

ZIMING LI,^a JIAHAO ZHANG^b

Spatial Patterns of Overtourism Perception: A Qualitative Study of Morphological Pathologies in Iconic Tourism Destinations

Abstract. This study examines how spatial morphology shapes tourists' perception of overtourism in iconic Chinese destinations and their resulting dissatisfaction. The author adopts a qualitative multiple-case design and Gioia-informed coding to analyse 120 digital complaint narratives from the Forbidden City, West Lake, and Gulangyu. Three morphology-related mechanisms are identified: funnelled immobility in enclosed heritage sites, persistent ambient density in open landscapes, and infrastructural compounding in island destinations. These mechanisms show that tourists' dissatisfaction is not simply the result of high numbers of visitors but also stems from how access, circulation, visibility, and transport interfaces mediate crowd pressure. The study advances a morphology-sensitive understanding of overtourism perception and suggests that destination governance should go beyond generic crowd control and include targeted interventions at spatial interfaces where crowding becomes experientially harmful.

Keywords: overtourism, spatial morphology, perceived crowding, tourist dissatisfaction, destination governance

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1. Introduction

Overtourism has become a central concern in tourism studies because continued visitor growth can undermine environmental quality, destination liveability, and the quality of the visitor experience (Capocchi et al., 2019; UNWTO, 2018; Velasco

^a Centre for Sustainable Urban Planning and Real Estate (SUPRE), Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Faculty of Built Environment, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2911-4291>, 229875150@qq.com

^b Department of Economics, Faculty of Business and Economics, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0379-4494>, 23058766@siswa.um.edu.my

González & Ruano, 2021). Most research has approached the problem through carrying capacity, governance imbalance, and resident pressure, but this macro perspective only partially explains why tourists in some settings report acute frustration while others do not.

An experiential perspective suggests that overtourism is felt not only as ‘too many people’ but also as blocked movement, diminished visibility, noise, fatigue, and the loss of a destination’s expected atmosphere (Gössling et al., 2020; Li et al., 2017; Yin et al., 2020). This article argues that such reactions are mediated by spatial morphology: boundaries, routes, nodal organisation, transport interfaces, and sightlines shape how density becomes perceptible and stressful (Gospodini, 2001; Hillier, 1996; Hillier & Iida, 2005; Yamu et al., 2021). The argument is not that morphology replaces governance, platformisation, or crowding research, but that it provides a missing mediating layer that explains why similar visitor pressure is lived differently across destinations.

To examine this argument, the study compares three iconic destination types in China: the Forbidden City – an enclosed heritage site, West Lake – an open landscape environment, and Gulangyu – an island destination. It relies on a Gioia-informed qualitative strategy to analyse 120 digital complaint narratives in order to identify recurrent mechanisms through which tourist pressure gives rise to dissatisfaction across different spatial forms. The comparative design is paired with morphology-sensitive interpretive schematics that visualise the coded pressure points in each case; these schematics summarise the narrative analysis rather than introducing an independent geospatial dataset.

The article makes four contributions. First, it conceptualises spatial patterns of overtourism perception. Second, it integrates platform-mediated visibility, perceived crowding, and destination form into a single explanatory chain. Third, it shows how cross-case qualitative evidence can reveal mechanism-rich differences that are often flattened in indicator-based research. Fourth, it offers a transferable framework for distinguishing funnelled immobility, persistent ambient density, and infrastructural compounding as distinct ways in which overtourism becomes experientially harmful.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Experiential Turn in Overtourism Research

Recent overtourism scholarship increasingly treats the phenomenon as an experiential and socio-psychological problem rather than only a numerical imbalance (Capocchi et al., 2019; Chaney & Séraphin, 2023; Gössling et al., 2020). While earlier work emphasised resident perceptions, urban pressure, and destination governance (Bertocchi & Visentin, 2019; Bertocchi et al., 2020), newer studies show that tourists themselves narrate overtourism through disappointment, loss of control, weakened place attachment, and failed expectations of leisure or heritage appreciation (Li et al., 2017; Miah et al., 2025; Yin et al., 2020). This shift matters because overtourism is not experienced as visitor numbers in the abstract, but through interruptions to movement, attention, atmosphere, and meaning-making in concrete settings. User-generated narratives are therefore especially valuable, since they reveal how tourists publicly frame crowd pressure as confusion, exhaustion, disappointment, and sensory intrusion rather than as a neutral question of density alone (Fazzolari & Petrocchi, 2018; Guo et al., 2021).

2.2. Perceived Crowding as a Multidimensional Mechanism

Perceived crowding is the key mechanism linking objective density to subjective dissatisfaction (Jin et al., 2016). It includes both human crowding and spatial crowding: visitors react not only to the presence of others, but also to restricted movement, blocked views, noise, and the inability to stop, linger, or withdraw (Machleit et al., 1994; Yin et al., 2020). Importantly, crowding is not a mechanical response to numbers. It is shaped by expectations, cultural background, activity goals, and the physical setting itself, which is why the same density may be experienced as lively in one environment and oppressive in another. For overtourism research, this means that dissatisfaction should be analysed as a situated cognitive-affective evaluation rather than a simple by-product of high visitation.

