

Walking the hidden city: The role of citywalk in shaping destination branding experience

Abstract

Citywalk, a burgeoning traveling phenomenon, significantly shapes destination branding experience (DBE) construction. Social media posts related to citywalk have been widely exposed in social media platforms like Xiaohongshu, one of the fastest-growing social media platforms in mainland China. There are six DBE dimensions as identified in contemporary tourism research including sensory, affective, behavioral, cognitive, spiritual, and relational. However, it is unknown how these DBE dimensions are reflected in tourists' citywalk experiences on social media. Few studies have examined how young citywalkers reveal their DBE through Xiaohongshu posts. This study aims to investigate the citywalkers' experiences by aligning them with six DBE dimensions. Utilizing netnography and analyzing Xiaohongshu posts, this study highlights the multi-dimensional experience fostered by citywalks, surpassing the conventional focus on brand experience dimensions in marketing research. Except for cognitive experience, other dimensions of experience demonstrate potential interactions among themselves.

Keywords: citywalk; destination branding experience; destination marketing; netnography; Xiaohongshu

Introduction

Tourism, as a mode of travel outside one's typical environment, provides a unique experience through tourist movement in the destination (Wang et al., 2022). However, in the era of post-tourism, which emphasized subjective imagination in unusual environments (Sharpley, 2000), the original definition of tourism is also being challenged as not limited to distance traveling to other places, but as part of one's routine life, with touristic behavior occurring in one's hometown (Urry, 2002). Individuals act like tourists, gazing at others' environments on their regular routes such as commuting (Jansson, 2018; Wang et al., 2022). Thus, both locals and tourists may participate in the city exploration.

“Citywalk” is a new phenomenon developing with postmodernism in tourism (Wang et al., 2022). Citywalkers, or city break tourists, are those who take a pedestrian life in the city and explore the public spaces, cultural and natural environments, that diverge from their daily routine life to explore the city's unique characters (Wang et al., 2022). Motivated by novelty, social experience, shopping, and relaxation, they embark on city travels (Vujičić et al., 2023).

Despite insights from past studies, significant research gaps remain. Existing studies mainly focused on the suppliers' perspective in improving the quality of citywalks. Studies have investigated walking tour design (Mavini, 2020) and factors that affect walkability in various contexts, such as beaches (Das & Bhattacharya, 2021) and shopping streets (Vural Arslan et al., 2018). Other studies have assessed walkability in general, including concerns about usefulness, comfort, safety, attractiveness, and street design (Gorrini & Bertini, 2018). Despite this rising

tourism phenomenon, few studies have explored tourists' experiential perceptions of citywalk.

Studies examining tourists' perspectives have only focused on factors such as spatial features' impact on expectations (Mansouri & Ujang, 2016), and the importance of walkability for satisfaction (Kim & Michael Hall, 2023). Urban research has also explored how urban heritage, such as streets, buildings, and alleyways, fosters a connection to local culture (Mavini, 2020). However, the gap in research in examining tourists' citywalk experiences at a destination persists, despite the crucial role in shaping destination brand experiences (DBEs). Contemporary tourism research identifies six dimensions of DBEs: sensory, affective, behavioral, cognitive, spiritual, and relational experiences (Ngwira et al., 2023). The concept of DBEs, derived from marketing research and adopted to the tourism literature, reflect the types of experiences that destinations can provide to tourists (Brakus et al., 2009; Barnes et al., 2014). Contemporary tourism research identifies six dimensions of DBEs: sensory, affective, behavioral, cognitive, spiritual, and relational experiences (Ngwira et al., 2023). For example, recent research by Kong, Kwon, Girish, Lee, and Reisinger (2024) found that affective and cognitive experiences in DBEs can play significant roles in influencing tourists' memorable experiences and their intention to revisit in the context of night tourism. Calderón-Fajardo, Anaya-Sánchez, and Molinillo (2024) utilized user-generated content from tourist reviews of core attractions to measure a destination's DBE. They found that the DBE dimensions (i.e., affective, sensory, behavioral, and intellectual experiences) varies across attractions due to cultural, historical, religious, and social factors, which indicates the needs to further explore the reflections of DBE in various contexts, especially with the rising phenomenon like citywalking.

While facilitating DBEs can enhance destination image and increase tourist satisfaction (Kumar & Kaushik, 2018), it remains unclear how these six dimensions are reflected in tourists' citywalk experiences. For instance, tourists may focus primarily on sensory rather than relational experiences during citywalks. Alternatively, citywalkers may focus on the behavioral instead of the cognitive dimension. There are relevant conceptual implications for connecting the six latest dimensions of DBEs from tourism research with the phenomenon of citywalk; yet, there is a dearth of research into such connections.

From the contextual perspective of social media, how these dimensions of DBE are reflected in tourists' experiences on social media is still underexplored. For instance, based on the latest report by *Little Red Book* or *Xiaohongshu*, citywalk has emerged as a growing travel trend among visitors. City walkers collectively cover over 320,000 kilometers in total distance (Red, 2023). Despite being one of the fastest-growing social media platforms in mainland China, few studies have examined the link between young citywalkers and Xiaohongshu posts.

To address these research gaps, the study aims to investigate the experiences of citywalkers by connecting them with the six DBE dimensions from tourism literature (i.e., sensory, affective, behavioral, cognitive, spiritual, and relational). It utilizes a netnographic approach via visual-textual expressions of tourist experiences on Xiaohongshu, an emerging social media platform which could potentially influence the travel patterns of young tourists, as approximately 50% of the citywalkers range from 19-28 years old (Red, 2023).

This study seeks to contribute to the literature by providing a novel understanding of the citywalk phenomenon from a tourist experience perspective. It also highlights how citywalkers experience and share the six DBE dimensions in their reflections on Xiaohongshu. From a practical perspective, this study shall provide insights to destination marketing organizations (DMOs) on promotional strategies to capitalize on the young and emerging citywalk market.

Literature Review

Emerging phenomenon of citywalk

Citywalk is an emerging phenomenon wherein tourists experience a city by walking (Hall & Ram, 2019), aiming to enhance their personal well-being (Kim & Michael Hall, 2023). Unlike the concept of wanderers, where people aimlessly roam cities to momentarily escape routine life (Kramer & Short, 2011), tourists who embark on citywalk (i.e., citywalkers) seek mental rejuvenation before resuming normal life (Dragouni et al., 2016; Shortell & Brown, 2016; Urry, 2002; Wang et al., 2022).

Three typical activities occur simultaneously during citywalk: walking, perceiving, and describing (Thibaud, 2013). The act of walking becomes pleasant and impressive as citywalkers perceive the environment through their senses. This could include the visual appearance of the building structures, heritage, and residents' diverse activities (Hall & Ram, 2019), which subsequently, inspire citywalkers to describe and reflect upon themselves (Borucka, 2019). For instance, they may reflect on their place attachment and improved personal well-being (including both mental and physical benefits) (Kim & Michael Hall, 2023; Lee & Shen, 2013). They may describe and reflect on the quality, authenticity, and novelty of their citywalk experience (Girish & Lee, 2020; Ujang & Zakariya, 2015).

