Journal of Trends in Finance and Economics
Print ISSN: 3007-6951
Online ISSN: 3007-696X
DOI: https://doi.org/10.61784/jtfe3085

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF INTERNET-FAMOUS DESTINATIONS: THE CASE OF WUKANG ROAD, SHANGHAI

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Abstract: Internet-famous check-in destinations, propelled by social-media traffic, have become a defining feature of contemporary urban tourism in China, yet their rapid popularity often collides with the carrying capacity of historic neighborhoods. Taking Wukang Road in Shanghai as a case, this article examines the problems that threaten the sustainable development of such destinations and proposes countermeasures. Drawing on academic studies and official sources, it identifies four intertwined problems: excessive visitor flows and overtourism pressures, disturbance to residents' everyday life, commercial gentrification and landscape homogenization, and strain on the environment and public services. The article argues that sustainability requires a shift from traffic-driven check-in consumption to place-based, resident-centered governance. Accordingly, it recommends managing visitor flows and destination capacity, adopting participatory governance through multi-stakeholder conventions, protecting everyday life and authentic commerce, diversifying the experience beyond the check-in, and strengthening data-driven regulation. The Wukang Road case offers transferable lessons for other internet-famous destinations seeking to balance popularity with long-term vitality.
Keywords: Overtourism; Tourist area life cycle; Commercial gentrification; Check-in economy; Participatory governance

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Rise of Internet-Famous Destinations and the Check-in Economy

Social media has fundamentally reshaped how people choose and experience places. Cities, streets, and even single buildings can be transformed overnight into internet-famous check-in destinations, as networked images spread rapidly and tourists travel to reproduce the photographs they have seen online. In China this phenomenon has produced celebrated cases such as Zibo, Harbin, and Chongqing, whose popularity was ignited less by intrinsic resources than by viral content and collective emotional resonance. Academic studies observe that such destinations typically burst into visibility and then fade [1], with popularity often proving short-lived and attention decaying rapidly after the peak. When traffic fades, destinations face the risk of a cliff-like decline, wasting earlier investment and disappointing local communities. For local governments and planners, the rise of such destinations is therefore a double-edged sword: social media offers an inexpensive channel for promoting a place, but it also subjects that place to volatile attention over which authorities have little direct control. This fragility is the starting point of the present study.

1.2 Wukang Road as a Representative Case

Wukang Road, located in the former French Concession of northern Xuhui District, is one of the most recognizable internet-famous streets in Shanghai. Designated as part of the Hengshan-Fuxing Historic and Cultural Area in 2003 and as a historic featured street in 2005, it contains dozens of protected historic buildings and has long been celebrated for its plane trees and heritage villas. The rise of social media turned the street into a national landmark, culminating in the Wukang Mansion's emergence as a favorite subject for photographers. The street's significance lies not only in its architecture but in its continuity as a living community, where residents, shops, and cultural institutions still coexist. The result of this attention is a dramatic intensification of tourism: the street now receives approximately 30,000 visitors on an average day [2], with peak flows approaching 100,000 on holidays. Such intensity in a residential historic street raises pressing questions about whether its popularity can be sustained without damaging the very qualities that make it attractive.

1.3 Purpose and Structure of the Article

This article examines the problems that impede the sustainable development of internet-famous check-in destinations, using Wukang Road as a case study, and proposes countermeasures. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and establishes a theoretical framework; Section 3 describes the research design and methods; Section 4 analyzes the problems; Section 5 proposes countermeasures; and Section 6 concludes.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 The Tourist Area Life Cycle and Internet-Famous Destinations

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The theoretical foundation for understanding destination evolution is the tourist area life cycle [3], which holds that destinations progress through exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and either decline or rejuvenation. The model warns that growth is not indefinite and that management intervention determines whether a destination declines or is rejuvenated. In the context of check-in tourism, the compression of the life cycle means that a destination may pass from exploration to stagnation within a few years, and even brief lapses in service quality can be amplified online into reputational crises that accelerate decline. Internet-famous destinations thus intensify this dynamic: their growth is unusually fast but also unusually fragile, and Chinese scholars have identified distinct lifecycle types and proposed systematic regulation to move from explosive fame to lasting popularity [1].

