

The Cultural Definition and Reproduction Path of City Walk in China: From Youth Subculture to Media Spectacle

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Abstract. City Walk, as a form of urban walking, originated in 19th-century Britain and entered the Chinese market after 2015, quickly gaining popularity in major cities. Initially part of youth subculture, it promoted a sense of freedom, relaxation, and spontaneous urban exploration. However, with the rise of social media and mass media, City Walk gradually transitioned from a subculture into a commodified and symbolized media spectacle. This paper aims to explore the cultural definition of City Walk in China and its pathways of cultural reproduction, analyzing how it shifted from a youth subculture to the mainstream and eventually transformed into a media spectacle. Throughout this process, the paper reveals how City Walk, under the collusion of consumerism and media forces, has gradually lost its original attributes of freedom and resistance, becoming a symbol of the refined lifestyle of the urban middle class.

Keywords: Cultural Reproduction; Subculture; Media Spectacle; Consumer Society.

1. Introduction

With the acceleration of urbanization, urban spaces and culture have become important venues for young people to express themselves and explore their identities. City Walk, as an urban strolling activity, originated in 19th-century Europe and gradually gained global popularity. In recent years, City Walk has entered China and rapidly developed in large cities. It has become not only a form of tourism but also an important element of contemporary youth culture. Unlike traditional tourism, City Walk emphasizes spontaneity and freedom, often organized and promoted by young people via social media platforms, making it a new cultural phenomenon.

Although City Walk has garnered widespread attention in China, its cultural meaning and its path of cultural reproduction have not been fully discussed. In particular, the transformation of City Walk from a youth subculture into a media spectacle contains profound processes of cultural reproduction. During this process, City Walk gradually detached from its original spirit of free exploration and evolved into a commodified and symbolized lifestyle. Social media has amplified this phenomenon, reinforcing the symbolic meaning of City Walk and turning it into a tool for displaying personal taste and identity, rather than a simple urban exploration activity.

This study aims to explore the cultural definition of City Walk in China and its path of cultural reproduction, focusing on how it has transformed from a youth subculture into a media spectacle. Through a combination of theoretical frameworks and case studies, this paper will uncover the cultural logic behind City Walk, particularly its process of symbolization and commodification, and the impact of this transformation on contemporary urban youth culture.

2. City Walk in China

2.1. Definition

City Walk originated in 19th-century Britain and is also referred to as urban strolling, urban walking, or urban hiking. It refers to a form of tourism where participants, led by a guide, explore the city's natural scenery, architectural style, and historical culture on a pre-planned route [1]. Typically lasting a short time (usually half a day), City Walk allows participants, mostly local residents, to tour urban neighborhoods on foot [2]. This form of tourism not only satisfies modern tourists' need for

fragmented time but also serves as an important means of showcasing urban culture, promoting city landscapes, and preserving cultural heritage [3].

After 2015, City Walk entered the Chinese market, first appearing in Shanghai and quickly spreading to cities like Beijing, Guangzhou, and Nanjing [4]. In China, the term City Walk has been redefined; beyond a tourism activity, it has also come to represent a fashionable movement and a symbol of youth subculture. As part of youth fashion culture, City Walk embodies both leisurely characteristics and the non-mainstream traits of subculture.

Moreover, City Walk can be viewed as a media spectacle. Driven by social media, participants engage by signing up for City Walk events, using relevant hashtags, and posting about related topics, eventually forming a collective celebration. This process not only reflects the media's domestication of behavior but also guides people to adopt new lifestyles, ultimately creating a new cultural landscape [5].

2.2. Poetic Ritual of Resistance

Chill, as a core style of City Walk, means that individuals can freely manage their time, no longer subjected to the strict control of time imposed by modern urban life. Under the "tyranny" of time, which exists as a social institution in modern society, City Walk's relaxed pace and flexible time arrangements allow individuals to express long-suppressed emotions regarding their free time. This ritual provides the precious experience of individuals no longer being mere machines controlled by time, or the continuous target of disciplinary time. Through this ritual, young people resist the time-dominance of modern society, calling for a return to individual subjectivity and freedom.