Travel information creation and sharing on social networks and with virtual communities has become common in tourism field in the digital age (Arica et al., 2022). Tourists are more willing to share their travel experiences with the reasons like altruism, personal fulfillment, and self-actualization (Oliveira et al., 2020). There have been numerous posts related to citywalk on social media platforms (e.g., Douyin, Xiaohongshu and Weibo Sina) as indicated from the search indices and media coverage (Wu, 2023). At the same time, citywalk related tour products (e.g., designed urban walking tours) have been widely promoted in the social media platforms (Mavini, 2020), among which the individual travellers also like to share and search recommended citywalk trails on those platforms (Wu, 2023).

Given the emerging citywalk phenomenon, studies have sought to examine the citywalk design for its users, that is, the physical function of the citywalk space. For instance, Hartanto and Yuwono (2020) investigated rehabilitation works on pedestrian paths to build a city's tourist destination image in Surakarta, Indonesia. Chen et al. (2023) explored the design of the city's sidewalk to motivate the tourists' desire for walking. The studies found that environmental cues, such as the use of red and blue colored sidewalks, alongside images of running shoes to promote walking, can motivate tourists to engage in citywalk. This line of work falls within the scope of "city walkability"

which focuses on the factors fostering citywalk from a management perspective (Hall & Ram, 2019).

Other studies have explored the benefits of citywalk (Borucka, 2019; Kim & Michael Hall, 2023; Wang et al., 2022). Citywalk enables tourists to absorb the unique characteristics of the city (Ujang & Muslim, 2014). It helps tourists learn about the social identities of the place (Borucka, 2019), while enriching their emotions and feelings of detachment (Wang et al., 2022). Citywalk enables individuals to reconnect themselves to the habitual environment and obtains values from the process of engagement (Wang et al., 2022). Overall, despite the literature documenting the activities, management perspectives, and benefits of citywalk, existing studies have not investigated tourists' actual experiences of citywalk, including their sensory, affective, behavioral, cognitive, spiritual, and relational experiences.

Connecting citywalk with the extended conceptualization of destination brand experiences

The concept of "brand experiences" originates from the general marketing literature, and is defined as "...sensations, feeling, cognition and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments" (Brakus et al., 2009). It encompasses four main dimensions: affection, which refers to consumers' emotional connections with a brand; cognition, which entails activities that stimulate thought, problem-solving, and curiosity; behavioral, which refers to physical activities during an experience; and sensory, which represents one's perceptions through the five senses.

Since then, tourism research has largely adopted these four dimensions to explore tourism experiences that destinations can provide (i.e., destination brand experiences; DBEs). For example, Barnes et al. (2014) investigated DBEs in the context of family beach holidays in the Lolland-Falster region of Denmark. Kumar and Kaushik (2018) highlighted specific dimensions of DBEs, such as tourist sensory and affective brand experiences, as having the most significant influence on visitor outcomes, possibly due to the rich religious, cultural, or historic values in the destinations (e.g., India in their studies). The significance of DBEs has been investigated in national parks, revealing their significant influences on visitor satisfaction, intentions to recommend, and revisit intentions (Martins et al., 2021). Tourism scholars also explored DBEs in an online setting, revealing that individuals who had not physically visited the destination were more influenced in their behavioral intentions by an enriched online DBE compared to those who had visited in person (Jiménez-Barreto et al., 2020). However, there is limited relevant research on DBEs for citywalkers from a contextual perspective.

Apart from the lack of research connecting DBE with the citywalk context, a significant conceptual limitation of existing research is their focus primarily on the four initial dimensions of DBEs: sensory, affective, cognitive, and behavioral. Recent tourism research has since extended this conceptualization to include spiritual and relational dimensions, acknowledging the evolving knowledge base in the field (Ngwira et al., 2023). Specifically, the spiritual dimension reflects connectedness between people and nature (Esfahani et al., 2017; Gill et al., 2019), while the relational dimension pertains to interactions among tourists, through host-guest interactions and/or new friendships with other tourists during a trip (Paik & Lee, 2021). Considering this extended

conceptualization is crucial for destinations, as tourists increasingly seek well-being and interpersonal bonds which the spiritual and relational dimensions respectively offer (Öznlbant & Alvarez, 2020).

The present study seeks to connect the six dimensions in the extended conceptualization of DBEs with the citywalk phenomenon. The sensory dimension of DBEs involves one's perceptions of sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste (Barnes et al., 2014). For instance, urban architecture significantly impacts citywalkers visual experience (Li et al., 2023). There could be diverse scents for citywalkers from local restaurants and even street food as they explore the residential communities. There could also be a mix of contrasting sounds, ranging from obstructive noise from roads and buildings in city construction to pleasant, natural harmonies from birds and wildlife in urban parks.

The affective dimension reflects the emotions that tourists experience at a destination, which could significantly influence their level of identification and connection with a destination brand (Ahn & Back, 2018). In contrast to structured urban experiences such as shopping and entertainment, in terms of time and location for tourists, the phenomenon of citywalk does not necessitate clear purposes or specific plans. Consequently, citywalkers naturally open themselves to heightened elements of spontaneity and surprise as they explore and immerse deeply in their unfamiliar surroundings.

The cognitive dimension (e.g., thoughts and curiosity) may be triggered when citywalkers explore the diverse culture and urban environment of a city. Exploring urban environments enables individuals to understand a city's trends and gain a deeper appreciation of urban change, which is significant as the rapid pace of daily life can often obscure urban culture (Wang et al., 2022). Citywalk could also influence individuals' perception of a city's destination image as they learn about a city's diverse nature, heritage, and history (Hernández-Mogollón et al., 2018).

The behavioral dimension reflects physical actions taken by tourists at a destination. The walkability of a destination is crucial for citywalkers to fully immerse themselves in the city's distinctive characteristics and consciously experience them. The leisurely pace of citywalking can provide tourists with the opportunity to gaze and photograph their surroundings (Witte, 2023). Multifunctional elements at a destination such as shopping streets, parks, and transportation nodes can further enrich tourists' behavioral experiences in urban spaces (Ujang & Muslim, 2014).

In addition to these four initial dimensions, the extended conceptualization of DBEs includes spiritual and relational dimensions. The spiritual dimension refers to a tourist's desire to connect with nature, thereby providing temporary solace for the spirit and body (Ngwira et al., 2023). Citywalk facilitates this spiritual invigoration, showcasing the transformative impact of walking on an individual's well-being, and reconnecting people to their bodies, spirit, and environments (Wang et al., 2022). For instance, citywalk provides an escape from the monotonous pace of everyday life, allowing individuals to leisurely absorb their surroundings, fostering a spiritual connection with the city and a profound appreciation for themselves and their place in society.