2.3. Spatial Morphology and Movement

To explain such variation, this study adopts a spatial-morphological perspective. Destination space is not a neutral backdrop; boundaries, route redundancy, visibility, and topological depth shape movement and perception (Gospodini, 2001; Hillier, 1996; Xie & Gu, 2018; Yamu et al., 2021). A morphology-sensitive lens helps explain why comparable visitor flows may generate very different experi-

ential outcomes across destinations. Rigid entrances, low path redundancy, weak visual access, and tightly coupled transport interfaces do not merely host crowding; they filter, concentrate, or prolong it. Although the study does not conduct formal space-syntax modelling, it uses these insights heuristically to analyse how spatial configuration conditions access, circulation, and experiential failure.

2.4. Platform-mediated Visibility and Research Gap

Spatial vulnerabilities are intensified by digital visibility. Recommendation systems and short-video platforms repeatedly direct tourists to the same viewpoints, routes, and time windows, thereby compressing visitation around recognisable hotspots (Moscardo, 2020; Wengel et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2023). Platformisation therefore amplifies existing morphological weaknesses: once a destination's most photogenic nodes are algorithmically highlighted, pressure becomes concentrated at precisely those interfaces least able to absorb it. Yet overtourism research still rarely integrates tourist narratives, spatial morphology, and comparative case analysis. Much of the literature remains oriented toward governance, carrying capacity, or macro indicators rather than mechanism-rich qualitative comparison. This article addresses that gap by comparing how dissatisfaction is produced across three distinct destination types.

2.5. Integrating Visibility, Morphology, and Experience

The key theoretical gap is therefore not simply a lack of case studies, but a lack of integration. Overtourism research has identified demand amplification through digital visibility, the socio-psychological role of perceived crowding, and the importance of spatial configuration, yet these strands are often discussed in parallel rather than as a single explanatory process. In this article, platform-mediated visibility is treated as a demand amplifier, spatial morphology as a mediating condition, and perceived crowding-related pressures as the proximal mechanisms through which dissatisfaction is produced. The central claim is consequently modest but important: morphology does not create overtourism by itself, but it strongly conditions how overtourism is encountered, interpreted, and remembered in particular destinations.

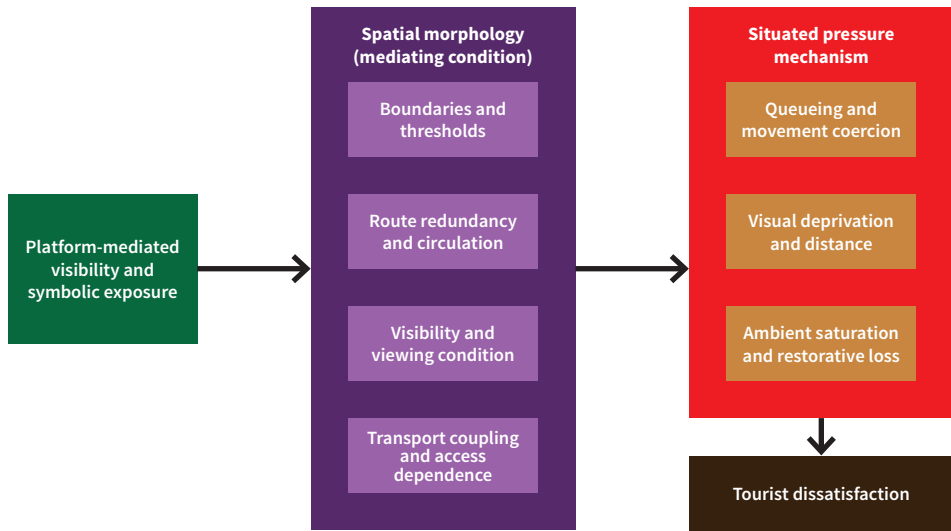


Fig. 1. Integrated analytical framework linking digital visibility, spatial morphology, and experiential strain
Source: Authors' own elaboration

3. Method

3.1. Research Design and Epistemological Position

This study adopts an explanatory qualitative multiple-case design grounded in analytical rather than statistical generalisation. Digital complaint narratives are treated as first-hand accounts of overtourism because they capture how visitors publicly describe waiting, obstruction, noise, visual frustration, exhaustion, and disappointment in specific settings. Compared with visitor statistics, satisfaction scales, or aggregate mobility data, such texts are better able to retain the situational texture of crowd pressure and tourists' post-visit evaluations (Fazzolari & Petrocchi, 2018; Guo et al., 2021). The purpose of the study is therefore not to estimate prevalence, but to explain how different spatial forms recurrently translate dense visitation into distinct patterns of experiential strain.

3.2. Dataset Construction

The empirical corpus consists of 120 narratives, with 40 texts for each case: the Forbidden City, West Lake, and Gulangyu. The cases were selected because they

combine high symbolic visibility with sharply contrasting spatial morphologies: an enclosed heritage complex, an open landscape integrated with the city, and an island destination dependent on transport interfaces. The final corpus was constructed through a four-stage protocol designed to make sample construction auditable. First, a broad retrieval pool was assembled for each case from major travel and social media platforms, including Ctrip, Xiaohongshu, Mafengwo, Weibo, Meituan, and TripAdvisor, using combinations of the destination name with terms indicating crowd pressure, queuing, blocked views, transport difficulty, noise, and disappointment. Second, duplicate posts, promotional materials, reposts, fragmentary comments, and posts unrelated to on-site density or access problems were excluded. Third, an eligible pool was formed by retaining only narratives that described a concrete experience and linked that experience to either a pressure mechanism or an evaluative consequence. Fourth, the eligible corpus was balanced to 40 narratives per case in order to support controlled cross-case comparison.