2.2 Overtourism and Carrying Capacity

A central concept for diagnosing the problems of popular destinations is overtourism. Koens and colleagues define overtourism as tourism that exceeds the limits of acceptable change in a destination with regard to the environment, the perceived quality of life of residents, and the quality of the visitor experience [4]. Importantly, they argue that overtourism should be understood not merely as a tourism or urban problem but as a social problem embedded in the city itself. Because overtourism is a socially produced phenomenon rather than an inevitable outcome of popularity, its management requires attention to distributional fairness: who benefits from tourism and who bears its costs. This perspective is directly relevant to Wukang Road, where the object of concern is not only congestion but the wellbeing of residents who live in a place they did not choose to make famous.

2.3 Post-Tourism and Social-Media Mediation

Social media not only drives visitor flows but also changes the nature of the tourist experience. The concept of post-tourism captures the way tourism has become generalized across everyday life [5], with media representations blurring the boundary between the real destination and its circulating images. Tourists increasingly travel to confirm and reproduce the images they have consumed online, a tendency that intensifies in a visual culture oriented toward the production of shareable content. This mediation means that the destination is partly produced in cyberspace, complicating efforts to manage a physical place whose meaning is constantly renegotiated by visitors and online communities. This reflexivity cuts both ways: while it enriches the imaginative value of places, it also makes destinations vulnerable to rapid shifts in online taste and to the homogenization of visual clichés across platforms.

2.4 Commercial Gentrification and the Production of Space

The material consequences of internet fame are analyzed through the lens of gentrification and the production of space. Studies of consumption practices and the production of space show how tourists and social-media users co-produce the meaning of iconic places, sometimes displacing the everyday functions that originally defined them [6]. Research on internet-famous consumption spaces demonstrates that digital media actively construct such spaces, guiding how visitors perceive and appropriate them [7]. In the case of Wukang Road, scholars describe two stages of touristification orchestrated by the local state [8], and analyze how digitally facilitated gentrification has redistributed aesthetic sensibilities and reshaped the neighborhood's commercial fabric [9]. These dynamics have produced visible outcomes, including the rising turnover of traditional shops, upward pressure on rents, and the gradual replacement of everyday services by visitor-oriented retail. A parallel reading traces the street's trajectory from homogenization to distinctiveness to re-homogenization [10], arguing that the pursuit of distinctiveness can itself become formulaic.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative, case-based design. It triangulates three types of secondary evidence: peer-reviewed academic studies of Wukang Road and internet-famous destinations; official materials and policy communications from district and municipal governments describing visitor flows and governance practices; and journalistic and documentary accounts of the street's transformation. The analysis proceeds by first mapping the problems reported in these sources and then evaluating the countermeasures that have been proposed or implemented, organizing findings around the themes of visitor flows, residential life, commercial change, and public services. Although the reliance on secondary sources does not allow for primary measurement of visitor perceptions, it is appropriate for a problem-oriented policy review whose aim is to synthesize evidence and identify actionable directions. Future research may complement these findings with resident surveys and on-site observation.

4 PROBLEMS HINDERING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ON WUKANG ROAD

4.1 Excessive Visitor Flows and Overtourism Pressures

The most visible problem is the sheer volume of visitors concentrated in a compact residential area. With daily flows around 30,000 and holiday peaks near 100,000, the street's physical capacity is chronically exceeded [8]. Crowding creates safety concerns, as tourists step into the road to secure better photographs, and it concentrates demand in a few iconic spots, notably the Wukang Mansion, leaving much of the surrounding area underused. Such uneven distribution

reflects the point-to-point logic of check-in tourism, in which a single landmark absorbs most of the traffic. The problem is aggravated by the concentration of visits on weekends and holidays, so that pressure is not only high but highly uneven, peaking in short windows that overwhelm services designed for modest daily flows.

4.2 Disturbance to Residents' Everyday Life

A second, closely related problem is the intrusion of mass tourism into residential life. Residents report that visitors occupy sidewalks and doorways, photograph private windows and balconies, and generate noise and litter, making ordinary activities such as commuting and taking out the garbage more difficult. The street is, above all, a place where people live, and the commodification of the domestic sphere creates tensions that a purely economic view of tourism cannot capture. For many residents, the boundary between public celebration and private intrusion has become porous, and the constant presence of cameras can generate feelings of exposure and fatigue.

4.3 Commercial Gentrification and Landscape Homogenization

The commercial fabric of the street has been transformed to cater to visitors rather than residents. Cafes, boutiques, and aesthetic retail replace everyday services, and facades and interiors are continually adjusted to appear attractive in photographs. This process, accelerated by digital media that amplify certain representations of the place, leads to landscape homogenization: distinctive local businesses give way to establishments that conform to a global aesthetic, and low-income residents and traditional merchants are marginalized. The homogenizing tendency is subtle because it is aesthetic: spaces that photograph well are endlessly replicated, while functional, everyday uses that do not generate shareable images are progressively squeezed out. The result is a tension between a curated, photogenic image and the authentic diversity that originally drew attention.