Randomness is another key characteristic of City Walk. Unlike planned travel, City Walk is often spontaneous, with practitioners anticipating an improvised experience. In City Walk, "Walk" is closer to "wandering." Baudelaire first introduced the concept of the "flâneur" in his works, which Benjamin later interpreted from a modern perspective. These wanderers roam through the landscapes of modern cities, immersed in the urban hustle yet maintaining a sense of detachment—they are both observers and outsiders. This state of wandering reflects the alienation and estrangement between people and their environment, as well as between individuals in modern urban life [6]. By wandering, City Walk participants re-examine familiar everyday spaces, turning daily life into an object of reflection and observation, ultimately defamiliarizing it. In this process, individuals do not mechanically visit famous landmarks but create new spaces for perception and experience through this strolling activity. This practice of randomness reflects the marginality of subculture, which is not limited to social power or status structures but is also an aesthetic pursuit. It rejects the certainty of mainstream aesthetics, seeking beauty in uncertainty and improvisation, uncovering hidden meanings in everyday life. This aesthetic no longer relies on traditional cultural symbols but discovers new beauty in ordinary life, presenting a cultural perspective distinct from mainstream aesthetics.

In de Certeau's Practice Theory, he argues that individuals can break the power structure's occupation of space through walking, creating new spaces. Walking is a poetic spatial practice that disrupts the established urban order, allowing people to carve out their own free spaces within existing power structures. In the practice of City Walk, participants intervene in appropriate symbolized spaces through wandering, transforming them into their own spaces. This walking practice not only redefines the relationship between individuals and the city but also blurs spatial boundaries, allowing participants to temporarily "escape" power's jurisdiction, creating their own narratives and meanings [7]. City Walk can be understood as a poetic resistance by young people in urban spaces. This resistance is not a direct confrontation with power but a gradual infiltration and deconstruction of disciplined spaces through everyday practices, creating new experiences and meanings. It is not merely about occupying space but also resisting the pace of modern life, allowing individuals to retain autonomy over their space and time outside consumer society and mainstream culture.

2.3. Transition to Mainstream Society in China

2.3.1. The Practice of Rebuilding the “Nearby”

The anthropologist Xiang Biao, who first proposed the concept of “nearby,” pointed out that “nearby” is a lived space where people from different backgrounds and positions frequently encounter each other in daily life, which enhances individuals’ capacities for seeing the multidimensional world [8]. On the one hand, in modern society, with the development of media technologies, people can form diverse couplings based on virtual technologies [9]. However, due to the general absence of physical presence, individuals become disembodied from real space, and social relations exhibit “disembodying” tendencies, leading to the disappearance of geographic “nearby.” On the other hand, in a highly homogenized modern society, where individuals live in an atomized state, the loss of concern for or indifference to everyday encounters and dialogue among people results in the disappearance of “nearby” as a friendly space of modern significance. “Nearby” is not only a definition in the physical spatial dimension but also an emotional and cultural adhesion to society. The manifestation of connections between individuals implies resistance to all elements that erode emotional communities in modernity [10].

City Walk advocates embodied experiences of urban space and landscape, focusing on individuals and their physical spaces. This shift from grand narratives to surrounding everyday scenes offers the possibility of the return of the “nearby.” City Walk provides social spaces for young people to integrate into urban interactions. Increasingly, young people are beginning to engage with individuals who share fluid identities and experiences, in a “society of strangers” as defined by Simmel. However, this differs from the mode of interaction that accumulates social capital. This type of relatively pure communication, without much instrumental rationalism, is characterized by ‘idle chatting,’ in which individuals reflect on their own minds and reshape their personality structures by referencing the ‘Other’ in the context of Mead’s symbolic interactionism. This behavior, in fact, embodies the very essence of social interaction itself.

City Walk, originally a ritual of resistance for a small group, has gradually expanded to more urban populations. It is no longer just a form of resistance to time discipline or power governance but has also become a response to the interpersonal alienation of modern society.

2.3.2. Mass Media’s Dissemination

Stuart Hall’s cultural studies theory emphasizes how cultural symbols and meanings are disseminated and reproduced through mass media. Hall argues that mass media is not merely a transmitter of information; it plays a key role in constructing and reproducing culture. The media constructs social realities through symbols and language, giving specific social meanings to certain activities and cultures [11]. In the dissemination of City Walk as a niche youth subculture, social media and online communities are not only platforms for transmitting information but also shape the cultural meaning of City Walk.

