

The Logic of “Viral Popularity” and the Development Path of “Sustained Popularity” in Influencer Cities

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Abstract: With the advent and continued development of the internet era, influencer cities have leveraged the internet’s power for rapid marketing, resulting in a swift rise to fame and a substantial influx of attention and traffic. In the face of such “overnight wealth and fame”, the primary challenge lies in preventing the transient nature of popularity and the potential lack of long-term sustainability, while simultaneously promoting enduring prosperity and fostering the high-quality development of the cultural and tourism industry. It is argued that sustained success can be achieved by influencer cities through strategies such as creating unique and immersive tourism experiences for visitors, enhancing infrastructure, facilitating upstream and downstream linkages, empowering technological advancements, and improving accessibility.

Keywords: Influencer cities; “Viral Popularity” logic; “Sustained Popularity” path; Cultural and tourism industry

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1. Introduction

In the context of the rapid development of mobile internet, cities such as Zibo, Harbin, and Tianshui have experienced meteoric rises, capturing widespread attention through their “overnight success” and “strong breakout.” These cities not only provide pathways for advancing digital marketing models in local cultural and tourism industries but also inject new vitality into urban development, thereby promoting the high-quality growth of the urban cultural and tourism sector ^[1]. By leveraging digital marketing strategies and the powerful dissemination capabilities of social media platforms, these cities have rapidly propelled their unique cultural identities, traditional cuisines, and tourism resources to national and even global recognition, generating significant social and economic impact. This phenomenon not only represents an innovative approach to the digital transformation of local cultural and tourism industries but also provides fresh momentum for urban brand building, economic growth, and cultural communication. However, the popularity of internet-famous cities is often short-lived. While increased traffic can quickly raise a city’s profile, maintaining sustained popularity and effectively

converting traffic into long-term economic benefits and cultural influence remains a central challenge for these cities. Therefore, the key to transitioning from “viral fame” to sustained recognition lies in the implementation of precise marketing strategies, the fostering of cultural innovation, and the advancement of industrial development to continuously shape and enhance the city’s competitiveness.

The phenomenon of a city’s “viral success” arises from the interplay of several factors. From a media communication perspective, the widespread use of new media platforms, particularly short video and social media platforms, provides an efficient avenue for the rapid dissemination of urban culture. Through the broad distribution of information and the stimulation of emotional resonance, these platforms quickly attract substantial attention, thereby enhancing the visibility and social recognition of the city’s brand. Simultaneously, internet-famous cities typically rely on their unique resource endowments, including rich historical and cultural heritage, distinctive local cuisines, and attractive tourism resources, which serve as key drivers in attracting visitors and public interest. Furthermore, government policy support and an optimized business environment provide strong backing for the cultural and tourism industries of these cities. While the short-term surge in traffic can swiftly raise a city’s profile, the challenge lies in sustaining this momentum and converting it into long-term economic growth amidst intense market competition.

This research seeks to explore the developmental path of internet-famous cities from “viral fame” to “sustained recognition.” Initially, the underlying logic behind how these cities achieve “viral fame” will be analyzed, focusing on how they leverage new media communication, resource advantages, and favorable business environments for rapid growth. Subsequently, in light of the challenges faced by these cities, this paper will propose specific pathways for promoting “sustained development”, with a focus on strategies such as refining urban cultural intellectual property (IP), enhancing deep visitor experiences, and optimizing industrial chains. The greatest challenge faced by internet-famous cities is the difficulty in maintaining sustained popularity, as traffic is often difficult to convert into lasting economic benefits. Capturing “traffic” and increasing “retention”, transforming “viral fame” into “long-term success”, and leveraging the network effect to build true urban competitiveness represent a long-term and complex task. This paper aims to examine the underlying logic of “viral fame” and the developmental trajectory toward “sustained success” in internet-famous cities, with the objective of offering recommendations for their long-term growth.

