

How Social Media Interaction Sustains Tourism Popularity from Viral to Long-Term

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Abstract:

The landscape of tourism promotion has been changed by social media, turning hot spots into viral hot spots, with likes, shares, and check-ins. The free press generated by such digital exposure is always a spike – not stability. Informed by Rogers diffusion of innovations [1] and co-creation theory, this paper explores how to transform destination from hype to heat. Examples such as China's Village Super League, the over tourism of Barcelona, and community-led processes within Iceland indicate the bad and good of unmanaged popularity and collaborative governance. The research concludes that the development of sustainable destination mandates active collaboration between DMOs, intermediaries and residents for ensuring a proper dealing of visibility and responsibility. Through the integration of theory and application, this paper provides strategic insights with which viral dynamics can be strategically employed to escape the ephemeral fame and to generate sustained tourism value.

Keywords: Social media marketing, user-generated content, destination branding, tourism virality, digital experience

1. Introduction

Over the past years, the emerging social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu have revolutionized global tourism by building a unique way of discovery, interpretation and consumption of destinations. Viral trends, geotagged posts and short-form video content have turned the most unlikely places into 'overnight sensations,' attracting significant volumes of visitors simply because of visual aesthetics and social proof [2]. As physical symbols like "check-in walls," signature dishes and scenic

swings multiply across platforms, travel behavior has come to revolve around the goal of capturing experiences that could be shared. But this immediate attention is sometimes fleeting, as destinations have a hard time continuing to remain in the spotlight. This trend has led to increasing needs of tourism researchers and practitioners to understand the way in which using social media - not just being present on social media - generates and maintains destination popularity [3].

The role of social media interaction in helping desti-

nations to transform from short-lived popularity into sustainable attractiveness is the focus of this article. Even if an algorithmically amplified burst of exposure can inspire widespread, initial interest and discovery, it is the ongoing user participation — comments, peer sharing, circle identity formation as well as co-created narratives — that will determine whether a “destination”, the objects around which these subcultures accrete, can outgrow its fifteen minutes of transient fame [4]. This research explores and explains these mechanisms, revealing the shared challenges in transitioning from “viral” to “long term,” and suggesting tangible practices for maintaining tourist appeal in the digital age. Through social media as an ecosystem of interactions, rather than a broadcast medium, this paper advocates for a more nuanced understanding of the impact of digital participation in relation to tourist flows, expectations and destination resilience. Social media has increasingly been conceptualized not only as a marketing channel but as an experience-creating environment [5].

2. From Hype to Heat – The Mechanics of Virality

2.1 Visual Triggers and Algorithmic Amplification

The power of the social media virality effect on tourism is driven by extremely visual and emotionally impactful stimuli. Media which is surprising or delightful or aspi-

rational is emphasized on platforms like Instagram, TikTok or Xiaohongshu, and these qualities are commonly present in travel media [3]. On Xiaohongshu, marketing content measurably shapes users’ travel decisions [6]. A single photograph of a multi-colored alleyway or a cinematic swing over a jungle vista can become a visual cue, prompting mimicry and thus promoting a destination to symbolic significance. The platform’s engagement performance mirrors the increase in the number of users who want to reenact the image and tag the location.

Platform algorithms reinforce this process. In the case of engagement-based curation systems, popular, fast-spreading content is promoted. This algorithmic amplification has an exponential effect on the amount of exposure, frequently surpassing the follower base of the original creator [4]. In turn, social media are transformed into potent trigger men for unwanted tourism promotion often beyond the control of the DMOs. On Xiaohongshu, for example, user-generated videos spotlighting “hidden gems” have provoked millions of searches and site visits being conducted on the fly. When content goes viral, it exists in a feedback loop: Exposure encourages engagement which in turn drives exposure. Destinations that go through this process usually see an abrupt influx of visitors in a way that seems out of control, driven by digital engagement, rather than pooled up marketing teams. As shown in Figure 1, keyword search interest spikes immediately after a viral post and decays quickly thereafter.

