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Pop culture, destination images, and visit intentions: Theory and research on travel motivations of Chinese and Russian tourists

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ABSTRACT

A worldwide phenomenon is occurring whereby tourists visit specific locations due to the content of pop culture. This study applies the concept of pop culture involvement to tourism discourse. The study classifies pop culture involvement on an enduring level and a situational level regarding its influence on the formation of destination image and visit intention. Finally, the study analyzes the difference within structural models between China and Russia. The results indicate that situational involvement and enduring involvement have different effects on the structural model. Results also show different path results depending on nationalities.

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1. Introduction

A worldwide phenomenon is occurring whereby tourists visit an attraction or destination because popular cultural portrays the destination in epic stories. Tourism researchers and industry executives accept the importance of popular culture in such genres as epic storytellings. Thus, the consumption of pop culture such as television programs, movies, and music associates to the tourism industry (Kim, Long, & Robinson, 2009).

The involvement of specific pop culture elements is now within the tourism industry more than ever, and examples are identifiable easily. For example, due to the *Harry Potter* series, the train platform at King's Cross Station is now a popular tourist spot in England. Similarly, for those interested in the film industry consider Hollywood as an important place to visit, and Psy influence tourists from all around the world to visit Gangnam region in Seoul. This study seeks to investigate this phenomenon in more depth through empirical research to determine the relationship between popular cultural forms of the media and the travel destination decision-making process.

Although scholars recognize the impact of mass media on creating images and values for specific locations (Kim & Richardson, 2003; Lee, Scott, & Kim, 2008), many studies focus on the influence of films or association with a specific celebrity. Kim and Kang (2007) examine the influence of famous soap operas, and Lee et al. (2008) suggest the impact of specific celebrities on the image of destinations. However, in

most cases, the interaction of multiple cultural media is what influences the formation of destination image and evaluation. Thus, this study investigates the pop culture as a whole context. Further, most studies examine involvement through just one dimension; however, both internally and externally processes are likely to affect this phenomenon. Although high involvement occurs mostly due to individual interest, one's surroundings also partly form involvement. Especially while living in the era of advanced information technology, international yet focused knowledge is accessible with ease, and word of mouth information is attainable easily. With this environment in mind, this study divides pop culture involvement into situational involvement and enduring involvement to investigate the different impacts on travel destinations. Further, although precedent studies explored significant differences in cultural influences on the image formation and visit intention for destinations (Chalip, Green, & Hill, 2003), not many has figured the differences between nationalities under the context of mass media's impact on destination image and actual tourism demand. In recognition of these research gaps, this study introduces the concept of pop culture involvement to the field of tourism discourse and attempts to examine the way one's pop culture involvement, including both situational and enduring involvement, influences other psychological constructs that may ultimately lead to visiting destinations associated with mass media content. Specifically, this study aims to advance the understanding of the interrelationship between pop culture involvement, destination image (cognitive and affective), overall image, and visit intention. Further, this study will compare the construct of two different countries within the same context based on travel motivations. By bridging theoretical understanding, the results from this study should contribute to existing tourism literature and provide managerial implications.

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2. Conceptual background

2.1. Pop culture involvement

This study proposes that one's involvement with certain types of pop culture influences his or her perceptions of the destination that the pop culture portrays. Many studies apply involvement in diverse contexts based on the socio-psychological point of view that accompanies behaviors (Havitz & Mannell, 2005). Involvement is also an important variable within the consumer behavior discourse. Rothschild (1984) defines involvement as a motive or a state of interest provided in some special situation. Further, Zaichkowsky (1985) states involvement as the importance of a particular object, or interest in that object, under a particular circumstance. In addition, Havitz and Dimanche (1997) define this concept as an arousal or interest toward certain recreational activities or associated products. Thus, involvement refers to an individual's interest or arousal toward a particular object in some special situation. Thus, this study, according to its purpose, defines pop culture involvement as an individual's interest or arousal toward a certain pop culture.

Within the tourism industry, emphasis on pop culture involvement is increasing more than ever due to the development of modern media (Gross & Brown, 2006; Kim, Ko, & Kim, 2015). Consumers can now access pop culture more easily and they can also easily find cases showing the effect of pop culture on tourism. The film *Notting Hill*, using the Notting Hill area of London as its actual title; this film induces visitors from all around the world. This occurrence is not limited to films; Abbey Road, which is the cover image of the last Beatles album, sets as a kind of pilgrimage course for Beatles fans. Thus, Abby Road is now a cultural heritage site of England (Gyeonggi Research Institute, 2014). The phenomenon of choosing trip locations based on portrayals in popular culture occurs beyond England and certain pop culture mediums.