2. The underlying logic of influencer cities’ “viral popularity” and breaking out of their regional boundaries

2.1. The strong promotion of new media and the emergence of synergistic marketing strategies

Zibo barbecue, Harbin frozen pears, and Tianshui spicy hot pot, the latest “top trending” sensations, are just a few examples of a phenomenon that consistently captures public attention. These influencer cities have effectively utilized new media platforms, such as Douyin and Kuaishou, to promote local specialty foods and leisure cultures, thereby attracting a large number of tourists ^[2]. The advent of the new media era and technological innovations has reshaped the media ecosystem, meeting the diverse audiovisual needs of the public and enabling the rapid dissemination of urban culture, while also fostering new growth in the cultural and tourism economy. It is essential for influencer cities to leverage the comprehensive power of multi-form, multi-channel, and multimedia communication. Synergistic marketing, with its strengths in scene-based, interactive, and emotional communication, has garnered significant attention and played a critical role in promoting the cultural appeal of

these cities ^[3]. Taking Harbin as an example, the Heilongjiang Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism, after assessing the situation, adopted several measures to initiate cross-regional and cross-platform joint marketing efforts. This initiative fostered close cooperation among local cultural and tourism departments. Through promotion by influencers and well-known figures on social media and short video platforms, Harbin's frozen pears and ice-and-snow tourism were successfully spotlighted on the internet. In sparking a cultural tourism boom, the city's marketing efforts must align with market demand trends and ensure these trends are accurately integrated into the supply and promotion of cultural tourism products. This alignment is crucial for influencer cities to "go viral" and break free from their regional confines.

2.2. Deepening cultural heritage and showcasing resource endowment advantages

The rise to fame of Zibo is closely linked to its long-standing barbecue culture, while Rongjiang's breakout is attributed to the deep-rooted popularity of its "village super league." Harbin's success is grounded in its unique ice and snow tourism, and Tianshui has gained immense popularity due to its distinctive spicy hot pot. However, relying solely on local specialty foods and recreational activities is insufficient to generate such widespread enthusiasm among the public. Taking Rongjiang as an example, the integration of sports into local cultural and tourism resources has created a novel model for rural revitalization, combining "cultural tourism + sports" for innovative development. The "village super league", with its highly approachable and engaging event style, has attracted numerous tourists. During these events, Rongjiang showcased its rural cultural resources, allowing visitors to experience intangible cultural heritage, traditional costumes, and local cuisine from various ethnic groups. Additionally, the production of the "village super league" mascot and handmade "village super ox" crafts has provided employment and income growth for over 2,000 rural women, promoted the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage crafts, and successfully stimulated the local tourism industry. As demonstrated in this case, the rich tourism resource endowment and deep cultural heritage serve as the foundation for influencer cities to "go viral" and transcend their regional boundaries.

2.3. Improved business environment and stimulated market vitality

The report from the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized that "creating a first-class market-oriented, rule-of-law, and international business environment" is a critical requirement for achieving high-quality development ^[4]. Consequently, in recent years, local governments have positioned the improvement of the business environment as the "lifeline" for high-quality development. Efforts have been made to establish market-oriented, rule-of-law, and international business environments, with the goal of promoting high-quality economic and social development, thereby providing a solid foundation for the cultural and tourism market.

Taking the newly emerging influencer city of Tianshui as an example, in the first quarter of 2024, the city welcomed 12.37 million tourists, with total tourism revenue reaching 7.163 billion RMB, reflecting a year-on-year increase of 45.3% and 44.4%, respectively. Tianshui has established an efficient operational model through comprehensive services, full-process coordination, and the integration of all necessary elements. From top-level government decision-making and quality control to businesses responding to market demands with high-quality products and services, a collaborative effort has been made to foster a favorable business environment and maintain a welcoming atmosphere. This collective force has enabled the city to capitalize on the opportunity for "overnight wealth and fame." In addressing major public events, the efficient collaboration between the government and the market, the strengthening of a sense of community, the proactive creation of a "first-class"

business environment, and the stimulation of the cultural and tourism market's vitality are essential factors in ensuring that influencer cities can "go viral" and transcend regional boundaries ^[5].