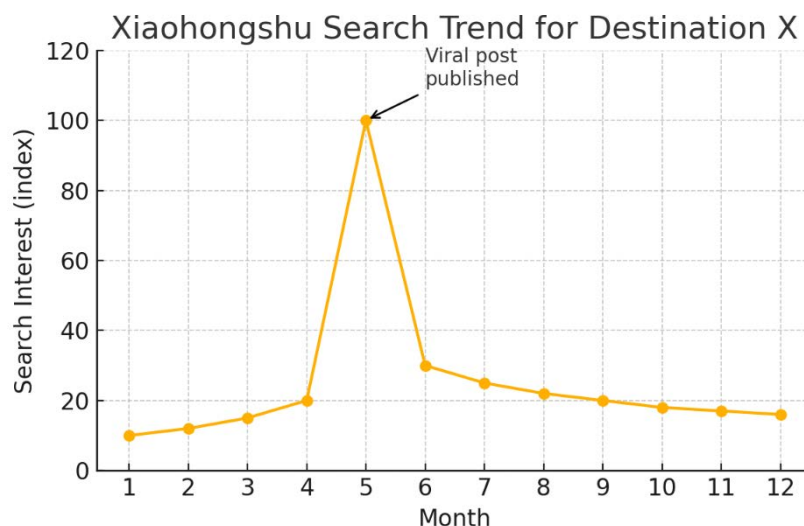


Figure 1: Line graph showing sudden spike in keyword search volume after a viral post, followed by rapid decline (used in Section 2.1).

2.2 Peer Influence and FOMO Amplification

In addition to vision’s second nature, social media’s most significant impact on tourism comes through peer-to-peer

networks. Unlike traditional media, apps like Xiaohongshu and TikTok allow users to participate in comment threads, repost one another’s stories and co-create stories in real time. These engagements involve electronic word

of mouth (eWOM), a social recommendation that has an important impact on travel intentions [3]. Places that friends, influencers, or micro-communities introduce you to become legitimate when you perceive them as authentic and you get a sense that it's all social-proof.

One of the most pervasive psychological processes in this context is the fear of missing out (FOMO). When one sees friends visiting someplace, there is the desire to experience that too. Social comparison and digital belonging: Social comparison and digital belonging are also important motivators, especially among young tourists [7]. It compels FOMO: travelers don't want to be left behind on a cool experience. This is the phenomenon that has given rise to viral check-in tropes like those of China's "college special forces travel," where college students share whirlwind vlogs of their trips to various cities within a couple of days. It's a challenge-based, peer-tested model that

incentivizes others to sign up and post, resulting in a cycle of replication and reward.

The involvement of influencers only hastens the process. When celebrities or influencers record their visits, engagement spikes — followers replicate itineraries, or even hunt down the same photo ops. This imitation effect accelerates in waves the popularity of destinations, under the influence of social validation. When enough people tag and geotag the same locations, the algorithms that power Instagram notice the spike, and they promote the content for more people to see. Thus, interaction and imitation spark self-reinforcing dynamics that turn a place into a viral tourism favorite. During the hashtag challenge period, content volume peaked and then tapered off (Figure 2). Bandwagon effects further intensify social proof, increasing the likelihood of travel once peers are perceived to have chosen the same option [8].