The last dimension of DBE, relational, involves a sense of belonging through interactions with others in a social setting (Everingham, 2016). Citywalkers seek interactions with residents in

unfamiliar settings to form new bonds. Urban exploration, enables them to appreciate diverse lifestyles and bridge the gap between people (Wang et al., 2022). Citywalk provides tourists an opportunity to meet others in an organic rather than precontrived way.

However, it is important to recognize that these reviews are not without its limitations. Although studies have focused on the four initial dimensions of DBEs in various contexts, empirical support for the extended conceptualization, including spiritual and relational dimensions, remains limited (Ngwira et al., 2023). Attributable to the recency of the extended conceptualization; hence, the present study aims to add to the conceptualization of DBEs by providing evidence on how spiritual and relational dimensions are manifested in citywalk experiences.

Furthermore, existing studies have rarely explored the correlations among the dimensions of DBEs. Despite their complementary nature, it remains unclear how one dimension can influence another (Tung & Tse, 2023). For instance, sensory experiences (e.g., sights of the city) during citywalk could potentially elicit subsequent affective experiences (e.g., amazement and awe). In addition, citywalkers who forge relationships with residents may develop a newfound sense of appreciation for the city, thereby strengthening the cognitive dimension as they delve into the local culture and history. These examples suggest potential patterns amongst the six dimensions of DBE. However, existing tourism research has not explored the inter-relationships among these dimensions. Thus, the present study aims to address this conceptual gap.

Methodology

This study aimed to examine the citywalkers' experience by connecting the DBE dimensions. It applies a constructivist paradigm (Pilarska, 2021; Burns et al., 2022), which is suitable to explore the understanding of citywalking phenomenon and the significance and meanings citywalkers associated with the visiting activities and encountered environment and communities. It is helpful to identify the important components illustrated from citywalking. In this case, the researchers mainly act as interpreters of the data obtained from the social media posts and then discovered the truth of the citywalking through analyzing the sharing contents while balancing the understanding and extension of existing DBE framework. In terms of the applied method, this study utilized netnography to analyze social media content due to its effectiveness in analyzing online information (Loanzon et al., 2013). Netnography is commonly used in tourism research and has been proven effective in exploring tourist experiences (Kodaş, 2024; Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). Citywalk, a popular travel experience on the internet, can be analyzed using netnography. The textual information from social media posts may reveal different dimensions of experience. Therefore, netnography was chosen as the research method to provide a holistic understanding of the citywalk context through detailed online community experiences, following the guidelines by (Kozinets, 2002), as shown in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Entrée

The entrée was to find the most relevant online community as marketing research targets (Kozinets, 2002). The identification of a suitable online community must fulfill five criteria through observation: 1) relevant segment, topic, or group of a specific research question, 2) high posting traffic, 3) large message posters, 4) detailed data, and 5) more between-member interactions about research questions. The research targets for this study were mainly chosen based on post reviews regarding whether they demonstrated the following: 1) walking behaviors in the city, 2) route display and sharing, and 3) word length (more than one sentence).

A pilot test was conducted on 30 randomly selected publicly available posts under the search results of “citywalk” across various social media platforms including Instagram, X (Twitter), TikTok, Douyin, Weibo Sina, and Xiaohongshu (Figure 1). This initial observation aimed to ensure the relevance of collected textual information to effectively reflect the research topic before copying text in bulk for a suitable community. It also served to establish the trustworthiness of subsequent data collection (Elo et al., 2014). Among the platforms reviewed, only Xiaohongshu contained substantial textual expressions on citywalk experience suitable for data analysis, making it the most appropriate online community for this study.

Xiaohongshu is one of the leading popular social media community in China (Statistic, 2023). Several mainland Chinese audiences share their inbound and outbound travel experiences in the form of text posts (Red, 2023). Travel posts featuring potential interaction with audiences (e.g., bloggers share more information with the reviewers) have sparked significant interest and desire among viewers or potential tourists when they use this media platform for Doyin destination information and decision-making (Sun & Ly, 2023). Citywalk tour and experience-sharing posts have experienced a surge in attention on Xiaohongshu, evidenced by a more than 30-fold increase in related searches year-on-year in the first half of 2023 (Red, 2023).

Data collection

In the main stage of data collection, the researchers utilized the Xiaohongshu Data Center Platform, which is a database that Xiaohongshu makes available to the public, including but not limited to querying popular posts, liking trends, data reports produced based on posts, and more (Analyst, 2023). Then, the researchers used the search engine on this platform with keyword “citywalk” and applied the following filter criteria to retrieve related posts (Figure 1). The data filter criteria included 1) publicly available data from 1st June 2023 to 30th November 2023 (till the time of the completion of data collection) considering the first rising curve on citywalk posts ensuring significant discussions have been raised in Xiaohongshu, and 2) the volume, which is the sum of likes, collectives, and reviews, was utilized as a representative indicator to rank post. Based on the maximum number of posts that were available for download, the top 500 posts were included in the pool of data analysis. Then, the top 250 posts were initially analyzed. In the next stage of data filtering, the following inclusion criteria were used: 1) images of posts are directly related to the text, and 2) textual narratives that reflect the blogger’s real and personal experiences, e.g. “I,” “with friends, family.” Correspondingly, the exclusion criteria included 1) commercial posts for

advertisement purpose, and 2) key opinion leaders' posts that are not from tourist's view. At this stage, 34 posts remained. In the second stage, to enlarge the data pool to explore a comprehensive reflection on the citywalk experience, 250 additional posts were included which yielded 69 valid posts. The 69 posts were then word counted in Excel and approximately 32,500 characters were sufficient for analysis.

Data Analysis

Content analysis has also been approved as a suitable method for exploring new or top-trend travel phenomenon texts on digital media (Choi et al., 2007; Lai & To, 2015). It discerns implicit meanings from a range of texts systematically and elucidates the connections between the texts, such as the attitudes, values, and behavioral intentions of individuals (Macnamara, 2005; Morris, 1994). With gaps in exploring citywalk experiences from social media texts, this study employed content analysis to investigate tourists' citywalk experiences based on DBE theory. All texts of the selected posts were directly imported into Word for subsequent processing in NVivo (Kozinets, 2002).

Thematic analysis was conducted on the filtered 69 posts (Table 1) in three levels (Figure 2) (Maher et al., 2018). In the open coding phase, the content in the posts was categorized and produced into 176 codes based on the DBE model. These 176 codes were reorganized in the axial coding phase by reassembling relationships (e.g., entailment relationships) and eventually formed 20 main nodes. In the selective coding phase, these 20 new nodes were interpreted by the DBE model and served as the sub-themes to consolidate the citywalk tourist experience with 7 confirmed themes. Figure 3 displays all these (sub-)themes along with their distribution percentages, illustrating the distribution of codes across the six DBE dimensions and highlighting the contributions of axial and selective coding to the final thematic structure.