2.4. Extending and enhancing the value chain with a human-centered approach

The "human-centered" concept emphasizes the prioritization of human interests and well-being to ensure the respect and realization of human dignity and rights. This principle is also applicable to the cultural and tourism industry. In advancing the high-quality development of the tourism sector, the most crucial factor is the "people." All efforts should be centered around "people." The rise of influencer cities is closely tied to the collective efforts of both the government and the people, with online and offline services functioning in tandem. Taking Tianshui as an example, following the sudden popularity of spicy hot pot, government departments swiftly responded by implementing a series of measures to enhance convenience for tourists, including ensuring food safety, improving accommodation, and optimizing transportation. The government adopted a "customer-first" approach, ensuring that "whatever the tourists desire, the government will provide." This comprehensive upgrade to the tourism service chain-spanning food, accommodation, transportation, sightseeing, shopping, and entertainment-created an experience in which visitors felt "treated like family." This not only stimulated tourists' desire to purchase and share their experiences but also further promoted the city's positive online visibility. This human-centered approach serves as the driving force behind influencer cities' ability to "go viral" and transcend regional boundaries ^[6].

3. Implementation path for the "sustained popularity" development of influencer cities

3.1. Refining the city's thematic image and creating distinct cultural IP

Culture is the soul of a city. A deep understanding of a city's history, traditions, regional cultural characteristics, and contemporary values is essential for refining and innovatively presenting the city's thematic image. By creating unique cultural intellectual properties (IP), influencer cities can establish the "vitality" required for their sustained development. Chengdu, one of the earliest influencer cities, has continuously promoted intangible cultural heritage, such as Sichuan opera face-changing and Sichuan embroidery, at cultural landmarks like Du Fu Thatched Cottage, Kuanzhai Alley, and Jinli. The city has also organized events, such as the Chengdu International Panda Festival and the Lantern Festival, which have successfully attracted numerous tourists and showcased Chengdu's unique cultural identity. Through these efforts, Chengdu has crafted a distinctive cultural tourism image, preserved and innovated its historical culture, and activated its contemporary appeal, facilitating the transformation from "viral popularity" to "sustained success."

3.2. Enhancing visitors' in-depth experiences and creating emotional resonance

A city may quickly rise to fame due to a moment of "serendipitous success", but once the online hype subsides, the attention from tourists often diminishes as well. The key to the sustained popularity ("sustained success") of influencer cities lies in providing tourists with profound emotional value and fostering deep emotional connections. "Superficial" interactions, such as "sightseeing in passing", do not create a strong emotional bond between tourists and the city, and may lead to a rapid decline in tourists' impressions, ultimately affecting their willingness to revisit. Therefore, enabling visitors to engage more deeply with the city and strengthening their experiences and connections with it is an essential strategy for influencer cities to convert "traffic" into "retention."

For example, Xi'an utilizes technologies such as AR and VR to vividly present the Terracotta Army, the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, and museum artifacts. Additionally, the city hosts events like the Tang Dynasty Night City light show and the Hui Muslim Street Food Festival to provide visitors with unique cultural tourism experiences, thereby enhancing the city's competitiveness. Providing visitors with profound and distinctive travel experiences is crucial for the sustained success of a city. Local cultural, culinary, and tourism resources should be thoroughly explored and packaged by municipal cultural and tourism departments to maintain and enhance tourists' emotional engagement and the city's lasting impression.

3.3. Promoting collaborative efforts and regulating market order

To guide influencer cities toward the path of "sustained popularity" and to enhance the quality and efficiency of the cultural and tourism industry, it is essential to strengthen the collaborative efforts among governments, businesses, and communities in order to establish a well-regulated and orderly market environment. Accordingly, governments should plan cultural and tourism industry projects, optimize urban spatial layouts, and leverage online trends to create distinctive tourist destinations. Businesses should improve the supply of innovative tourism products and enhance comprehensive supporting services for tourism. Communities should integrate local cultural resources, create volunteer service platforms, and promote increased participation and engagement in cultural and tourism activities. A collaborative development system for the cultural and tourism industry, characterized by complementary advantages and shared benefits, should be established. Regulating market order is the cornerstone of building such a collaborative system and fostering the prosperous development of the cultural and tourism industry. Decisive actions must be taken to address market chaos, improve law enforcement coordination, implement targeted corrective measures, and strengthen policy support in order to create an exemplary cultural and tourism market.

