelers looking for long-term value are narratives centered around "slow living," hands-on ceramics DIY, and authentic local food sharing. These culinary and craft traditions are far better suited for showcasing Jingdezhen's genuine cultural and historical heritage. Riding on the coattails of foreign mega-IPs (like Kyoto or the Maldives) is a fragile, short-term gimmick; as a long-term strategy, the risk of disappointing visitors far outweighs the benefits of early clicks. Ultimately, local authorities must pivot from chasing viral online traffic to building solid foundations. By upgrading local infrastructure and prioritizing environmental protection, Jingdezhen can successfully balance tourist satisfaction with the daily well-being of its residents, effectively turning volatile digital waves into sustainable, long-term tourism growth.

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