[Insert Table 1 & Figures 2 & 3 here]

Findings and discussion

Based on the findings of this study and projections in the industry report (Red, 2023), current citywalkers emphasize and enjoy the experience of random urban exploration with few or no plans (e.g., Post No. 64). The detailed citywalker's travel experiences align with the six dimensions of DBE theory. The potential relationships among the six dimensions of DBE theory through the citywalk experiences are also outlined (Figure 4).

[Insert Figure 4 here]

Six dimensions of DBE with citywalk

Sensory experience

Sensory experiences, including feelings, smells, tastes, and visual sensations, are typical reflections of visitors, as these experiences are commonly influenced by changes in the environment (Pharino et al., 2018). This is particularly pertinent to city walking experiences, which are inherently attuned to the environment. Visual experiences are highlighted because citywalk allows tourists to scrutinize the architectural complexes and inner city. For example, the street layouts, buildings, and the urban landscapes in the city. This visual experience reflection stems from the motivation of citywalk as free exploration, which heightens the visual sensory engagement (Edensor, 2021; Wang et al., 2022). “Look at the tall buildings, look at the trees, look at the pedestrians, look at the fallen leaves” (Post No. 22).

A few citywalkers also noted distinctive culinary smells on their casual walks. These memorable smells from these passing stores can create a unique sensory experience and impression of the destination for tourists. In this regard, food aromas while walking have more potential to evoke positive emotions, such as pleasure experiences (Ouyang et al., 2018). “While walking around the Macau, the freshly fried pork chops from the garden snacks I passed by smelled very fragrant, so I went to eat them.” (Post No. 5).

Spiritual experience

A slow travel experience has more potential to immerse tourists in the surrounding environment (Kresic & Gjurasic, 2022). Citywalking is a slow-paced method of traveling (i.e., downshifting). Compared to other forms of tourism which have a specific schedule for leisure or relaxing, citywalk becomes a new way to enable citywalkers to escape the hectic pace of life and reality for a while, as well as to truly appreciate the city in a state of relaxation during their travels (Wu, 2023). “Walk slowly. If it is possible, order afternoon tea and sit by the side of the road to let go of the mood of the whole road.” (Post No. 40) (Figure 5). Citywalkers felt that such immersion could produce an unprecedented sense of comfort and healing within themselves. “It is really comfortable to citywalk here and laze around for a few days” (Post No. 1). This healing mood is of extreme importance for tourists with mental health issues, which indicates the potential role of the destination in creating a relaxing and peaceful atmosphere for purifying one’s soul like pilgrimage tourism (Kujawa, 2017), as tourists can avoid anxiety from experiencing the environment. “It was really soothing, not so anxious.” (Post No. 30) (Figure 6). In other words, citywalk as a travel experience demonstrates psychotherapeutic benefits and transformative powers (Ngwira et al., 2023).

[Insert Figures 5, 6 here]

The pursuit of freedom is another manifestation of the spiritual experience. Given the spontaneity of citywalk, many citywalkers viewed this casual travelling behavior as a sign of freedom. As

citywalks are free from all planned itineraries, citywalkers are more spontaneous in their movements (Wu, 2023). Citywalk can involve any streetscapes or landscapes, without being confined to typical attractions or destinations in other travel forms (Ngwira et al., 2023). “Every day I enjoy walking in the streets and alleys, free and easy” (Post No. 28).

Affective experience

The affective dimension of the experience was also informative. Interest generation (e.g., city, stores, and culture) is an obvious feeling shown by posts, and this is mainly derived from the sense of freshness, especially the surprise feeling created during the walk. Many bloggers felt that there were many unexpected sights and activities during the city walk. Tourists are willing to embrace unfamiliar encounters while walking (Ramsden, 2017). This unexpected experience creates a citywalk with added value. “Every street I walk down I encounter surprises.” (Post No. 62) (Figure 7). Compared to other city tours, spontaneous encounters of unplanned and random walking experiences are more likely to generate a strong interest in tourists’ minds, such as the desire to continue exploring the city (Wu, 2023).

[Insert Figure 7 here]

Enjoyment and touch were the other two emotional experiences of the city walk. Walking is generally enjoyable because there is no pressure exerted by the planned itinerary from one point to another within a limited time (Maule et al., 2000). “The free form of urban exploration is more likely to be enjoyable” (Post 18). Additionally, many bloggers expressed being moved by the scenes they encountered. “I was so touched by this perspective, this romantic moon, that I wanted to cry” (Post No. 4). These feedbacks indicate that the citywalk fosters relaxation and a stress-free environment (Wu, 2023).

Behavioral experience

The behavioral experience of citywalkers was mainly reflected in photo taking. Most posts indicate that citywalkers would consciously try to capture visually appealing photographs during the walk (Figure 8). Despite their spontaneous exploration without predefined routes, tourists took multiple photographs upon encountering impressive and interesting places. They also shared the location information and the strategies for photo taking when posting. “Fewer people and good for taking photos. The benches next to each other is also good view to take photos” (Post No. 7). Such behavior can be attributed to the herd mentality among social media users (Vishwanath, 2015). The posts on photo-taking during citywalk always stimulate other citywalkers to emulate the same and share their experiences afterward, reinforcing the notion that photo-taking and sharing behaviors concur with travel experience (Li, 2020).

[Insert Figure 8 here]

Cognitive experience

Citywalk can shape the image perceptions of the destination and these perceptions are almost all positive. Citywalkers felt that they would generate different and new perceptions of the city when walking freely in the city, such as, “romance,” “charm,” and a particularly “pleasant” atmosphere. These cognitive feelings served as a metaphor for the citywalkers in constructing their perceptions of destination image (Ngwira et al., 2023). “Just by walking around the city, one can feel the romance and charm of the city, and the ambiance from day to night” (Post No. 33). Some bloggers also thought that they increased awareness and detailed observations of local life. “I’m partial to the hustle and quietness of residents’ lives when I walk in the city” (Post No. 62). Such local experience enhances their perceived authenticity of local culture, which reinforces the destination imagery (Ramkissoon & Uysal, 2011). In addition, a small group of bloggers also believed that citywalks would improve their attitudes toward lifestyle, especially among locals. “When you step out of your home citywalk, you will be relaxed in mind and body” (Post No. 24). In other words, the citywalk provides locals with the chance to change the stereotypes about their living spaces and encourages the walking behaviors in the surroundings (Wang et al., 2022).

Relational experience

Relationships, as an experience dimension in DBE theory, vary among tourists on citywalk. Most posts show that citywalk can help one encounter different people. Citywalkers are proactively interested in communicating with strangers (i.e., residents) while walking (Ramsden, 2017). This phenomenon is difficult to observe in other forms of tourism. “Going to a neighborhood, a street, and meeting different people every day.” (Post No. 28) (Figures 9, 10). Such relational experience is also observed among the companions. Citywalkers found it beneficial to increase their closeness with their family members through relaxing walks. “Walking all along the path is great with children” (Post No. 14) (Figure 11). In other words, walking like other socialization activities offers the opportunity for maintaining relationships or establishing new ones (Olănescu, 2021).