Because online review ecosystems are dynamic—posts can be edited, deleted, duplicated, or re-ranked over time—the study does not treat the retrieved material as a stable population from which a statistically random sample could be drawn. Instead, an audit log was maintained for each retained narrative recording the destination, platform, retrieval instance, principal complaint focus, inclusion rationale, and provisional first-order code. This log created a transparent procedural bridge between corpus construction and later interpretation.

The resulting sample is therefore not random, and it is important to state this explicitly. It is a case-balanced stratified purposive sample designed for comparative explanation rather than population inference. A narrative was included only when it met at least two substantive conditions: (1) it referred to a concrete on-site or access-stage experience, and (2) it described either a pressure mechanism such as queuing, blocked movement, noise, transport confusion, or visual obstruction, or an evaluative consequence such as fatigue, disappointment, helplessness, or atmospheric loss. Posts were not chosen because they already matched one of the final morphological categories. On the contrary, the categories were generated only after the eligible corpus had been assembled and read repeatedly. This sequencing separates sample construction from later interpretation and helps reduce the risk of selecting texts merely to confirm a prior hypothesis.

Balancing the final corpus at 40 narratives per case served an analytical purpose. The study does not claim that the three destinations generated the same volume of online complaints, nor that the final corpus proportionally represents all reviews posted online. Instead, the balanced design creates comparable qualitative leverage across three contrasting destination types. Table 1 summarises this case logic and the sample-construction principles used in the study.

Table 1. Overview of cases and sample-construction logic

Destination	Spatial Type	Case-selection rationale	Main retrieval platforms	Final sample size
Forbidden City	Enclosed heritage site	Bounded monumental complex with controlled entry and relatively fixed internal route structure	Meituan, Ctrip, Xiaohongshu, Mafengwo, Weibo, TripAdvisor	40
West Lake	Open landscape setting	Diffuse scenic environment integrated with the surrounding city and transport system	Meituan, Ctrip, Xiaohongshu, Mafengwo, Weibo, TripAdvisor	40
Gulangyu	Island destination	Access-dependent island destination combining ferry interfaces with narrow internal circulation	Meituan, Ctrip, Xiaohongshu, Mafengwo, Weibo, TripAdvisor	40

Note: Table 1 reports the final analytic corpus only. Because platform populations are dynamic and may shift through deletion, reposting, or re-ranking, the retained sample is not presented as the full universe of available complaints, but as the auditable comparative corpus used for analysis.

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Where several posts reproduced the same incident with minimal variation, only the fuller or more analytically informative narrative was retained so that the corpus privileged interpretive richness over redundancy. By contrast, posts that complicated an emerging pattern—for example, narratives reporting crowding without intense dissatisfaction, or dissatisfaction shaped partly by service confusion rather than density alone—were retained in the analytic memos as negative or boundary-checking instances during recoding.

The final sample size should also be understood in relation to the interpretive purpose of the study. Although online review platforms contain far larger volumes of user-generated content, the aim of this article is not to conduct large-scale sentiment mining, estimate the prevalence of complaints, or produce statistically replicable proportions across platforms. Instead, the study seeks to generate an in-depth, mechanism-oriented explanation of how different spatial morphologies translate crowd pressure into tourist dissatisfaction. For this reason, analytical adequacy was assessed through narrative richness, cross-case comparability, recurrence of meaning, and the ability of the corpus to support a transparent coding bridge. The balanced corpus of 40 narratives per case was therefore considered appropriate for controlled qualitative comparison across three theoretically contrasting destination types.

3.3. Data Analysis Using the Gioia Methodology

The analysis proceeded in three linked stages following a Gioia-informed logic (Gioia et al., 2013). In the first stage, narratives were open-coded line by line so as to preserve tourists' own expressions, such as being pushed forward, seeing only heads, not being able to stop, walking endlessly after failed taxis, or feel-

ing exhausted before arrival. In the second stage, conceptually related codes were clustered into second-order themes including bottlenecked entry, movement coercion, visual deprivation, ambient saturation, restorative decline, access-system confusion, transport entrapment, commercialization pressure, and multimodal friction. In the third stage, these themes were compared within and across the three cases and synthesised into higher-order morphology-mechanism configurations: funnelled immobility, persistent ambient density, and infrastructural compounding. Table 2 makes this bridge from narrative material to cross-case synthesis explicit. Because a substantial proportion of the corpus was retrieved from Chinese-language platforms, the initial screening, memo writing, and first-stage coding of Chinese narratives were conducted on the original Chinese texts. This helped preserve idiomatic expressions, culturally specific evaluative language, and context-dependent descriptions of crowding, queuing, movement restriction, and disappointment. English translation was undertaken after the initial coding stage and was used primarily for reporting narrative cues, thematic labels, and illustrative expressions in the manuscript. During translation, priority was given to semantic equivalence rather than literal word-for-word rendering. Ambiguous expressions were checked against the original text during recoding to ensure that the translated wording did not alter the meaning of the complaint or the analytical category to which it was assigned. TripAdvisor materials written in English were analysed in their original form.