On one hand, online communities and social media platforms provide a platform for young people to consult on City Walk, offering route recommendations and serving as an important reference when choosing locations. On the other hand, online communities and social media platforms are not just channels for consultation; they are also platforms for interaction and communication. Through social media platforms such as WeChat, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu, participants can share content related to City Walk, such as scenery sharing, route recommendations, and experience feedback, or even initiate online and offline event invitations. This means that the interactive rituals of City Walk not only occur in the physical space of “walk” activities within the “city,” but also extend into virtual space through online communities. These platforms provide City Walk with a cross-regional interactive space, where participants can form virtual collective interactions through the internet, even if they are not in the same time or place. Through these interactions, participants constantly reaffirm their identities and common interests, and this virtual interaction often promotes offline group activities, such as organizing local City Walks, thereby increasing opportunities for offline interactions.

Through the dissemination of mass media, City Walk has transformed from a purely urban strolling activity into something imbued with new symbolic meanings of exploration, social interaction, and cultural experience. This reproduction of meaning has driven City Walk from the margins of youth subculture into mainstream society, and it has been accepted and participated in by more and more people through the spread of social media.

2.4. Reduced to a Spectacle

As City Walk gained popularity, it was packaged within consumerism, extending to become synonymous with a refined middle-class lifestyle, and it has been ridiculed online. For example, in July, a paid version of City Walk emerged, leading to comments such as, “Even Street strolling comes with a fee now.” Another incident involved a blogger in Hangzhou launching an English version of City Walk, requiring all participants to speak only English, which was mocked as reminiscent of middle school English corners. A viral silent dance video on Douyin ignited discussions about “Shanghai lifestyle.” In the video, a Black man led a group of people in a synchronized silent dance on the street, with young participants closely following the leader’s movements, mechanically performing the next steps. This was sarcastically referred to by netizens as “tense relaxation” [12]. Such formalized, templated, and refined trends completely betray the original spirit of City Walk, which emphasizes freedom and relaxation.

Behind City Walk, young people often attempt to create a relatively comfortable image of themselves, one that appears better than their actual living conditions [5]. City Walk can be seen as a front-stage performance, as described in Erving Goffman’s theory of impression management [13], and online communities and social media have become the main stage for these performances. Participants engage in self-presentation by sharing City Walk routes, experiences, and photos, gaining likes and comments from others, thus achieving impression management and public recognition. This self-presentation is not only a personal behavior but is also influenced and driven by social media and societal expectations.

In modern society, consumption is not just about material products but increasingly involves symbolic behavior [3]. City Walk, within this framework of symbolic consumption, has been redefined as a consumption activity for self-presentation and identity enhancement. In Guy Debord’s view, spectacle is a social phenomenon driven by commodities and consumer culture, where surface form and display replace authentic experience [14]. As individuals go to great lengths on social media to present an idealized self-image and engage in symbolic self-construction, City Walk has transformed from a personal, free exploration of the city into something consumed and watched by others. This spectacle-based transformation has caused City Walk to deviate from its core values, becoming a symbolized middle-class lifestyle. Participants no longer pursue the free experience of urban space but rather use symbols, such as photos on social media that highlight a “chill” state, to display their identity.

Under the collusion of consumer society and new media, City Walk has been reduced to a spectacle. Individuals in consumer society pursue identity through symbolic display, and social media provides a stage for such displays, further amplifying the impact of this performative behavior. In this collusion, City Walk is no longer a simple strolling practice, nor is it a resistance ritual exclusive to a small group of young people. It has gradually become a symbol of refined living, where people use this activity to display their taste and status. Behind this phenomenon lies deep identity anxiety and the pressure of societal expectations, as individuals seek social recognition through symbolic consumption in a consumer society. Every action of the individual becomes something to be watched and judged [15].

3. Summary

In a consumer society, the boundary between reality and symbols gradually disappears, with symbols themselves replacing reality. The popularity of City Walk is a manifestation of this implosion

in the context of simulacrum theory: it is endowed with increasing symbolic significance, while the actual experience of the activity becomes less important. On one hand, people pursue refinement and immerse themselves in symbols and appearances, gradually losing their connection with real life and their perception of authentic experience. On the other hand, people are trapped in an endless cycle of consumption in a consumer society, constantly engaging in symbolic consumption to alleviate identity anxiety and meet societal expectations. Through symbols, they construct their sense of self, but this symbolic self cannot bring true satisfaction; instead, individuals are controlled by the symbols, ultimately becoming part of the symbolic world, losing their autonomy.

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