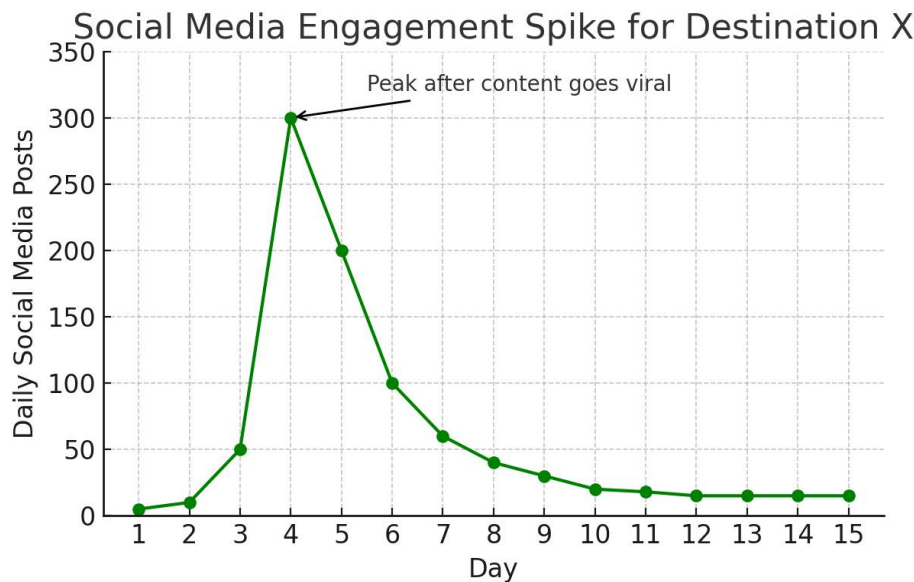


Figure 2: Bar chart indicating content volume peaking during hashtag challenge period, then falling gradually (used in Section 2.2).

2.3 Digital Collectives and Niche Communities

Besides personal peer-to-peer influence, viral tourism trends are frequently amplified in interest-based, digital-centric communities, or so-called "circle culture" for short in China. These micro-communities, like fan groups around anime, street food or extreme sports, bond over niche interests and gather around content that validates them. One-line summary: Niche communities amplify destinations whose aesthetics and values fit group identity, sustaining attention beyond one-off viral breakouts. There is a lot about place promotion -- why do some destinations catch on and others don't? When a locale jibes with the values or aesthetics of a particular group, promoting it becomes natural, even gut-level. This kind of collective

amplification is different from viral breakouts on a large scale; it is more deliberate, more enduring, more community based.

Marine-Roig and Clavé [4] note that digital tourism stories often evolve from networks of users with common interests, not from mainstream sites. These stories are carried by co-creation: users share their custom itineraries, rating lists, memes, and cultural analysis. One such example is the 2023 "Village Super League" in Rongjiang, Guizhou, to which grassroots soccer tournaments have appealed to rural culture enthusiasts. Through short videos, livestreams, and user-generated commentaries among the "village revival" circle, New Views on the Rural had effectively turned a hyper-local event into a nationwide

tourism event, with over 30 billion hits in less than three months [9].

Social networks enable this by means of hash tags and attraction feeds and model-driven personalization. Users aren't just passive consumers, they are active contributors to trends by participating in challenges or content campaigns that represent group identity. Such digital collectives often have more staying power than the typical viral trend because they have an emotional or cultural stake in it. Once the content moves within the group, it overflows to the other circles, becoming more widely seen. Those destinations that become part of such communities find themselves with deeply loyal and continuing online engagement as a route from passing attention to enduring popularity. This pattern mirrors Rogers' [1] diffusion of innovations: virality resembles early adoption, but sustained demand requires crossing into mainstream adoption through consistent experience delivery. This highlights the challenge of crossing the "chasm" from early adopters to the early majority, where DMOs must provide systematic experience design rather than relying on transient digital buzz [1].

3. Why Hype Fades – Barriers to Long-Term Popularity

3.1 Flow Dependency and Shallow Content Development

Many places which catch the limelight thanks to social media fail to create a working tourism model as their success depends on too brief an online hype. This trend, known as "flow dependency," involves being too dependent on transient traffic from becoming viral without development of content of a more durable nature or brand [10]. Instead of diversifying their tourism portfolio, some places are stuck with one trite photo, video, or viral meme.

This low-depth content structure causes visitor fatigue. Tourists attracted by a quick-draw photo op or a fad-centred experience find there's not much to do when they get there. Without new stories to tell, experience layers to build on or content offerings to diversify, destinations are left behind when the social media craze moves on. Agu-

iar and Leal [11] claim that the absence of a long-term branding strategy enhances this challenge, considering that numerous viral places do not offer any cultural depth, educational programme, or heritage value, leading to a shallow visitors' experience.

This cycle of "gone after the hype" becomes self-reinforcing: users rapidly switch to the next vogueish site, and en-route-locates that prove unable to adapt become obsolete in terms of online chatter and tourist demand alike. Without live content creation — and here it's mostly user-generated storytelling or visual updates — the platforms' algorithms frog-march the destination into a lower tier and the attention dissipates. In summary, flow dependence undermines retention by substituting sustainable value creation with transient popularity.