Figures 3 to 5 were produced only after the coding process had been completed. They should therefore be read as interpretive schematics rather than measured geospatial outputs. Their purpose is to visualise where the coded pressure points identified in the narratives concentrate within each case type. They are not based on original GPS tracking, formal space-syntax modelling, or traffic counts. This clarification matters because the figures summarise the narrative interpretation; they do not constitute a separate empirical dataset.

To make this interpretive chain more inspectable, Table 2 is deliberately organised as a coding bridge rather than as a thematic summary alone: the first column retains abbreviated narrative cues, the second records their analytic clustering, and the third names the morphology-mechanism configuration only after within-case and cross-case comparison. The table is therefore not a substitute for the full corpus, but a compact audit device showing how textual expressions were translated into meso-level explanation.

3.4. Credibility Control and Research Boundaries

Interpretive credibility was strengthened through an explicit audit trail that linked the retrieval logic, inclusion criteria, coding revisions, and case memos. Repeated comparison was conducted both across platforms within each case and across the three cases. Cross-platform recurrence was treated as strengthening a theme, whereas isolated but vivid posts were not treated as sufficient evidence on their own. Coding categories were revised whenever newly examined narratives challenged earlier thematic boundaries, and negative instances were retained in the analytic memos to prevent the cases from being reduced to overly neat prototypes.

Table 2. Coding bridge from narratives to cross-case morphology

Illustrative cue / first-order concept	Second-order theme	Higher-order configuration	Most salient case(s)
Gate rush and threshold compression	Bottlenecked entry	Funnelled immobility	Forbidden City
Being pushed forward and unable to pause	Movement coercion	Funnelled immobility	Forbidden City
Blocked viewing through railings and bodies	Visual-interpretive deprivation	Funnelled immobility	Forbidden City
Photos full of people; nowhere quiet to pause	Restorative decline	Persistent ambient density	West Lake
Noise, vendors, and no scenic breathing room	Ambient saturation	Persistent ambient density	West Lake
Failed taxis, crowded buses, difficult exits	Access-system overload	Persistent ambient density	West Lake
Terminal confusion before arrival	Access-system confusion	Infrastructural compounding	Gulangyu
Artistic-island expectation undermined before arrival	Pre-arrival depletion	Infrastructural compounding	Gulangyu
Overlapping scooters, shops, and pedestrians	Multimodal street friction	Infrastructural compounding	Gulangyu
Accumulated waiting, walking, and exhaustion	Physical and emotional fatigue	Cross-case outcome	All three destinations

Note: Table 2 is illustrative rather than exhaustive. It displays the dominant bridging logic from recurring narrative cues to higher-order configurations and is intended as an audit aid, not as a quantitative frequency inventory of the entire corpus.

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Given the interpretive character of the study, credibility was pursued through iterative recoding, memo comparison, and negative-case checking rather than through formal intercoder reliability statistics, which would not by themselves resolve conceptual ambiguity in short narrative materials. What is offered here is therefore procedural transparency and conceptual discipline, not a claim to mechanical coding objectivity.

The study does not claim statistical representativeness; instead, it aims for analytical transferability and conceptual clarity. Table 2 should therefore be viewed as a qualitative coding bridge rather than as a frequency table, and the emotional-intensity language used in the findings should be understood as interpretive description rather than psychometric measurement. These boundaries are central to the article’s design and to the claims that follow.

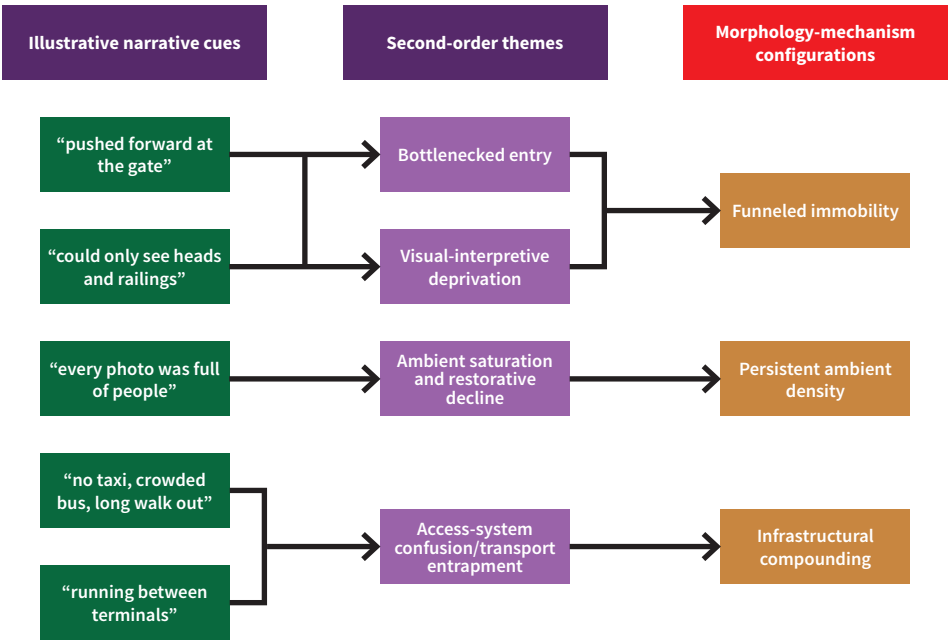


Fig. 2. Auditable coding structure from narrative cues to morphology-mechanism configurations
Source: Authors’ own elaboration