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3.5. Keeping up with product market trends and deepening technological empowerment

To provide tourists with a richer and more diverse cultural and tourism experience, cities should fully explore local cultural resources to lay a foundation for the development of a wide range of cultural and creative products.

A comprehensive consideration of the development and construction of the cultural and tourism industry chain and value chain is essential, employing a systems-thinking approach to address existing gaps in cultural and creative product development^[7]. In this process, modern technologies should be integrated to fully leverage tools such as big data, cloud computing, virtual space development, and artificial intelligence, enabling the creation of innovative experiential models for the city's diverse culture. At the same time, precise coordination between online and offline consumer markets is necessary to maintain a consistent supply of products that meet the needs of emerging mainstream tourist groups seeking expanded travel offerings^[8]. For example, in Xi'an, the Shaanxi History Museum has continuously enhanced its reputation by curating and showcasing valuable historical artifacts, further solidifying the city's status as the capital of thirteen ancient dynasties. The museum employs advanced technologies for the preservation of cultural relics and the construction of historical sites, consistently demonstrating the culture of the pre-Qin period and the grandeur of the Tang dynasty. By fostering innovation and utilizing technology to support relic restoration, exhibition curation, and the development of cultural and creative products, Xi'an continues to unlock the synergistic potential of cultural and tourism integration.

4. Future prospects

With the continuous advancement of digital technologies and the increasing diversification of social and cultural demands, the long-term development of so-called internet-famous cities relies not only on short-term surges in online traffic but also on systematic upgrades in cultural depth, industrial structure, and resource coordination. The transition from "instant fame" to "sustained popularity" marks the progression of urban cultural and tourism industries toward high-quality development and offers a new paradigm for enhancing global urban competitiveness.

First, the in-depth exploration of cultural heritage and brand identity serves as the primary driver of the enduring appeal of internet-famous cities. Historical traditions must be systematically integrated with modern innovations to create distinctive cultural intellectual properties (IPs) that reinforce civic identity and emotional resonance. The incorporation of technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) enables the design of immersive cultural experiences, which not only strengthen tourists' emotional attachment to cities but also increase repeat visitation and facilitate the long-term dissemination of urban brands.

Second, the establishment of a collaborative cultural-tourism ecosystem is essential for achieving sustained popularity. Effective coordination among governments, enterprises, and civil society is required to optimize policy environments and promote the integration of cultural, tourism, technological, and economic sectors. By constructing comprehensive industrial chains and service systems, internet-famous cities can attract substantial traffic during the initial phases of popularity, while simultaneously securing long-term economic and social benefits through improved service quality, diversified tourism products, and enriched user experiences. Such synergies ultimately ensure the sustainable development of the cultural and tourism industry.

Moreover, technological empowerment and intelligent management will play pivotal roles in shaping the future trajectories of internet-famous cities. The widespread application of big data, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence facilitates the precise analysis of tourist preferences, enhances the operational efficiency of urban service infrastructure, and delivers personalized, technology-enabled experiences. The promotion of smart tourism further allows visitors to access information, plan routes, and complete transactions with greater convenience and efficiency, thereby strengthening urban competitiveness and attractiveness.

Finally, sustainable development forms the cornerstone of long-term prosperity. While advancing the rapid growth of cultural and tourism sectors, cities must simultaneously prioritize environmental protection and the rational use of resources to ensure balanced progress across economic, cultural, and ecological dimensions. The adoption of green development strategies and the integration of eco-tourism with sustainable tourism not only reinforce the economic and cultural influence of cities but also safeguard environmental sustainability, generating a virtuous cycle of growth.

In conclusion, the future development of internet-famous cities will be driven by innovation, rooted in culture, supported by technology, and guided by collaborative governance. Only through continuous innovation and sustained cultural investment can such cities transform short-term popularity into enduring prosperity, thereby shaping modern urban brands with robust international competitiveness.

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