3.2 Online–Offline Mismatch: Expectation vs. Experience Gaps

For destinations that have been made popular through social media, a major issue is the widening gap between the way they are presented online and the reality on the ground. Viral exposure frequently results in an exaggerated expectation among visitors; imagery and enthusiastic reports are carefully selected. Yet the travel experience either does not meet, or falls short of, these expectations in real-life causing disappointment and reputational challenges [10]. Post-visit satisfaction systematically lags behind pre-visit expectations built by online imagery (Figure 3).

This misalignment manifests itself at two levels: the infrastructure and the service. Viral places are often inundated with hordes who come in search of the same hoot and holler and stamp their visiting time and place on social media. Infrastructure such as transportation, lodging, signage, and public services may not be able to accommodate the scale and speed of demand. And the quality of services at the front line — guides, dining options, safety measures — can be unsatisfactory or questionable. These voids can be particularly glaring when visitors come in filled with high expectations driven by the social media storylines — often far removed from the real thing. As prior work [11] points out, travelers tend to encode digital images as promises, with follow up offline, or satisfaction, being much lower when these are not fulfilled.

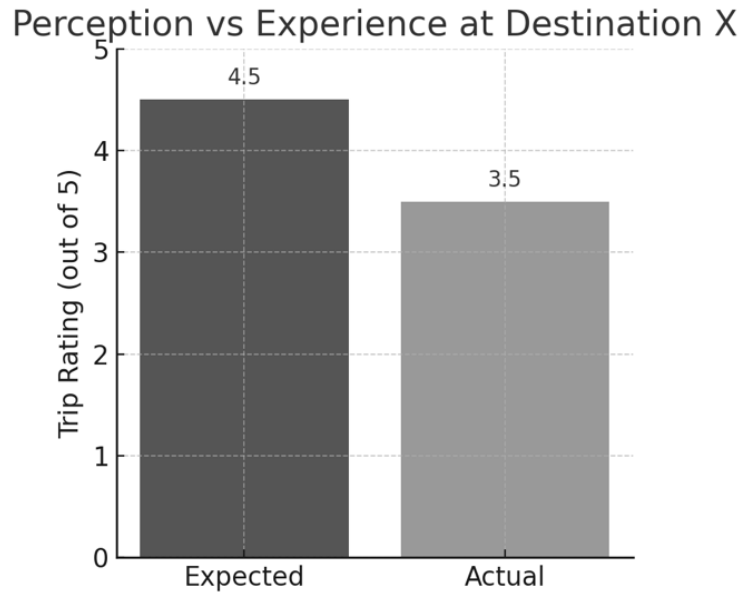


Figure 3: Comparative bar chart illustrating expectation score (e.g. 4.5/5) based on online imagery vs. actual satisfaction (e.g. 3.5/5) from post-visit survey (used in Section 3.2).

There are ramifications beyond personal frustration. Bad experiences are just as quickly shared on those very platforms, creating counter-narratives to deter future visits. Negative online reviews, criticism on social media and videos featuring overcrowding, disorganization or environmental damage can quickly change public sentiment. In Iceland there is one canyon, Fjaðrárgljúfur, which became burdened by Instagram and tourism and was temporarily closed by authorities because the paths were collapsing and it was unsafe [12]. Places that do not deal with the expectation-experience gap well may find themselves not simply logistically strained, but with a public image that is badly tarnished.

In the end, social media speeds up both the ascent and descent of a place. The lack of offensive coordination between digital marketing and in-store execution can turn viral celebrity into a liability.

3.3 Symbolic Saturation and Cultural Erosion

Symbolic saturation is one of the reasons that viral destinations are not sustainable – the single idea or visual cliché is overplayed, and becomes denuded of its newness and removed from its cultural context. Hoping to capitalize on digital attention when it arrives, many localities flatten their identity into a series of easily shareable symbols — a mural or a landmark or memorable name — restageable and interchangeable from town to town, endlessly reproduced and consumed across social media. This recurrence leads to a loss of emotional involvement, and plays down the likelihood of the content being revisited [4].