4. Findings: The Spatial Patterns of Perceived Overtourism

Based on the coding bridge summarised in Table 2, cross-case comparison identifies three recurring morphology-mechanism configurations through which overtourism becomes experientially salient: funnelled immobility in enclosed heritage sites, persistent ambient density in open landscapes, and infrastructural compounding in island destinations. These are not presented as a closed typology, but as analytically recurrent ways in which access, circulation, visibility, and transport interfaces convert high visitor pressure into dissatisfaction. Across the cases, what

matters is not density alone, but where pressure is concentrated, how long it is sustained, and which expectations of movement or atmosphere are frustrated.

4.1. Enclosed Heritage Sites: The Funnel Effect and Restricted Mobility

Across the 40 narratives coded for the Forbidden City, the most recurrent first-order expressions concerned being pushed forward at the threshold, queuing before meaningful viewing could begin, and seeing the site through layers of bodies, barriers, and distance. When clustered, these expressions formed two linked second-order themes: bottlenecked entry and visual-interpretive deprivation. Fig. 3 summarises this narrative synthesis as an enclosed-site schematic. It is intended to visualise where the coded frustrations repeatedly concentrate, not to present an independent flow model.

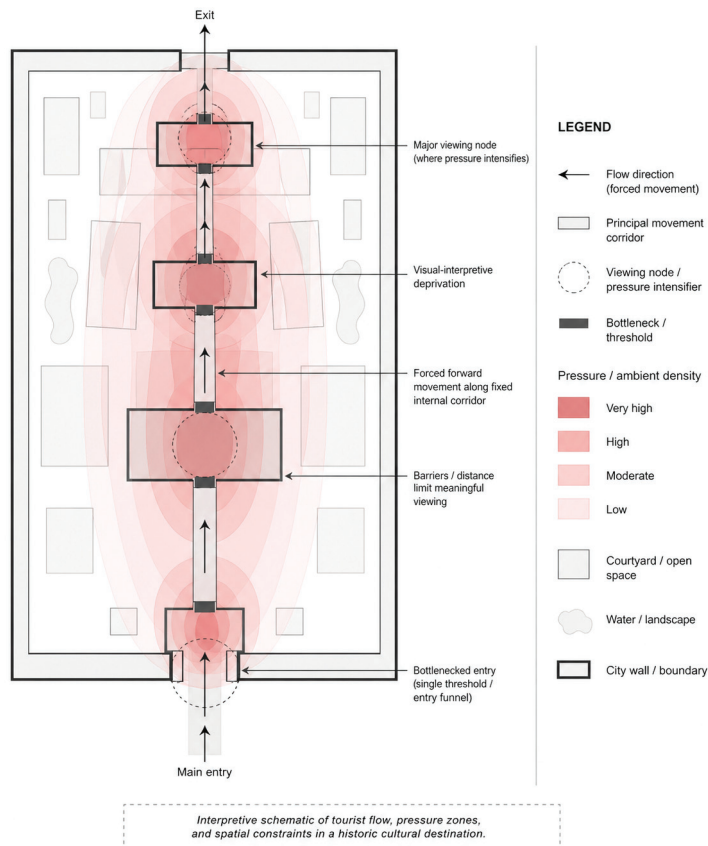


Fig. 3. Interpretive schematic of narrated bottlenecks and viewing constraints in the Forbidden City

Source: Authors' own elaboration

The case illustrates an enclosed heritage morphology in which rigid boundaries, limited entrances, and relatively fixed internal routes convert visitor pressure into funnelled immobility. Under peak flows, pressure concentrates at gates, checkpoints, turning nodes, and approaches to major halls, producing queueing anxiety, forced movement, and a reduced sense of autonomy. In such settings, crowding is not evenly distributed but channelled through a small number of compulsory interfaces, which means that otherwise manageable visitor numbers can quickly become experientially oppressive.

A second source of dissatisfaction arises inside the site. Protective barriers and viewing distances often leave visitors able to see but not properly approach. In heritage settings, where visual access and interpretive immersion are central expectations, this produces more than mild inconvenience: it generates visual deprivation and interpretive distance. Visitors repeatedly described standing far from the main halls, seeing only railings and other people's heads, and feeling that the visit had been reduced to passive viewing. The heritage value of the site therefore remains physically present yet experientially unreachable, which helps explain why disappointment becomes such a prominent emotional tone.

4.2. Open Landscape Environments: Persistent Environmental Density

Across the 40 West Lake narratives, the most recurrent cues concerned prolonged exposure rather than singular chokepoints: every photo filled with people, nowhere quiet to pause, crowded scenic edges, difficulty leaving, and fatigue extended by overloaded transport. These cues were grouped into the second-order themes of ambient saturation, restorative decline, and transport entrapment. Fig. 4 translates this narrative pattern into an open-landscape schematic that highlights dispersed scenic pressure and overloaded escape links rather than a single bottleneck.

