Word-of-Mouth and Visit Intention in Cultural Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Online reviews and word-of-mouth influence tourists' decisions when they search information online before visiting a destination. This study investigates the impacts of different types of online reviews on visit intention. We conduct a case study on a cultural park in southern China and examine the impacts of word-of-mouth using an experimental design. The results show that physical, emotional and social cues in the reviews influence visit intention through three mechanisms respectively. Implications for marketing and management are discussed.

Keywords: Word-of-mouth, online reviews, visit intention, cultural tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

Given the development of Internet and digitalization, especially those platforms for sharing reviews, it has been very common that tourists search information online before visiting a destination. As a special area of consumption, tourism is obviously exposed to the effect of word-of-mouth as well [1]. Online reviews from individuals who have actually visited the place provide valuable reference for potential visitors in the process of decision making. By reading online reviews, potential visitors usually check physical environment and facilities, learn from reviewers' feedback and experience, and imagine possible scenarios when they visit the place with others' company [2-4]. Hence, it is important to explore what posted in the reviews will influence potential visitors' intention and find out the mechanisms underlying.

This paper aims to investigate visit intention of cultural tourism with two research questions: 1) what information in word-of-mouth influences tourists' visit intention? 2) As the underlying mechanisms between word-of-mouth and visit intention, what responses will people have when they read different types of reviews and thus form their visit intention? Richard (2003) conceptualized cultural tourism with three key elements: cultural attractions as resources, cultural purposes that tourists visit the place for, and tourist typologies based on cultural motivation [5]. The

concept of cultural tourism emphasizes that tourists seek experiences for their various cultural needs, including appreciation on cultural attractions, acquiring experiences which are different from everyday life, and enjoying the time with the company of family or friends via different activities in the cultural space. Basing on the conceptualization on cultural tourism, we divide online word-of-mouth into three types of reviews that could induce tourists' responses and visit intention: physical, emotional and social cues. When people read online reviews, these three types of cues will influence their visit intention through different responses, which are telepresence, empathy and social belonging, respectively.

A case study was conducted at a cultural park called Tangs' Village in southern China. Based on the research model, our research design combined experiments and interviews. We selected online reviews corresponding to the three types of cues respectively. Taking the selected reviews as a manipulation, the purpose was to trigger readers' responses. Interviews were conducted to collect participants' responses. And then we used content analysis to obtain results. This study extends research of word-of-mouth and its effect on visit intention in cultural tourism. For practice, especially for newly developed cultural parks like Tangs' Village, our findings provide implications in marketing and management.

2. THEORETICAL MODEL

2.1 Physical cues and visit intention

Online reviews play an important reference role when tourists plan their visit. As advice from previous visitors, word-of-mouth influences potential visitors' perception, attitudes, emotion and behavior. It has been very common that people read reviews before deciding whether to visit a place and write reviews after visiting the place. Online reviews could be about different aspects. Reviewers usually introduce basic facts about the place, describe the environment and the facilities, and post pictures or videos to show what they see. For readers who have never been to the place, this information helps them get a vivid impression. Especially, rich media including pictures and videos provides a visual way to understand the place. Therefore, these reviews play a role as physical cues, which enhance readers' telepresence. Telepresence means an immersive experience on the scene, feeling a presence in an environment which although is not the immediate physical environment to a person [6]. Digital data and technologies make it easier to generate telepresence in distance [7]. Rich media showing a place creates physical cues to give readers concrete and visual engagement with the environment [3], make readers feel they are in the place while actually they are not. Such an experience facilitates potential visitors' decision making, whereas without it they may concern a risk of a wrong decision. Therefore:

Proposition 1: Physical cues in online reviews build readers' telepresence and thus influence their visit intention.

