Meme Tourism: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract. With advances in technology affordances, contents generated by individual tourists in the tourism context has become an influential source of tourism information besides contents channeled by traditional mass media such as newspapers and broadcasts. Specifically, *Meme Tourism* (i.e., meme phenomenon in tourism) becomes one of the biggest trends in imitating and transforming/evolving tourism contents online, which is a byproduct of participatory culture that use text and visual images as means of user-generated communications in online communities through the exchange, distribution, and transactions. Understanding the emerging phenomena of meme in tourism would provide insights on tourists' desires and behaviors in modern traveling. This study conceptualizes three major perspectives in tourism; 1) media-induced tourism, 2) user-generated content, and 3) social media activities, reflecting meme phenomena in tourism. Given the foundation provided, this study calls for a new stream of study in tourism that examines desire, motivation, and behavior of tourists in technology-enabled modern travel culture.

Keywords: Meme · Internet meme · Meme tourism · Meme phenomenon · Media-induced tourism · User-generated content · Conceptual framework

1 Introduction

The rise of digital media - most notably social media sites – has provided commonly called "user democracy culture" [1]. Digital media has developed from a broadcast medium to participatory platforms including social media such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok, encouraging "media" to collaborate and share information on its own [2]. On Web 2.0 platforms, the social system consists of individuals and objects related through mutual viewing, sharing, and commenting [3]. In an era marked by 'networked individualism' [4], internet meme has become a new digital culture, which connects tourism to a new territory. This new digital culture in tourism pave a way for opening new fields of research. The term '*MEME*' is a short for mimeme, which means 'imitated thing.', in the book of *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins [5]. An Internet

meme spreads via through social media platforms (YouTube, Instagram) from person to person. For example, a staircase, the concrete flight of steps in the Bronx, New York, is emerged as the latest tourist hotspot in the film Joker [6]. The memorable scene is spread out to tourists the #jokerstairs by way of hashtag tagged on Instagram and recreate new image. Finally, such the popularity of the location was briefly marked as a religious site on Google Maps. This popularity of unexpected attraction causes a new paradigm in tourism, which is described as *'meme tourism'*. In other word, digital media technologies allow people to create and distribute own travel contents online— and those meme contents have a traction to potential tourists for a hot place to visit. The most popular Pisa and Eiffel Tower are good examples of the meme picture. Despite the fact that these meme phenomena (i.e. to imitate photos posted on SNS and create them in one's own way) are already prevalent in the tourism industry, thus far, the meme (including internet meme) has not been included in studies in context of tourism. Understanding of meme diffusion in the context of tourism can be important in view travelers such that triggered by tourist-generated contents (i.e. photos, videos and so on) on social media, and have a meaningful insight that non famous place become travel hotspot. This research aims to explore *'meme tourism'* theoretically and proposes a conceptual framework in explaining the phenomenon for tourism discipline.

2   Meme Tourism

A concept of meme is introduced as an example of 'gene' in the human body that is inherited to generation to generation, which can replicate itself through imitation based on the Darwinian [7]. The rise of internet and digital media generate memes and digital cultures. Specifically, Shifman [8] has conducted extensive research on digital memes from the perspective of journalism and communication. She defined the internet meme as artifacts are circulated, imitated, and transformed via the Internet by multiple users" [9]. That is, internet memes are a byproduct of participatory culture that use text and visual images as means of user-generated communication in online communities through the exchange, distribution, and reception [10]. The use of memetic contents in a desirable manner can impact the impressions of the recipients [11] and, thus, influence the perception of the subject (yourself, other individuals, groups, places, phenomena) by individuals or groups of recipients.

The role of this process in the self-presentation of tourist activity in the social media is emphasized by Lo and McKercher [12]. They view that shared photos are expressions of a tourist's satisfaction with a trip and the people sharing them would like to be perceived as such by the recipients [13]. Internet meme generated by tourists is a potential manifestation of the tourist experience embedded in their context, activities and experiences. That is, in an era of 'networked individualism', a tourist can exploit memetic contents to simultaneously express both their uniqueness of themselves and their connectivity to the community [9]. The characteristics of the images as the content of a memetic nature can significantly influence the perception of individual subjects. At the same time, these contents may significantly shape and stimulate other users' willingness to undertake different online activities of an affective, cognitive, and behavioral nature [13]. The intensity of such activities or behaviors of tourists including

consuming, distributing, and recreating contents will, then, become a determinant of the intention to visit a specific destination or attitude toward a certain place of other potential tourists. Eventually, 'meme tourism' is defined as a series of processes in which tourists visit tourist sites to share their experiences of copying other tourists or expressing tourist attractions in their own way, can explain the current tourism phenomenon in terms of memes. Hence, this paper explores a conceptual framework, which draw an attention meme tourism on user-generated content, media-induced tourism, and social media use motivation.