West Lake therefore exemplifies an open landscape morphology with weak entry boundaries and deep integration into the surrounding urban transport network. Because access is diffuse and continuous, overtourism is experienced less as a single chokepoint than as prolonged ambient pressure spread across scenic nodes, walking routes, and peripheral transit links. Openness does not automatically produce comfort. Instead, continuous inflow and long-duration exposure make density feel chronic, multi-nodal, and difficult to escape.

Visitors repeatedly described a loss of restorative value. One complaint noted that 'every photo was full of heads' and that noise and commercialisation had washed away the lake's original charm. Here dissatisfaction stems from the erosion of the very qualities that motivate the visit: aesthetic appreciation, leisurely walking, and psychological restoration. Open landscapes also generate mobility help-

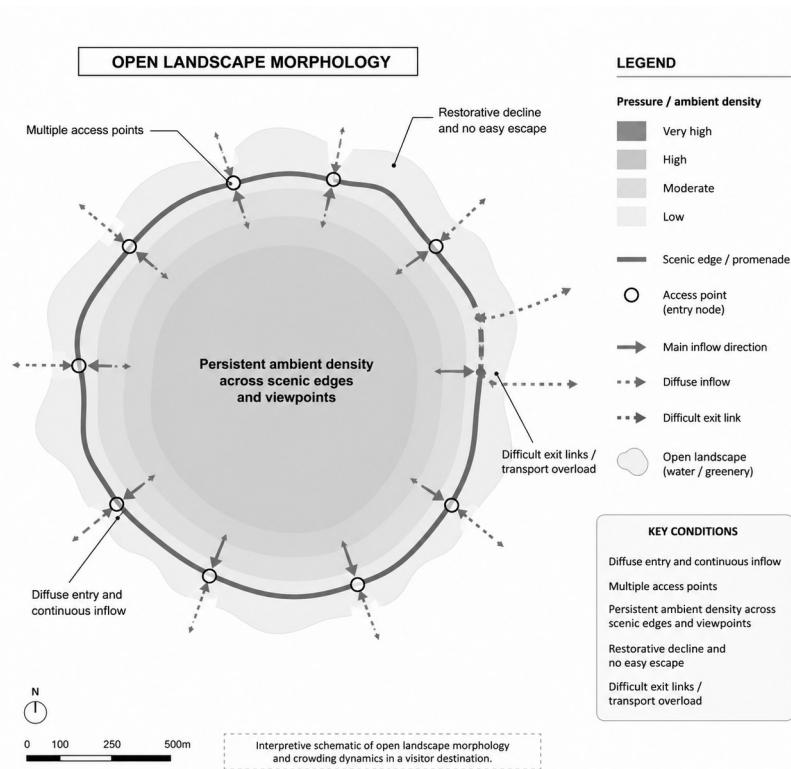


Figure 4. Interpretive schematic of ambient-density accumulation and exit frictions in the West Lake scenic area

Source: Authors' own elaboration

lessness when surrounding support systems are overloaded. Narratives of failed taxis, overcrowded buses, long walks, and difficult exits show that an apparently open destination may still trap visitors in slow and exhausting circulation. For this reason, West Lake is better understood not as a site of episodic congestion, but as a field of persistent environmental density.

4.3. Island Destinations: Infrastructural Compounding and Spatial Friction

Across the 40 Gulangyu narratives, two linked clusters repeatedly appeared: frustration before arrival and friction after arrival. Visitors described running between terminals, confusing ticket rules, unclear prices, scooter noise, narrow streets, and the feeling of being squeezed by overlapping flows. These cues were coded as access-system confusion, pre-arrival depletion, and multimodal street conflict.

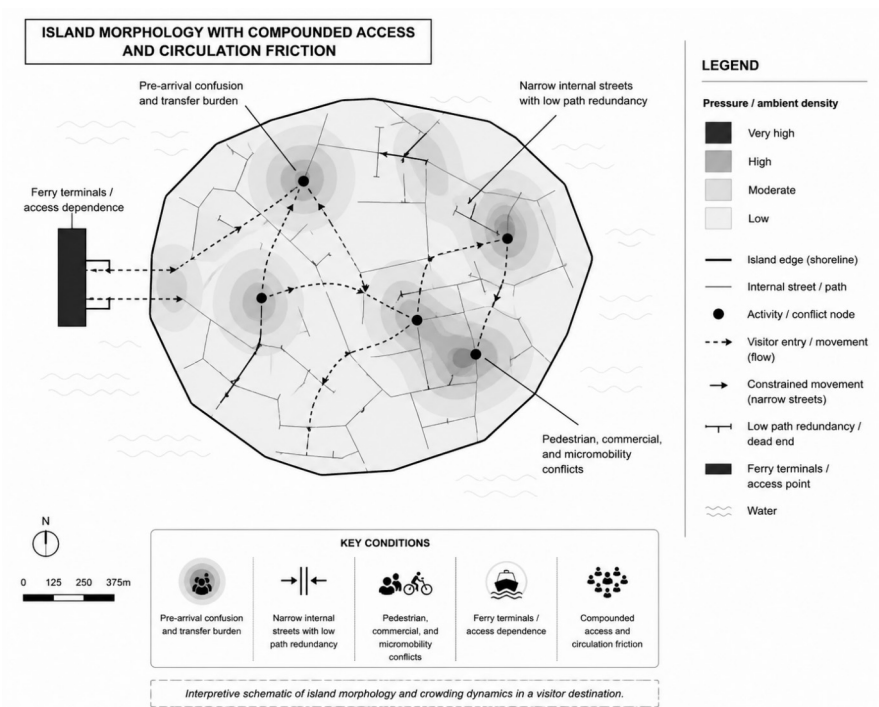


Figure 5. Interpretive schematic of access dependence and circulation frictions in Gulangyu

Source: Authors' own elaboration

Fig. 5 synthesises these themes as an island schematic in which ferry dependence and constrained internal circulation reinforce one another.