4.4 Strain on the Environment and Public Services

Finally, intensive visitation places heavy strain on infrastructure and the environment. Waste accumulates, non-motorized vehicles are haphazardly parked, and public toilets are insufficient for the crowds, forcing visitors to seek facilities in shops and institutions. These pressures raise maintenance costs and, if unmanaged, degrade the environmental quality on which the street's appeal ultimately depends. Because that appeal rests on its historic atmosphere, uncontrolled congestion and litter erode it directly, creating a feedback loop in which popularity undermines the qualities that attracted it.

5 COUNTERMEASURES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

5.1 Managing Visitor Flows and Destination Capacity

Sustainability begins with matching demand to capacity. Measures include identifying the optimal visitor load for the street, guiding crowds away from the most congested spots through signage and designated photo spots, and spreading demand across time and space so that a single landmark does not absorb all traffic. Physical interventions such as soft barriers can separate pedestrians from vehicles and ensure both safety and flow. Such measures should be informed by data on when and where crowding occurs, so that interventions target the peaks rather than blunt restrictions that reduce legitimate access.

5.2 Participatory Governance through Multi-Stakeholder Conventions

Because the street is simultaneously a tourist attraction, a commercial district, and a residential community, governance must be participatory. Wukang Discussions convened residents, merchants, and visitors to negotiate shared expectations, producing a residents' convention, a merchants' convention, and a visitors' convention. Such agreements convert abstract principles into locally owned rules and build the trust needed for long-term cooperation. The value of these conventions lies in their legitimacy: because they are negotiated rather than imposed, residents and merchants are more likely to observe them and to police them informally among themselves. Community-based initiatives, such as a program that combines professional social workers with volunteers, further embed governance in everyday life.

5.3 Protecting Everyday Life, Local Identity, and Authentic Commerce

Countermeasures must actively protect the qualities that make the street valuable: its residential character, its historic identity, and its authentic commerce. This requires zoning or guidance that preserves everyday services, limits the conversion of residential uses into visitor-oriented businesses, and supports local merchants rather than formulaic chains. Such protection may involve reviewing commercial leases, offering support to longstanding local businesses, and ensuring that heritage conservation serves residents as well as visitors. Protecting residents' quiet enjoyment of their homes is as important as managing visitors, and policies should be judged by their effect on residents' quality of life, not merely by visitor numbers.

5.4 Diversifying the Experience beyond the Check-in

Reducing overconcentration also depends on changing what visitors do. By developing diverse routes, cultural programs, and narratives that extend beyond the single iconic building, operators can encourage visitors to explore the wider neighborhood, stay longer, and engage with local culture rather than merely photographing a landmark. Cultural programming that draws on the street's history and the stories of its buildings can give visitors reasons to linger and to return, reducing the pressure of one-off photographic visits. This shift from point-based to area-based experience disperses pressure and increases the economic and cultural value of each visit.

5.5 Data-Driven and Digital Regulation

Finally, modern destination management should be data-driven. Real-time monitoring of visitor flows, integrated management platforms, and predictive tools can help authorities anticipate crowding and coordinate responses, while the same digital channels that created the phenomenon can be used to communicate expectations to visitors and to correct misleading or unsafe content online. Data-driven regulation makes capacity management proactive rather than reactive. At the same time, regulation should be accompanied by transparency and civic participation, so that monitoring serves residents rather than merely optimizes visitor throughput.

6 CONCLUSION

Wukang Road illustrates both the promise and the peril of internet-famous check-in destinations. Social media can transform a historic street into a national landmark and generate substantial economic and cultural vitality, but unmanaged popularity threatens the residential life, commercial diversity, and environmental quality that underpin its appeal. The problems identified here—overtourism pressures, disturbance to residents, commercial gentrification, and environmental strain—are intertwined and require coordinated responses. The countermeasures proposed in this article, from capacity management and participatory governance to the protection of everyday life and data-driven regulation, point toward a model of sustainability in which popularity serves the place rather than the place serving popularity. These lessons extend well beyond Shanghai, offering a reference for the many cities seeking to make their internet-famous destinations both popular and livable.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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