[Insert Figures 9, 10, 11 here]

However, some bloggers also felt that citywalk provided a great chance to be by themselves. This is mainly reflected in the citywalk tours for local citywalkers. Citywalking is an achievable way of traveling to different places without traveling outside one’s regular life circle, which is particularly suitable for locals who want to wander around (Wu, 2023). “There is something very different about going on a walk alone and not having to entertain anyone else” (Post No. 24). This study revealed that citywalkers shared similar patterns with that of solo travelers pursuing a transformative experience, freedom, and flexibility (Yang, 2021).

Potential interrelationship of citywalk DBE

Regarding the citywalk phenomenon, this study identified several potential interrelationships among the dimensions of a DBE (Tung & Tse, 2023; Wu, 2023). Different sensory experiences can lead to diverse ranges of experiences. First, sensory experiences (e.g., smell) may elicit affective responses (Ouyang et al., 2018). “It was very unexpected for the sense of smell to suddenly catch the sweet aroma of toasted bread floating in the air if at all” (Post No. 62). Unintended food aromas can cause surprises. However, a visual sensory experience is more likely to induce a spiritual experience, particularly a feeling of immersion. “Seeing these unique and historical European-style classical buildings immersed me in the equally prosperous provincial city of Guangzhou in the past” (Post No. 13). This is primarily because a visual sensory experience is more likely to quickly produce immersion (Oprean, 2015).

Sensory experiences serve as stimuli connecting affective or spiritual experiences with relational or behavioral experiences. Photo-taking, for instance, emerges as a spontaneous reaction when citywalkers encounter impressive visual stimuli (i.e., sensory experience) triggering profound emotional responses (i.e., affective experience). “When I was walking, I came across a swing at the sea viewpoint, and when I swung it, I felt healed, and I could take pictures of the beautiful sea view.” (Post No. 67). While walking, people may become completely lost in their thoughts, unaware of their surroundings until something captures their attention (Ramsden, 2017). This phenomenon differs from previous findings of DBE, particularly in contexts like robot service. For instance, Tung and Tse (2023) found that sensory experience is the result of the interplays between cognitive, affective, and behavioral experience in the hospitality field. This suggests that the dimensions of DBE vary across contexts, highlighting the importance of exploring its applications in diverse experiential environments.

Relational experience manifests differently depending on its relationship with other dimensions. Affective experience can induce relational experience since the emotions (e.g., moving) induced while walking would improve people’s relationships. “It is really touching, it’s rare to travel with confidantes at night” (Post No. 4). When relational experiences are associated with spiritual experiences (e.g., healing of the mind), it is mostly observed among solo citywalkers. Walking allows people to reconsider their relationship with themselves. “This time it was by myself, following my memories through the streets of Nanking, with more healing and freedom” (Post No. 38). All these citywalk experience reflections highlight the potential relationship among the key dimensions of DBE.

Conclusion

Citywalk is a new form of traveling that offers a more diversified experience for both locals and tourists. This study aimed to investigate the experiences of citywalkers by connecting them with the six DBE dimensions from the tourism literature (i.e., sensory, affective, behavioral, cognitive, spiritual, and relational). The study analyzed posts from Xiaohongshu, a platform for mainland Chinese tourists to share their citywalk travel experiences in China and overseas, which is rich in textual content. The findings reveal that the six dimensions of citywalk DBE are comprehensively

illustrated from citywalkers' reflections, led by sensory experience. Sensory experience plays a critical role in arousing other experiences. Except for cognitive experience, other dimensions of experience show their potential interactions among themselves.

Theoretical implications

This study significantly contributes to the tourism literature. It connects recent literature on DBE with the emerging phenomenon of citywalk, and analyzes each of the six dimensions of DBE independently and comprehensively. The study found that not all dimensions of DBE were equally emphasized by citywalkers; that is, although the concept of DBE is typically viewed holistically in existing literature (Barnes et al., 2014), it is necessary to consider the salience of the individual dimensions of DBEs in the citywalk context.

This study extends beyond the initial focus on the four dimensions (e.g., sensory, affective, intellectual, and behavioral) of the brand experience scale in marketing research (Brakus et al., 2009) by highlighting the multi-dimensional experience offered by citywalk. Existing studies have highlighted the varying importance of each dimension in diverse contexts. For instance, behavioral and cognitive experiences were the core dimensions of brand experiences in the context of service robot technologies (Tung & Tse, 2023). Conversely, Ngwira et al. (2023) emphasized the role of spiritual and relational experiences in the extended conceptualization of DBEs. This study expands on existing research regarding the application of DBE in the tourism context, detailing the multifaceted citywalk experience encompassing the six dimensions. The role of sensory experience is highlighted, suggesting its potential to catalyze other experiences. Furthermore, spiritual experience is perceived during citywalks, indicating their capacity to alleviate stress and promote mental health among citywalkers. These novel findings enrich the existing literature, elucidating the significance and the interplay among each DBE dimension. It also contributes to the underexplored phenomenon of citywalks, particularly their prominence on social media platforms for research purposes.

Practical implications

This study provides managerial implications to destination management organizations (DMOs) and business operators (e.g., roadside stores) for destination or place marketing. DMOs can enhance the citywalk destination brand experience by launching targeted marketing strategies. The visual impacts of cityscape construction can significantly shape citywalkers' perception of the destination (Oprean, 2015). Improving street decorations and promoting tertiary attractions with local characteristics, especially those related to the city's culture and history, can arouse interest from citywalkers. More importantly, such visual experiences can easily create an immersive spiritual experience. For instance, destination management organizations (DMOs) can design visual immersion zones (e.g., art installations or vibrant murals) to stimulate tourists' visual perception while they walk, helping them enter a state of relaxation or meditation and enhancing their overall spiritual experience. Business operators can renovate exteriors and interiors with unique features, motivating citywalkers to explore and satisfy their photo-taking needs.

According to studies, scents play a crucial role in how citywalkers perceive their environment, such as smells from dining places, which can enhance the overall sensory experience and influence business operations (Ouyang et al., 2018). For instance, the aroma of roasted coffee beans from a coffee shop and the smell of bread baking are fascinating to pedestrians, potentially attracting more customers to businesses. Through these scents, tourists can experience pleasure and satisfaction, leading to positive emotions during their walk. Adversely, unpleasant odors from street garbage cans and sewers must be avoided when planning, the air quality in the area is critical in either encouraging or preventing the citywalkers from visiting. This is mainly because smell sensations can easily influence emotional experiences (Xiao et al., 2020). Pleasant smells can significantly enhance positive feelings towards the destination and even its image during walking, while unpleasant smells have the opposite effect. Therefore, practitioners should provide a wide range of sensory experiences as they play a key role in connecting with different affective experiences. For example, creating tantalizing aroma filling the air (e.g. plant scented osmanthus trees with the seasons) at the attractions can increase tourists' feelings of joy and warmth while walking through the streets.