Gulangyu thus displays a layered island morphology. Maritime boundaries are explicit, access depends on ferry systems and terminals, and the island interior is characterised by narrow streets, dense commercial interfaces, and limited path redundancy. As a result, dissatisfaction emerges both before arrival and after entering the destination. Island overtourism is therefore compounded: infrastructural difficulty and on-site spatial friction reinforce one another rather than appearing as separate problems.

Many narratives describe arrival as frustrating in itself: visitors reported running between terminals, confusing ticket rules, and unclear prices, sometimes feeling exhausted before sightseeing began. Such complaints show that in island destinations, arrival is part of the tourism experience rather than a neutral preliminary step. When access systems are fragmented or opaque, they consume time, emotional energy, and goodwill in advance, placing visitors in a negative interpretive frame

before they encounter the destination proper. Once on the island, narrow streets, commercial circulation, and motorised devices intensify sensory overload and movement conflict. Because path redundancy is low, tourists have limited opportunities to bypass congestion or restore a comfortable walking rhythm. The result is not simply crowding, but compounded spatial competition among pedestrians, commercial flows, and mobility devices within a highly constrained environment.

Table 3. Summary of morphology-mechanism configurations and experiential failures

Morphology-mechanism configuration	Spatial constraints	Dominant experiential pathology	Concrete manifestations of experiential failure
Forbidden City (enclosed heritage site)	Rigid boundaries, controlled entry, and relatively fixed internal routes concentrate movement at compulsory thresholds.	Funnelled immobility	Queueing anxiety and rushed movement at entry points; visual-interpretive deprivation once inside the heritage core.
West Lake (open landscape setting)	Weak entry boundaries, dispersed scenic space, and deep coupling with the urban transport system extend exposure across the visit.	Persistent ambient density	Continuous erosion of restorative quality; noise, commercialisation, and difficult exit conditions jointly prolong fatigue.
Gulangyu (island destination)	Maritime boundaries, ferry dependence, narrow streets, and low path redundancy link access problems to on-site circulation conflicts.	Infrastructural compounding	Transfer frustration emerges before arrival; once on the island, overlapping pedestrian, commercial, and micromobility flows sustain spatial friction.

Source: Authors' own elaboration

5. Discussion: Theoretical Advancement and External Applicability

The findings show that overtourism should not be understood only as aggregate pressure, but also as experience production shaped by a mediating chain linking visibility, morphology, and situated crowding mechanisms. Enclosed, open, and insular destinations are not merely geographic categories; they are distinct combinations of boundaries, circulation logics, visual access, and infrastructural coupling that determine how density becomes noticeable, stressful, and narratively salient (Gospodini, 2001; Jamhawi et al., 2023; Jin et al., 2016; Yamu et al., 2021). Seen comparatively, the above results demonstrate that similar visitor pressure can be translated into different emotional consequences depending on whether tourists encounter chokepoints, prolonged ambient exposure, or layered access frictions.

The article advances overtourism research in two related ways. Theoretically, it gives greater explanatory depth to the relationship between perceived crowding and destination form by specifying how platform-mediated visibility amplifies exposure while morphology filters the concrete encounter with density. Methodologically, it shows how a transparent, case-balanced, stratified purposive corpus of complaint narratives can be analysed through an auditable coding bridge rather

than through impressionistic interpretation alone. This matters because overtourism studies often invoke space, atmosphere, and crowding, but do not always show how narrative evidence is systematically translated into meso-level explanations.

At the same time, spatial morphology should not be treated as the sole determinant of overtourism perception. Platform-specific complaint cultures, ticketing rules, service failures, holiday peaks, and visitors' prior expectations may all intensify or soften the narrative salience of crowd pressure. The analytical value of the present framework is therefore not monocausal reductionism, but explanatory ordering: it identifies morphology as the recurrent condition that shapes where and how these additional pressures are encountered.

The three configurations proposed here should not be read as a closed typology. Rather, they function as transferable diagnostic frames that can be adapted to other destination settings where particular spatial links repeatedly convert pressure into experiential failure. Their value lies in clarifying the dominant problem at stake: whether a destination is primarily suffering from threshold compression, prolonged environmental saturation, or compounded access-and-circulation friction. Framed this way, the article not only deepens the conceptual discussion of overtourism perception, but also clarifies why morphology-sensitive governance is analytically preferable to generic crowd-control language.

6. Managerial Implications

Management responses should therefore be morphology-sensitive rather than uniform. In enclosed heritage sites, the priority is to relieve entry bottlenecks, streamline timed access, reduce redundant checks, and improve sightline quality where physical separation is unavoidable. Because visitors in these settings are especially sensitive to loss of autonomy and visual deprivation, governance should aim not only to regulate numbers, but also to restore the possibility of meaningful viewing and paced movement (Jamhawi et al., 2023; Xie & Gu, 2018).