As Aguiar and Leal [11] highlight, tourist motivations

are increasingly post-modernist aesthetics consumption – looking for the signs and symbols, and not the real involvement in the destination. When destinations are arranged for the camera's gaze, their cultural identity is relegated to secondary consideration. This contributes to what researchers call cultural hollowing, in which local traditions are played for commercial value or filtered to continue below platform aesthetics. Traditional villages in China, for example, have repainted their facades or put on “folk” performances, custom-made for influencer videos, attracting accusations that they are sapping local authenticity.

This symbolic saturation also inhibits any serious communication. When the pictures are taken and posted of a mural or street from every angle, the site is drained of its visual novelty. Tourists — especially digital natives — have a short attention span and move on quickly to the next visual spectacle. Zhang, Kler & Wong [12] have also demonstrated that a repeated presentation can decrease the affective response and the perceived distinctiveness of that image. Excessive reification of a symbolic identity can just as easily marginalize the community and make residents feel estranged from their own plots on the landscape.

Ultimately, it is places which possess only shallow visual branding that run the risk of becoming interchangeable and detached. Because, without developing more complex narratives, emotional connection or community involvement, the image will disappear as quickly as it arrived. From a sustainable marketing perspective, over-simplified symbolic branding weakens long-term value creation [13].

4. Strategies for Enduring Popularity

4.1 Narrative Branding: From Viral Labels to Cultural Depth

To cross the threshold from fleeting fame to sustainable relevance, destinations need to rise above surface-level descriptors to establish a more meaningful narrative identity. Viral fame is often associated with a single, visually arresting image or meme — what Chinese discourse calls a “propagation tag”. And as catchy as they can be in the moment, once they get filtered through, timeless they are not. Rather, destinations should practice “narrative deep cultivation” — creating a storytelling that resonates with tourists emotionally and intellectually with layered cultural depth.

An effective brand story is inspired by a destination’s history, ideals, and people. According to some studies, story-based branding is found to not only make information more memorable but also enhance perceptions of authenticity and differentiation [11]. For instance, instead of marketing a village as just “colorful” or “Instagrammable,” people might be encouraged to value the history behind its architecture, its journey towards community transformation, or its environmental ethos. They can be communicated via embedded storytelling techniques — guided tours, murals with QR code-linked oral histories, or digital documentaries broadcast on social platforms.

Destinations can even co-create content with their residents and those experiencing the destination themselves, giving both locals and visitors a platform to help build the brand story. Activities like “travel story contests,” “local ambassador livestreams,” or group map-building programs not only improve the destination’s online profile, but also emotional connection with tourists. In Yucun, China, the destination went well beyond bamboo groves, branding itself on an ecological philosophy and rural creativity, which in turn enabled the destination to become a UNWTO Best Tourism Village [9].

Through narrative branding, destinations turn from photo opportunity to story experience. This storytelling is the cultural “I.P.” that helps deepen resilience beyond the initial hype online.

4.2 Immersive Experience Design: Delivering More Than a Photo

Indeed, snapshots are key to social media virality, but long-term desirability is cemented through the experience itself. Visitors today no longer just want to record a destination, but to engage with it. To hold our interest beyond one photo or trend, destinations must offer immersive, multi-sensory and participatory experiences that match and surpass the ones we’ve been conditioned to expect

online.

Immersive design starts with the addition of interactives—from augmented-reality (AR) apps that disclose the hidden history of a site, to zones where visitors can try their hand at a local craft, or taste local food. These aspects increase engagement while also giving visitors something that is both shareable and unique. Huang et al. [14] also indicated that both augmented and virtual reality had a significant effect on tourist satisfaction, visiting intention and destination memorability among digital native tourists. Evidence from a cultural World Heritage Site shows that UGC engagement strengthens loyalty [15].

Offline upgrades are equally critical. Well-maintained venues, legible signage, theme-centered trails, and multilingual information generate professionalism and care, which transforms casual visitors into returnees. This is especially true when the viral attention draws hordes of people that overwhelm existing infrastructure. Without complimentary enrichment of the offline environment, even the most enticing virtual presence will eventually get derailed by negative reviews and unsatisfied customers [10].