Moreover, destination practitioners can develop multi-sensory experience strategies (e.g., enhancing both smell and visual stimuli) to simultaneously stimulate affective and spiritual experiences. DMOs can introduce themed fragrances in specific walking areas (such as parks or historic districts) to evoke feelings of nostalgia, relaxation, or pleasure. For example, using subtle floral or vanilla scents along pathways next to romantic architecture can evoke romantic emotions and immerse visitors in a romantic atmosphere. By creating multi-sensory environments, tourists can enjoy visual relaxation and favorable olfactory experience simultaneously.

Furthermore, the relational experience of citywalking varies depending on whether citywalkers are accompanied or not, Thus, tailoring experience offerings to target groups is crucial. Before undertaking any campaigns to attract the concerned group, DMOs must thoroughly explore market segments within citywalking areas. This develops more effective marketing strategies for creating a desirable experience for citywalkers. For instance, if a particular citywalk district is more favored by citywalkers with companions, interactive setups such as designated photo spots with decorated frames can be arranged, enhancing opportunities to strengthen intimate relationships. Additionally, such experiences are more likely to be enhanced in areas with scents that fill the air. Because the pleasant emotions brought about by the smells can cement close links with companions. Conversely, for solo citywalkers, a quiet and authentic environment is key, facilitating easy immersion and relaxation. Many citywalkers value experiencing the local culture in an authentic environment that aligns with the local lifestyle. Thus, government authorities must handle streetscape construction with care, avoiding gentrification issues that compromise the authenticity of local culture. Because visual effects have a strong influence on spiritual experiences (Reavey, 2020). By embracing the local authentic environment, tourists can fulfill their expectations of spiritual and relational enrichment from their visit.

Research Limitation and future studies

This study has some limitations. It provides a general understanding of citywalkers' experiences

using netnography, which is acceptable considering the emerging nature of and the limited existing research. However, there is scope to expand research on this topic building on the findings of this study. Specifically, future research could delve into the interrelationship among the citywalk DBE dimensions. This study discovered some potential connections among key dimensions of the citywalk DBE, which may have cause-and-effect relationships. For example, the sensory experience of smell might influence how surprising something feels. More empirical studies are crucial to elucidate if such relationships exist and their mechanisms through quantitative research. Similarly, investigating the evolving psychological changes of tourists during citywalks is worthwhile. Future studies can further examine citywalkers' motivations, perceptions, and evaluations of citywalk experiences using in-depth interviews.

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The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Table

Post No.	Posting time	Word count	Destination	Volume*	Views*
1	25-Oct-23	1037	Moscow	57460	636816
2	21-Nov-23	992	London	46126	526136
3	07-Jul-23	360	Shanghai	41418	482012
4	23-Jun-23	140	Beijing	32936	384014
5	21-Oct-23	357	Macau	29494	329520
6	23-Jul-23	285	Hangzhou	28287	315524
7	19-Jul-23	954	Wuhan	26383	301372
8	31-Aug-23	141	Shanghai	26081	305670
9	06-Aug-23	205	Shanghai	24191	278388
10	10-Oct-23	783	Huangshan	22304	249666
11	30-Aug-23	203	Wuhan	17759	204096
12	13-Oct-23	329	Beijing	17242	390184
13	02-Oct-23	651	Guangzhou	16304	375240
14	08-Sep-23	1065	Hangzhou	15784	94162
15	25-Jul-23	929	Shanghai	15692	354608
16	18-Aug-23	145	Chengdu	15688	179521
17	11-Jul-23	607	Dalian	15366	344592
18	31-Jul-23	384	Hangzhou	14773	156755
19	21-Jun-23	263	Suzhou	14452	330160
20	18-Jun-23	1112	Shanghai	14245	324572
21	04-Aug-23	181	Beijing	14077	325544
22	04-Jun-23	235	Zhuhai	13372	309208
23	13-Oct-23	102	Macau	13190	301736
24	12-Jul-23	489	Guangzhou	12998	292496
25	26-Jul-23	290	Madrid	12981	285144
26	27-Sep-23	395	Shanghai	12890	300412
27	08-Aug-23	512	Shanghai	12545	284004
28	22-Jul-23	532	Changsha	12345	282980
29	19-Jul-23	350	Macau	12271	288560
30	04-Sep-23	635	Nanjing	12227	276268
31	27-Oct-23	120	Wuhan	11740	276852
32	23-Nov-23	206	Harbin	11466	258344
33	04-Oct-23	248	Hangzhou	11281	180215
34	07-Nov-23	151	Shanghai	11141	258184
35	30-Aug-23	620	Qingdao	11030	245656
36	18-Sep-23	458	London	10992	258656
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44	27-Oct-23	289	Tianjin	10364	237688
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47	15-Jun-23	822	Shanghai	9886	171414
48	02-Jul-23	248	Taipei	9729	225120
49	15-Jul-23	235	Hangzhou	9662	230344
50	02-Aug-23	608	Shanghai	9611	217696
51	01-Aug-23	245	Paris	9499	224112
52	29-Sep-23	56	Paris	9123	207584
53	28-Sep-23	304	Wuhan	9059	138969
54	20-Oct-23	125	Suzhou	9000	205396
55	01-Jul-23	748	Dalian	8948	195536
56	02-Nov-23	567	Shanghai	8920	199512
57	07-Oct-23	543	Shaoxing	8770	205892
58	29-Aug-23	576	Hangzhou	8724	292765
59	30-Jul-23	345	Rome	8554	198388
60	15-Oct-23	341	Xiamen	8509	190812
61	03-Jul-23	296	Changsha	8345	185056
62	19-Nov-23	563	Shanghai	8218	189164
63	14-Aug-23	545	Qingdao	8170	182044
64	08-Aug-23	987	Shanghai	8155	186848
65	25-Oct-23	88	Beijing	8105	185852
66	09-Aug-23	241	Beijing	8063	91000
67	22-Sep-23	319	Qingdao	7970	178780
68	11-Jul-23	130	Hongkong	7956	183780
69	14-Jul-23	296	Shanghai	7884	173136