In open landscapes, governance should protect restorative experience by dispersing pressure from over-concentrated nodes, improving peripheral transport, integrating walking routes with public transport, and constraining forms of commercial or acoustic overload that erode atmosphere. The challenge here is less about blocking access than about preventing continuous ambient density from becoming the default condition of the destination (Arbelo et al., 2021; Kaplan, 1995; Ojala et al., 2019).

In island destinations, interventions must address both access systems and

internal circulation: clearer ticketing and terminal guidance should reduce pre-arrival uncertainty, while pedestrian priority, stricter control of motorised devices, and better management of commercial flows can reduce on-site friction. What matters is to treat arrival infrastructure and internal street space as one connected experiential system rather than as separate administrative domains (Chalkidou & Mavridis, 2026; Leka et al., 2025).

7. Conclusion

This article has examined overtourism through the lens of spatial morphology and shown that tourist dissatisfaction is mediated by how destinations organise access, circulation, visibility, and transport. Comparing the Forbidden City, West Lake, and Gulangyu demonstrates that dissatisfaction is not a uniform response to crowd size, but a differentiated outcome of funnelled immobility, persistent ambient density, and infrastructural compounding. The study therefore reframes overtourism perception as a morphology-conditioned experience rather than as a simple by-product of numerical crowding.

Two contributions follow from this argument. First, the article offers a clearer theoretical integration of platform-mediated visibility, perceived crowding, and destination form by specifying how they operate as a linked explanatory chain. Second, it strengthens methodological transparency by clarifying that the 120 narratives were assembled through a stratified purposive protocol and that the case figures are interpretive schematics derived from the coding process rather than independent geospatial measurements. In this sense, the article contributes both a conceptual vocabulary and a more auditable qualitative procedure for studying overtourism experience.

The analysis nonetheless remains interpretive and based on complaint narratives, which are particularly effective for capturing intense negative experiences but cannot substitute for formal behavioural measurement. Future research could combine qualitative perception data with movement tracing, visual analysis, spatial metrics, or observational evidence in order to test how robust these morphology-mechanism configurations remain across other destination types and cultural contexts. Even so, the present findings already indicate that destination governance should move beyond generic volume control toward interventions aimed at the specific interfaces where crowd pressure becomes experientially harmful.

A further limitation is that the retained corpus deliberately privileges publicly articulated dissatisfaction. This design is consistent with the purpose of the study,

which is to examine how overtourism-related frustration is narrated and spatially produced, but it also means that quieter, neutral, ambivalent, or positive experiences are likely to be under-represented. The findings should therefore be read as a diagnosis of recurrent experiential pathologies under conditions of perceived overtourism, not as a claim that all visitors experience these destinations negatively or with the same intensity. Spatial morphology may also operate in the opposite direction: route redundancy, visual openness, shaded resting areas, accessible exits, and well-managed transport interfaces may mitigate the negative effects of crowding and support more positive visitor experiences. Future research could therefore compare complaint narratives with positive or mixed-experience narratives in order to examine when destination morphology amplifies dissatisfaction and when it helps absorb, distribute, or soften crowd pressure.

CRediT Authorship Contribution Statement

MZL: conceptualisation, investigation, methodology, supervision, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing. **HJZ:** data curation, formal analysis, writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that no conflicts of interest exist.

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Przestrzenne uwarunkowania postrzegania nadmiernej turystyki: jakościowe badanie patologii morfologicznych w wybranych destynacjach turystycznych Chin

Streszczenie. Celem badania jest analiza sposobu, w jaki morfologia destynacji wpływa na postrzeganie zjawiska nadmiernej turystyki w czołowych obszarach recepcji turystycznej Chin i rodzi niezadowolenie turystów. Autor przeprowadza jakościową analizę trzech przypadków i stosuje kodowanie oparte na metodologii Denisa Gioii do analizy 120 opinii krytycznych opublikowanych w internecie na temat Zakazanego Miasta, Jeziora Zachodniego i wyspy Gulangu. W badaniu zidentyfikowano trzy mechanizmy związane z morfologią: spowolnienie ruchu spowodowane zwężeniem w zamkniętych obiektach turystycznych, utrzymujące się zagęszczenie w obiektach otwartych oraz zagęszczenie infrastruktury w destynacjach wyspiarskich. Mechanizmy te pokazują, że niezadowolenie turystów nie wynika jedynie z dużej liczby odwiedzających, ale również ze sposobu, w jaki dostęp, ruch, widoczność i interfejsy transportowe przyczyniają się do wrażenia zatłoczenia. Badanie rozwija wiedzę uwzględniającą uwarunkowania morfologiczne na temat postrzegania nadmiernej turystyki i wskazuje, że zarządzanie destynacją nie powinno ograniczać się do kontrolowania liczby odwiedzających, ale musi też obejmować ukierunkowane działania w miejscach, gdzie tłok wpływa negatywnie na doświadczenia turystów.

Słowa kluczowe: nadmierna turystyka, morfologia przestrzenna, postrzegany poziom zatłoczenia, niezadowolenie turystów, zarządzanie destynacją



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