Such portrayals and features of mass media can act as powerful forces that stimulate tourism demands (Beeton, 2001; Connell, 2005; Ko, Choo, Lee, Song, & Whang, 2013; Ko, Lee, & Whang, 2013; Lee et al., 2008; Ortega & Rodriguez, 2007). Representations of tourist destinations constructed by popular cultural forms of media such as films, television, and literature play a significant role in influencing people's vacation decision-making process (Iwashita, 2008). The tourism industry is also increasing the use of images of places introduced in popular culture to promote tourist destinations and to distinguish themselves from each other. This demonstrates that the involvement of pop culture has a high correlation with visit intention for destinations. While these existing studies contribute to understanding the influence of pop culture on tourism, only few studies empirically investigate the actual linkage between pop culture and tourism perceptions and behaviors.

2.1.1. Situational pop culture involvement/enduring pop culture involvement

Involvement can include two categories of situational involvement (SI) and enduring involvement (EI) (Richins & Bloch, 1986; Richins, Bloch, & McQuarrie, 1992). Here, SI means a temporary interest in a particular behavior or object under a particular situation (Richins & Bloch, 1991) and EI refers to the enduring interest of an individual. In other words, each individual's involvement toward the same object may vary in degree based on not only personal traits but also on the surrounding conditions. Thus, SI refers to the involvement influenced by circumstantial situations, and EI refers to the involvement related to the individual's interest.

Because SI has a close relation to particular situations, the time period matters and influence on individuals are temporary. Thus, when social pressure exerts, the tendency enhances (Richins et al., 1992). In other words, when a particular aspect of pop culture wins a lot of social popularity and appears in public for a long-term, the

individual feels pressure to conform (Laverie & Arnett, 2000). Thus, in modern society where certain information or trends transfer faster than ever with the development of electronic media, SI is more likely to occur. Certain cultural or social phenomenon now builds upon the influence of media and through word of mouth (Ko & Lee, 2011). In particular, social network service (SNS) incorporates many interrelated networks, expanding social participation in a particular situation or phenomenon and evoking a bond of sympathy throughout (Kang, Song, & Choi, 2013). The social and environmental transition of social media networks also leads to the spread of foreign pop cultures, creating more power for ripple effects. Thus, this study defines SI as involvement caused by a particular situational phenomenon.

Conversely, involvement that stands on individual's longer lasting desire or motives refers to EI. Havitz and Dimanche (1997) define EI as an "unobservable state of motivation, arousal or interest toward a recreational activity or associated product, evoked by a particular stimulus or situation, and which has driven properties." Individuals with EI tend to care more because individual involvement relates to enhancing self-image through certain objects. Thus, unlike SI, EI is an enduring type of involvement. Because EI refers to the enduring interest in a particular behavior or object, individuals would consistently relate themselves to a particular object (Laverie & Arnett, 2000). Fandoms, or groups who internally and enduringly engage with a certain celebrity or character, may relate to EI. To sum up, this study states EI as an enduring involvement based on the individual's traits. However, previous studies indicate that communication channels such as SNS or the situational context can influence an individual's enthusiasm (Kang et al., 2013). Further, some studies suggest that pop cultural forms, such as movies, influence on individual's behavior (Choi, Ko, & Megehee, 2014). Thus, the worldwide phenomenon of pop culture's influence on tourism can be the result of social and environmental transitions. Therefore, this study formulates and tests the following hypothesis.

H1. The level of situational pop culture involvement influences the level of enduring pop culture involvement.

2.2. Destination image formation

Destination image is a composite of various products, attractions, and attributes added into the total impression (Aiello et al., 2015; MacKay & Fesenmaier, 1997). Individual forms an impression about the destination as a consequence of a selection process based on the numerous pieces of information (Reynolds, 1965). Destination images can play a critical role in actual travel decision-making processes (Bigne, Sanchez, & Sanchez, 2001; Lee, Lee & Lee, 2005) and identify destination images into cognition and affect, which are two conceptually different but highly correlated components (Lee et al., 2008).

The cognitive component leading to some internally accepted attributes builds more or less upon factual information. On the other hand, the affective component relates to a diffusive feeling, which can become important when making the actual decision to travel (Russell, 1980). Russell (1980) notes that an affective state occurs only as the final result of the cognitive process. Pop cultural contents can act as the informative substances delivering crucial information forming the destination image (Ko & Lee, 2011). Due to the methods of modern media, social diffusion forms the trend of certain pop culture content (Kim & Kang, 2007; Ko, Chun, Song & Kim, 2013; Park, Song, & Ko, 2011). Thus, the contemporary tourist's experience is inseparable from cultural diffusion. Precedent studies indicate that pop culture content portraying a social and environmental transition can change the destination image drastically within a short period of time (Gartner, 1994). Cases of increasing tourists in particular places without any promotional activities, yet appeared in a popular soap opera suggest that pop culture enhances the positive destination image of individuals

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