In addition, experience design should return to the destination’s central narrative to ensure a seamless brand journey. For instance, if a rural destination focuses on sustainability, tourists might be able to attend farming workshops or visit zero-waste markets. If it markets itself around traditional arts, the destination might provide hands-on calligraphy lessons or the opportunity to wear traditional folk costumes for photos. These are the kind of activities that offer deeper interaction, and they also create a wide range of user-generated content that fuels the social media loop without outside support.

Thoughtfully designed immersive experiences turn a trip into a story, and that story is content worth sharing. When we entertain, inform and respect those visitors, they become advocates—posting happily and eagerly inviting their friends. This is how immersive experience design creates a second wave of digital presence, founded on fulfillment rather than novelty.

4.3 Stakeholder Collaboration: Building a Tourism Ecosystem

Viability of destinations in the long-term is not possible without the cooperation of stakeholders such as local communities, DMOs or digital content producers. Destinations become less vulnerable to the vagaries of social media trends, more resilient and better able to maintain tourism long into the future if these groups can co-create, co-manage and co-benefit.

DMOs serve as strategic narrative architects and experience synthesizers. They should also not just do the advertising of our attractions, but be out in the online

sentiment being driven and do social listening and things to be proactive in shaping public perception. Wengel et al. [10] recommend that “digital response units” be stood up to respond in real time to viral spikes, scaling up capacity, issuing crowd management notices, and amplifying evidence-based messaging through multiple channels. Interventions like these not only protect the visitor experience, but also local resources. DMOs need structured digital destination-branding practices to assess and coordinate online–offline alignment [16].

Just as valuable are content creators, particularly micro-influencers that are part of niche communities. Unlike one-off viral videos, ongoing collaborations with creators can help maintain fans’ interest with themed series, seasonal updates and behind-the-scenes commentary. Today, many destinations work with longer-term ambassadors, who return on numerous occasions, to document the changing face of place and experience. It creates a steady flow of real user-generated content (UGC), further amplifying brand story [2]. Instagram-based influencer campaigns can also be aligned with sustainability messaging [17].

Local communities are not just static backdrops but also the true influencers of the tourism experience. In this regard, the participation of residents in directing visitor flows has turned out to be necessary in Barcelona to reconcile tourism expansion with quality of life. For example, Iceland’s handling of over tourism at Fjaðrárgljúfur Canyon (temporarily closing the canyon and efforts by local residents to take care of it by themselves) shows that the message is clear — localisation is key to sustainable tourism governance [12]. Whether through revenue-sharing schemes, storytelling platforms or digital tourism entrepreneurship training, these models are designed to provide a sense of stewardship and pride among the communities ensuring that they benefit from the flow of people just as much as tourists.

This three-way relationship is to ensure knowledge is reality-based, expectations are set, and the rewards are mutually beneficial. The hype cycles on social media, in this context, serve as a launch pad for collective growth, not as a one-time flash in the pan. Destinations mature into committed partnerships that go beyond being mere fashionable attractions into sustainable, socially embedded systems of tourism. These practices align with co-creation theory, emphasizing that value emerges when multiple stakeholders collaboratively shape both the experience and its meaning. This approach aligns with Pine and Gilmore’s [18]. Experience Economy, where co-created and memorable experiences generate lasting value beyond functional tourism services.

5. Conclusion

The prominence of social networking sites has changed

how a destination gains popularity, often fueled by viral images and peer pressure, and by niche groups. Yet short-term hype does not often translate to sustained success. There are many that don’t last beyond their early popularity for reasons of weak branding, service gaps, or symbolic saturation.

This study addressed how fast tourist attention is incited in the process of following social media advertising, and posited three strategic ways to maintain such attention – narrative branding, immersive design and multistakeholder collaboration. Such tactics go far beyond mere visibility, rather emphasizing emotional resonance, increased real-world satisfaction, and regional voices. In the platform-driven era, future research could assess how creator influence and return tourism behavior reinforce long-term destination relevance. Future studies could empirically test how different forms of social media engagement (e.g., influencer collaborations, micro-community interactions) affect not only visitation intent but also repeat visitation and loyalty.

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