Table 1. Demographic profile

**Volume: The sum of likes, collectives, and reviews*

**Views: Total views of each post*

Figures

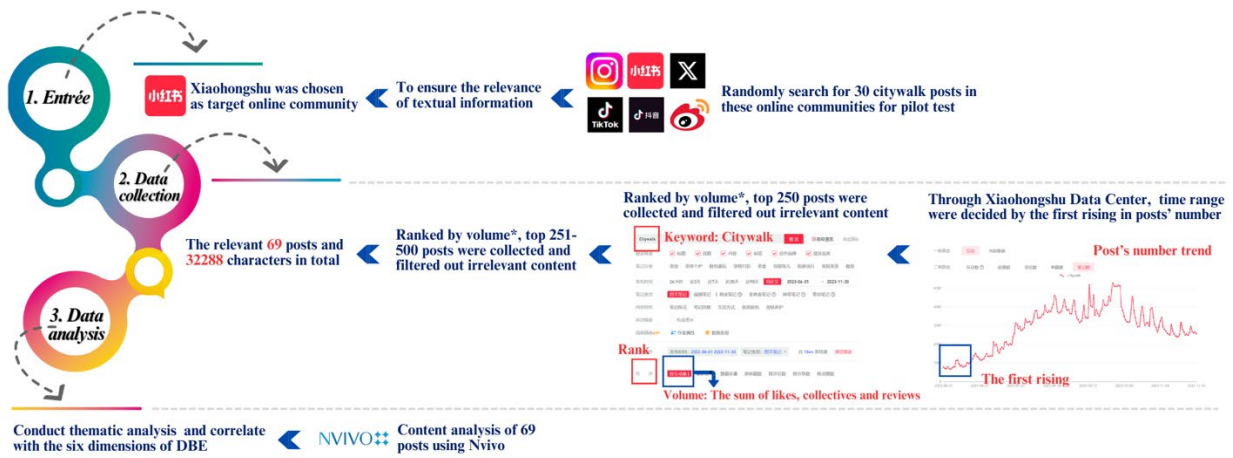


Figure 1. The process of netnography in citywalk experience

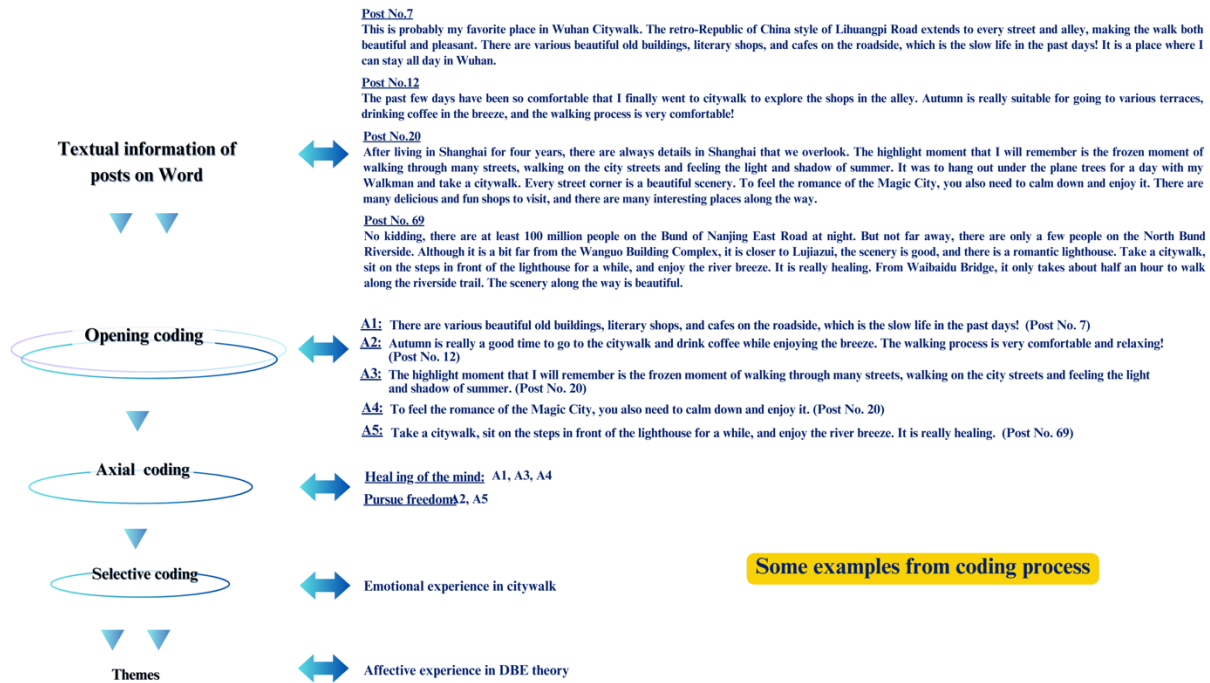


Figure 2. The process of thematic analysis

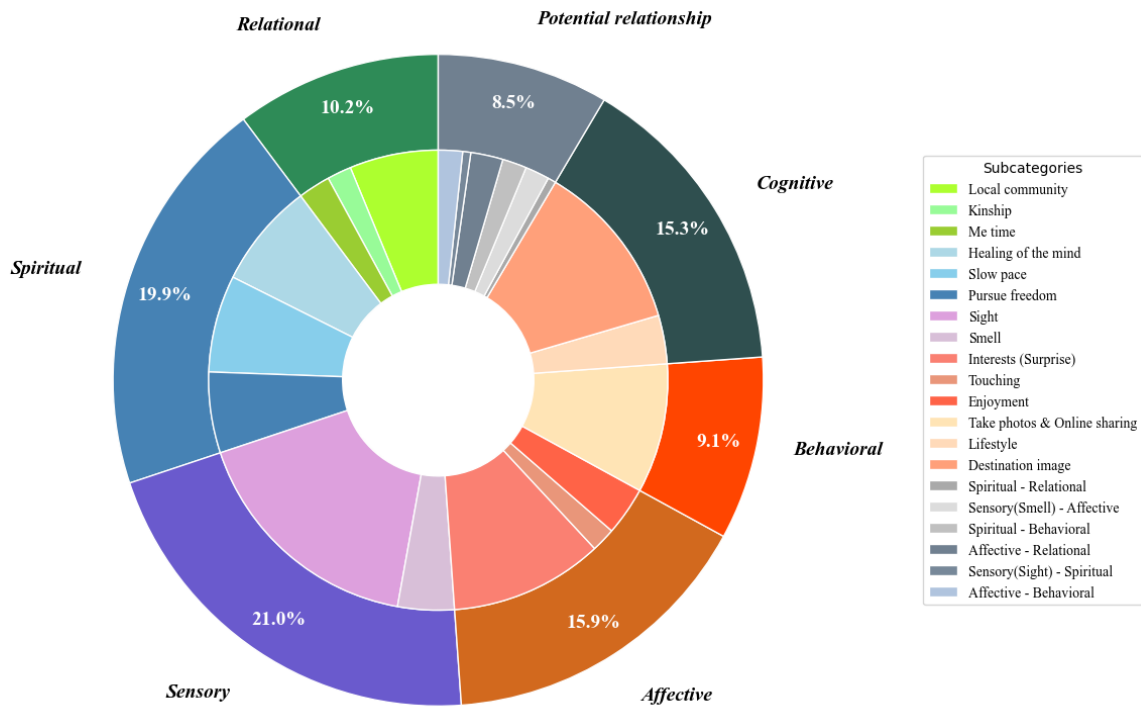


Figure 3. Code distribution among six dimensions of DBE and their potential relationships in citywalk

