

# **Does Disney's magic meet sustainability?**

## **A sustainability assessment of Shanghai Disney amusement park**

Ruiqi Wang<sup>1</sup>, Lan Xu<sup>2</sup>, Xiwen Cao<sup>3</sup>

University of Michigan - Shanghai Jiao Tong University Joint Institute, Shanghai, China

1 wrq2021141710@sjtu.edu.cn, 2 xulan\_serena@sjtu.edu.cn, 3 theodosia@sjtu.edu.cn

Tourism is a multifaceted and often overlooked source of environmental damage. From plane flights to souvenirs and lodging, many activities contribute to tourism's ecological footprint. The Chinese tourism industry has a critical role to play in sustainable development as this sector accounted for up to 8% of mainland China's total carbon emissions in 2019. While in the post-pandemic period China's tourism is rebounding with vigor, it brings forward the urgency to evaluate potential opportunities towards more sustainable practices. Shanghai Disney has been attracting crowds of tourists since its opening in 2016, with more than 100 million visitors so far. As a globally renowned and widely advertised place of entertainment, the park set a benchmark model for many tourist attractions. Therefore, a sustainability assessment of Shanghai Disney is of great significance in unveiling environmental, economical and societal facts that could foster new opportunities for more sustainable practices in recreational tourism.

Our investigation includes a social media analysis and a survey, as we collected 205 answers to a questionnaire on visitor's impressions, food and drink consumption, souvenir purchase behavior, Chinese culture inclusion and environmental awareness. About half of the answers were collected via a random intercept method by asking visitors near Shanghai Disney premises to scan a QR code and access an online questionnaire that they could fill in on their personal devices. The rest of the answers were collected through a random intercept method on Shanghai Jiao Tong university campus resulting in about 65% of the respondents being university students. With 157 million consumers, China is now the second largest middle class in absolute terms and already produces more waste than the United States. Strong economic growth, changing lifestyles and rising consumerism over the past thirty years has boosted up domestic tourism. This trend shows no signs of abating and is predicted to grow against the economic power of the younger Chinese generations. This is why in this study, we intentionally collected half of our data among university students. Although our sample's composition does not reflect accurately the visiting population of Shanghai Disney, it can highlight emerging patterns and attitudes towards recreational activities as well as opportunities for more sustainable practices in the future. Since the aim of this work is to offer new directions for refined studies on recreational tourism in China, the unusual composition of the sample serves well the purpose of our study. We used social media platforms to perform photo analysis of packaging and food decoration and looked at users-uploaded comments on

perceived over-packaging. The conclusions in this regard are consistent with the collected data and provided a refined understanding of the problem. For instance, food sold on street stalls appeared to be using much more packaging than the one sold in the canteens, indeed using more plastic packages and non-edible decorations.

Our analysis reveals that despite a great appreciation for the visually appealing food and goods presentation proper to Disney, their excessive packaging – obviously posing environmental challenges – are unexpectedly more strongly perceived by the older population. This result highlights the necessity to develop environmental awareness among students through on-campus awareness campaigns, in order to foster eco-responsible consumption among the new generations. Our study also found that Disney souvenirs are largely subject to impulse buying and thus quickly set aside, which leads to a considerable waste of resources. Our study unveils the potentials for economically profitable and yet environmentally-friendly marketing re-orientations as advertising potential efforts in manufacturing goods from recycled materials or limiting packaging could give a green image to the company. Another important finding is that while Shanghai Disney benefits from a globally positive emotional evaluation, visitors do not value much the efforts made to integrate Chinese culture into activities and events. As the preservation and enhancement of local cultures is another aspect of sustainable development, tailoring shows, attractions and articles of consumption to the Chinese public would contribute to a better integration of the theme park within Chinese urban and social development.

Our assessment of Shanghai Disney's sustainability thus unveils room for improvement in various domains and could foster meaningful directions towards more sustainable practices in the Chinese entertainment industry, where leading companies could set the benchmark for more sustainable urban development.