2.2 Emotional cues and visit intention

Experience of emotion influences tourists' evaluation and behavior [8]. Cultural tourism makes people satisfied because of its hedonic value [9]. It is very often that online reviews mention the reviewers' sentimental feeling and evaluation about what they have bought or used [10]. This is especially salient in cultural tourism. As tourists seek for cultural experience from the place they visit, emotional feeling and experience is usually what they care and what they express when they write comments. Sentiments in a review represent the writer's emotional evaluation and recommendation to readers. People write a positive review and recommend to others because they have liked and been satisfied about the tourism experience [11]. Reading this review, people may feel the writer's emotion, then be aroused their own emotion, which in turn influence their visit intention. Empathy, which represents a person's perceiving and understanding others' feeling, infects readers' emotion when they read the reviews. Emotion theories have demonstrated that emotions can influence

people's perception, attitude and behavior. When people are happy and satisfied, they are more likely to give positive evaluation and make purchase decision. Triggered by the sentimental reviews on a tourism destination, empathy can positively influence people's response and increase visit intention [12].

Proposition 2: Emotional cues in online reviews arouse readers' empathy and thus influence their visit intention.

2.3 Social cues and visit intention

As a basic human need, social belonging is also critical in tourism. Research on place attachment, social bonding and social servicescape shows that relationships between persons and between a person and a place have effects on tourists' experience, visit intention and word-of-mouth [1] [13]. Tourism has become an activity with the need for sociality, indicating that social belonging and connectedness has been a key motivation behind tourism behavior [4]. Although many people have vacation alone, many tourism activities involve family's or friends' company. It is one of key purposes that people travel with important ones, for maintaining a relationship or enhancing a bonding. Even for many of those solo tourists, they look forward to meeting new people and making friends in the journey, while relationship or social experience can make a trip wonderful and memorable. Social interactions and feeling of intimacy lead to higher satisfaction [2]. It has been seen a lot that online reviewers post what they do with important ones and express an appreciation of belonging. Reading this information as social cues, readers may be reminded of some ones important to them and imagine what it will be like if they are doing the same activity in the place. Social belonging is aroused by seeing the reviewers' experience and the readers may get an intention to visit the place with some ones.

Proposition 3: Social cues in online reviews stimulate social belonging and thus influence visit intention.

3. METHODS

Based on the research model, this study combines experimental and interview methods. The study was conducted at Tangs' Village, an ancient village had inhabited by people who shared the same family name as Tang but recently was redeveloped into a cultural park. It provided cultural, leisure and social functions. There were three main types of facilities, including a museum, coffee shops and hostels. We collected online reviews from main tourism or review websites and sorted them into three files as physical, emotional and social cues. A total of nine participants were recruited, including male and female, single, married and married

with children, with ages ranged from 18 to 40. The subjects represented the main targets of Tang's Village.

Manipulating the experiments with a between-group design, we randomly divided the participants into three groups and assigned them one type of online reviews on an iPad. After each participant received the physical, emotional or social cues, an interview was conducted to collect their responses. Questions included "What do you see from the reviews," "Describe what the reviewers experienced," "Do you feel the same emotions," and "Would you go to this place with someone?"

All interviews were transcribed for content analysis using qualitative methods. The results constructed final propositions.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Physical clues and visiting intention

As physical clues, rich media including photos shared by tourists online were used. All respondents could obtain vivid information about the place from the materials. They described what they saw: "these houses have the characteristics of the 1990s style", which showed that the pictures and words in the materials could make respondents recall similar scenes in their memory, helping them understand what the saw about Tangs' Village. Two respondents expressed that they could imagine they were in the place when they read the reviews: "I can already feel the breeze and the fragrance of flowers and plants." Hence, telepresence was induced. Finally, they both expressed their willingness to visit the place, which demonstrated that the pictures and words in the materials could bring a sense of telepresence and increase the intention to visit.

However, one respondent said that he would not visit the place: "It's an ordinary place, with no difference from others. There are no attractive pictures or text descriptions in the materials." A follow-up discussion indicated that, to some extent, respondents' visit intention was also affected by their own preference and experience. For example, the interviewee was not interested in the content about the museum, and unpleasant experiences in similar historical cultural parks in the past also hindered the stimulating effect of telepresence on the visit intention.