3   Meme Tourism: Three Major Perspectives

Internet meme generated by tourists is a potential manifestation of the tourist experience embedded in their context, activities and experiences. Although meme tourism is a new concept, meme tourism has been involved in multiple components and real cases related to the context of tourism [6]. Drawing on the characteristics of internet meme from the prior tourism research, we categorize them into three major perspectives that are essential for understanding meme tourism [14, 15]. They include media-induced tourism [16], user-generated contents [17], and social media activities [18] (Fig. 1).
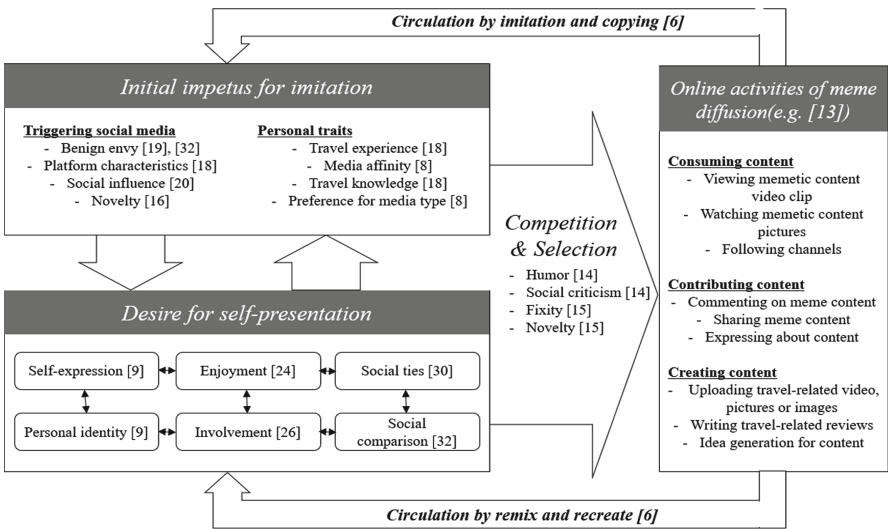

Fig. 1.   Conceptual model of meme tourism

3.1   Media-Induced Tourism

Media related tourism has been extensively studied in the past 20 years, defined as travel to places associated with books, celebrities, television and film [16, 19]. Numerous studies have tried to explain how media shapes images about destinations and influences tourism [17]. As social media in Web 2.0 allowed people to create and

share their travel experiences online in real time [20], various types of content on social media are mostly motivated by altruistic and hedonic desire, thereby a significant relationship between potential tourists' desires and motivational factors [17] were examined. For example, a friend's travel-related contents seen in social media tends to elevate envious thoughts that lead to more travel intention [21]. Therefore, it seems becoming spontaneous as less attractive places could become travelers' hotspots. Considering that memetic contents spread rapidly through social media, theses contents created and shared through various types of media can also boost tourists' desires. However, there seems a clear difference between general content and memetic content. Even if the social media content becomes viral, the memetic content is transmitted through imitation as a form of the recreated version [22].

3.2   User-Generated Content (UGC)

Customers express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a product or service through UGC because social media offers people opportunities to socialize and form communities of interest [23]. Customers use UGC for various reasons, such as evaluating service quality and price [24] and identifying the best attractions, food, and destinations [25]. Others search for social acceptance [26], enjoyment [27], a communal feeling [28], and involvement [29]. In the tourism and hospitality industries, special attention has also been given to user-generated content (UGC) online due to its influence on destination and business image formation [30], tourist behavior [31]. Tourists have a significant influence on other potential tourists by sharing travel experiences through UGC (i.e. text, pictures and videos). Those contents inspire social networks individually to copy or imitate the contents. Although internet memes are also a form of UGC, there is a lack of research on theoretical points of view on them.

3.3   Social Media Activities

The rise of Web 2.0 technologies has led to a wealth of social media websites, popular examples of which are YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. These platforms provide many opportunities for users to share and create content about anything, including their travel and journey [23]. To study travel-related activities as behavioral construct provides a unifying framework to think about tourist activities pertaining to travel-related content on social media platforms. This concept is not new and also encompasses early typologies of consumer behavior in online brand-related activities. Muntinga et al. [18] categorized into three dimensions that correspond to path of gradual involvement with brand-related content on social media, namely consuming, contributing, and creating as level of activeness. In the context of media use, it is also important to examine travel-related activities' meme. Particularly, tourists' meme for engaging with content on travel-related content on social media (cf. [32]) would be important to overview the full spectrum of travel-related social media activities. In this process, we can explore how a memetic content spread and why tourists consume, distribute, and recreate a memetic content.

4 Directions for Future Research

Apparently, meme phenomenon in tourism is already underway and tourism-related meme has grown to become a significant part of the tourist market. However, it appears that a lack of attention to meme tourism is paid by the academia. With this paper, we introduced a new concept of meme tourism and identified three perspectives of meme tourism for the foundation of future research in understanding the current phenomenon in the context of tourism. While not meant to be concrete or comprehensive, this research aims to serve as a starting point for further development of the theoretical aspect of meme phenomenon. In the future, it is recommended to identify the attributes of meme tourism through a mixed method approach including qualitative and quantitative study.

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