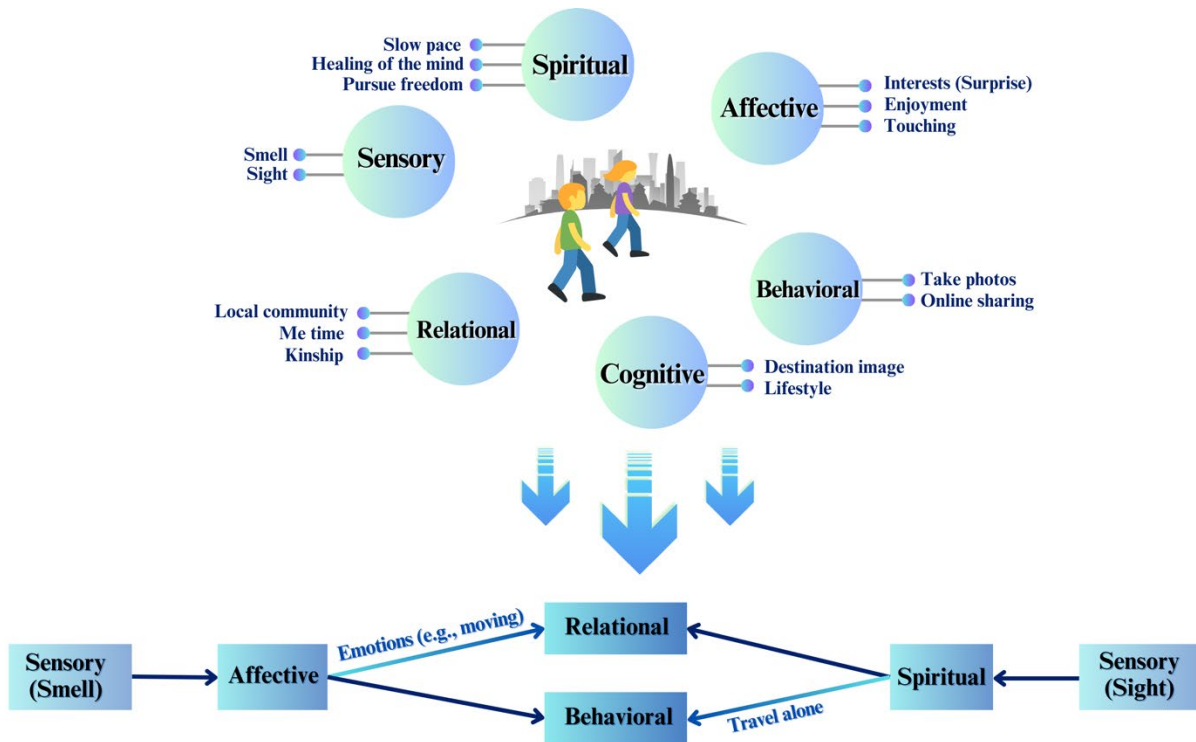


Figure 4. Citywalk six experience with potential relationship



Figure 5. Downshifting of spiritual experience (Source: Xiaohongshu)

Figure 5 Alt Text: The image depicts an open-air eating area with vacant wooden tables and chairs, surrounded by a vibrant skyline and a brilliant blue sky, implying Shanghai.



Figure 6. Healing of the mind of spiritual experience (Source: Xiaohongshu)

Figure 6 Alt Text: The triptych picture features various street scenes, with shadows cast by the low sun. The upper panel shows a motorcycle rider and three pedestrians, while the center panel features leaves and a parked bicycle. The bottom panel shows a person passing a no-parking notice, with their shadow lengthening on a sunny wall.



Figure 7. Touching of affective experience (Source: Xiaohongshu)

Figure 7 Alt Text: At sunset, a skyscraper is seen from a low viewpoint with a blue sky in the distance. Two round light fixtures resemble eyes peering out into the sky, while moonlight illuminates the clouds. The exterior features square recesses in a geometric pattern, and the bottom of an overhanging structure has lights for a soothing glow.



Figure 8. Take photos of behavioral experience (Source: Xiaohongshu)

Figure 8 Alt Text: A person stands behind a blue street sign stating "Tianjin Road" with a left-pointing arrow and "331m" underneath. She is wearing a wide-brimmed hat, white shirt, denim overalls, and white shoes, posing in an urban scene with clear skies overhead. And she leans on the sign pole with her arms spread.



Figure 9. Meet strangers of relational experience (Source: Xiaohongshu)

Figure 9 Alt Text: The image shows a person who sit down around a sidewalk reading a newspaper, dressed in black and carrying a large bag. He is in front of two recycling bins with symbols for batteries and recyclable materials.



Figure 10. Local community of relational experience (Source: Xiaohongshu)

Figure 10 Alt Text: An elderly person sits in a traditional courtyard with white walls and dark tiles, smoking a pipe. Clothing is lined up between buildings, and a metal pot smoking on a wood-fired stove. Bamboo chairs are scattered around, and the floor is paved with irregular stone slabs. The courtyard appears to be a traditional setting, with a variety of clothing and furniture.

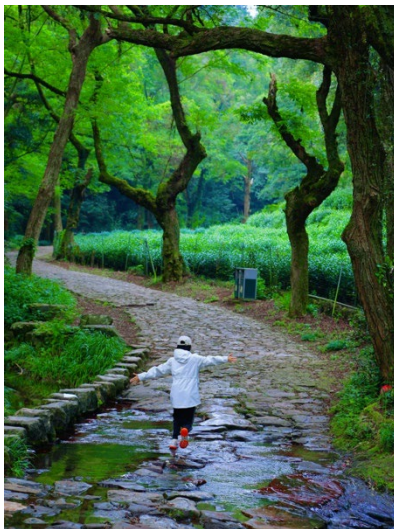


Figure 11. Kinship of relational experience (Source: Xiaohongshu)

Figure 11 Alt Text: A child strolling through a verdant park on a cobblestone path is dressed in a white jacket and red pants. Vibrant green shrubs border the path, and tall trees with entwined branches rise over the park.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. The process of netnography in citywalk experience

Figure 2. The process of thematic analysis

Figure 3. Code distribution among six dimensions of DBE and their potential relationships in citywalk

Figure 4. Citywalk six experience with potential relationship

Figure 5. Downshifting of spiritual experience

Figure 6. Healing of the mind of spiritual experience

Figure 7. Touching of affective experience

Figure 8. Take photos of behavioral experience

Figure 9. Meet strangers of relational experience

Figure 10. Local community of relational experience

Figure 11. Kinship of relational experience