In summary, physical clues in online reviews construct readers' telepresence, and thus affect their visit intention. And tourists' personal preferences and past experiences, especially negative experiences, might influence the mechanism of telepresence.

4.2 Emotional cues and visiting intention

In the second manipulation of the experiment, we selected sentimental reviews including words and photos expressing positive emotions. All three respondents agreed that they could feel the emotions of reviewers through photos and words: "the interactive experience at the museum seems very interesting," "I feel they are very happy and relaxed in the hostel".

The results demonstrated that readers could generate empathy from the emotional cues embedded in the online reviews. Moreover, one interviewee said that the reviewers' emotions were contagious and she was very willing to visit the place for the same emotional experience: "if it was me at this place, I should feel very happy like them." Another interviewee said: "if it was me, I would also like to lie down in the hostel and touch the small animals." The results confirmed that the readers could feel the reviewers' emotions from photos and comments, and affected by the positive emotion, the readers' would increase the willingness to visit the place.

Furthermore, there were some other interesting findings. We found that female respondents were more interested in the coffee shops and the textile museum. And the respondents' preferences also affected the empathic effect of the emotional cues, and there were gender differences on preferences. In addition, work and life pressures hindered empathy. For example, a respondent said: "the mood of tourists did not infect me because I didn't have enough money and time to enjoy life."

Therefore, emotional cues in online reviews arouse readers' empathy and increase their visit intention. Meanwhile, gender, personal preferences and work and life pressure are factors affecting this mechanism.

4.3 Social cues and visiting intention

For social cues, we selected photos and comments focusing on social gatherings and interactions. All respondents thought that it was very warm and joyful for the tourists with their family or friends. And all respondents agreed that they could also enjoy the same social scenes by going to this place with their family or friends. And they started imagine different social scenes when they reading the reviews. For example, they mentioned that they could go to the place with the elderly, children or friends: "I will go to the textile museum with my grandparents, because the it has a strong sense of time, and my grandparents can recall the past." The results showed that the social cues embedded in the photos and words of the reviews triggered the respondents' sense of social belonging, i.e. a sense of relatedness connected to a positive interpersonal relationship. The sense of social belonging stimulated

the intention to travel there with relatives and friends for maintaining and extending the relationships.

In sum, social cues in online reviews stimulate the sense of social belonging and thus affect visit intention. In different social scenes, tourists might or might not respond to social cues, depending on whether the scenes fit the relationship they would like to maintain or extend at the moment.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Focusing on the impact of word-of-mouth on visit intention in cultural tourism, this study extended the literature by identifying three different cues in online reviews and exploring three corresponding mechanisms that induced by the cues and finally stimulate potential tourists' visit intentions. With rich media such as photos and videos, physical cues help readers vividly understand the physical layouts and facilities in a destination, giving them a sense of telepresence. Displaying in photos and texts, emotional cues arouse readers' empathy of the same feelings, which in turn trigger the readers' intention to visit the place for similar sentimental experience. And social cues, which represent different social scenes, generate readers' sense of belongings and increase their visit intention for maintaining or extending a relationship.

Some interesting findings also were discussed. Tourists' gender, personal interests, preferences, past experiences and relationships might influence the effect of online reviews on visit intention. Future research is suggested to investigate these possible moderating factors.

The limitation of this study was mainly on the sample size. There were only nine participants in the experiment. Although qualitative research allows small sample sizes, more participants in the first part experiment could enhance the reliability of the findings.

This study provides implications for marketers and managers. First, word-of-mouth has different types and plays as different cues to target customers' responses. Second, potential tourists make visit decisions because of different physical, psychological and social mechanisms. Finally, personal characteristics also have impacts. Practices should differentiate these factors and mechanisms, encourage different word-of-mouth and utilize the effect for different segments or scenarios.

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