



Reality TV, audience travel intentions, and destination image



Hui Fu, Ben Haobin Ye^{*}, Junzhi Xiang

Sun Yat-sen Business School, Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, China

HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine the underlying mechanism of reality show-induced tourism.
- 355 respondents who watched “Where are we going, Dad?” were surveyed.
- Audience involvement positively influences tourists’ behavioral intentions.
- Cognitive and affective image are found to be mediators.

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ABSTRACT

Film/TV induced-tourism research has proliferated in recent decades. Nevertheless, there is a lack of cross-disciplinary academic investigation into audiences’ psychological processing of film tourism. In this study, the relationships and intervening mechanisms between audience involvement and tourist behavioral intentions were examined. Hypotheses were tested on a sample of 355 respondents, with the use of structural equation modeling and bootstrapping analysis. A popular reality show “Where are we going, Dad?” was the focus of our study. The empirical results indicate that audience involvement influences tourists’ behavioral intentions through the mediating role of cognitive and affective images. The findings contribute to an improved understanding of how audience involvement affects tourist behavioral intentions, and the extent to which destination image mediates the relationship. Practical implications of using reality TV shows for marketing are drawn from the findings of our study.

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1. Introduction

Reality shows are among the most popular types of television (TV) program worldwide (Patino, Kaltcheva, & Smith, 2011; Rose & Wood, 2005). They also offer tremendous business opportunities. For example, it has been reported that reality programs influence young people’s consumption behavior and generate more than \$20 billion of related spending per year (Lindsay, 2004). Previous studies have shown that the audience’s attachment to the location of a reality show can significantly affect their perception of the destination (Tessitore, Pandelaere, & Van Kerckhove, 2014). Indeed, tourism destination marketers are increasingly cooperating with film producers to promote their destinations through placement in films (Rosen, 1997; Seaton & Hay, 1998).

A popular Chinese reality show “Where are we going, Dad?” (爸爸去哪儿)

去哪儿) was the focus of the study reported here. The show has unprecedentedly high audience ratings in China, where reality shows have been gaining public appeal. In 2013, “Where are we going, Dad?” became the most successful reality show in the country. According to CSM Media Research, it is China’s highest-rated TV show (CSM Media Research Report, 2014). The settings featured in the show, which hitherto were not considered well-known tourist destinations, have drawn increasing attention from the audience. According to the BaiDu index (BaiDu is the most popular and powerful search engine in mainland China), after the reality show broadcasts, the number of searches for the featured destinations increases dramatically by 272% (Hunan TV, 2014).

According to previous research, it is very likely that viewers’ perceived images of these destinations may be influenced by their watching experience, leading to future behavioral changes. A meta-analysis conducted by Zhang, Fu, Cai, and Lu (2014) confirmed that destination image exerts a significant effect on loyalty. In the context of advertising, Greenwald and Leavitt (1984) argue that the higher the level of audience involvement in advertisement, the higher the attentional capacity required, leading to increasingly

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mnsfuh@mail.sysu.edu.cn (H. Fu), yehb3@mail.sysu.edu.cn (B.H. Ye), xiangjunzhi@foxmail.com (J. Xiang).

endurable cognitive and attitudinal effects. Similarly, the audience of a reality show may devote more cognitive and emotional effort to the program through two avenues: identification and transportation (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). In particular, the audience may either identify with the characters and become empathetic, or totally immerse themselves into the story and temporarily ignore their surrounding reality. These cognitive and emotional efforts are very likely to contribute to the enhanced perceptions and knowledge of, and feelings towards, the destinations where the show is set (i.e., destination image). Hence, it is interesting to study whether audience involvement in “*Where are we going, Dad?*” influences the perception of the destination image and future behavioral intentions.

Academic research on the relationship between film/TV and tourism has continued to grow, and with it a new form of tourism has been identified, namely film-induced tourism (Beeton, 2005; Connell, 2005; Macionis & Sparks, 2009; Mordue, 2008; Riley, Baker, & Van Doren, 1998). However, it is still unclear through what psychological mechanism reality shows exert their effects on audiences' destination perceptions and future behavioral intentions. Although similar terms have been applied to illuminate this issue (e.g., vicarious involvement, empathetic involvement, and celebrity involvement) (Kim & Richardson, 2003; Lee, Scott, & Kim, 2008; Schofield, 1996), the focus in these studies is on how traditional television genres affect tourist experiences. Reality shows, however, have distinctive characteristics and differentiate themselves from traditional TV programs. Moreover, the ways in which reality shows influence viewers' attitudes, perceptions, and even behavior may be different from what has been found in film or fiction TV programs (Barton, 2009; Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007; Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006; Sperry, Thompson, Sarwer, & Cash, 2009). Despite the significance of reality shows in shaping audience attitude and behavior, research on audience characteristics, such as their involvement in reality shows, is scarce, and how this can affect audiences' affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects in the tourism context remains under-researched. In this regard, a cross-disciplinary investigation of the relationship between audience characteristics (e.g., audience involvement) in media studies (e.g., television, audience reception, media effects) and their travel behavior is urgently needed (Beeton, 2010).

While a number of researchers have recognized the role of mass media in promoting destination image and tourism demand (Kim & Richardson, 2003; Lee et al., 2008), little research has investigated the role that audience involvement plays in shaping this demand. In particular, the effects of audience involvement on behavioral intentions have not been studied or established. To address this research gap, we introduce the concept of audience involvement to the field of tourism studies, and examine whether audience involvement in reality shows affects viewers' perceptions of the location where the show is filmed.

From a marketing perspective, research on film/TV tourism has examined how film or TV programs can form and change viewers' perceptions of destinations. That research has found destination image to be influential in determining tourists' decision-making. Following this line of research, our study examines how destination image mediates the relationship between audience involvement and their behavioral intentions. This research is novel in that it contributes to the literature on audience involvement and tourism behavior by examining the underlying psychological process whereby audience involvement affects their behavioral intentions. The findings of our research are expected to shed light on the role of reality shows in tourism destination marketing. Tourism scholars can use our theoretical framework to underpin further model enhancement (e.g., examining the boundary conditions for

the effects). Practitioners can benefit from leveraging our results for better design of reality-show programs to influence tourist perceptions of destinations and enhance their visit intentions.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the literature on film tourism and reality shows, audience involvement, destination image, and behavioral intentions. The hypotheses are developed and presented in the context of this review. Section three provides an explanation of the research methodology and data collection process. The empirical findings are presented in section four, and the paper concludes with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications of the findings.

2. Literature review and hypotheses development

2.1. Audience involvement and behavioral intentions

Audience involvement is a complex concept originating from media studies. The concept generally addresses how audiences react to media programs in ways that result in cognitive and behavioral changes. Audience involvement refers to the degree to which audiences engage in reflection upon, and parasocial interaction with, certain media programs, resulting in overt behavioral change (Sood, 2002). Parasocial interaction refers to an audience member's imaginary relationship of intimacy or friendship with the media performers or the characters they portray (Horton & Wohl, 1956). For example, the audience may consider the performers to be their friends and feel affection for them. Sood (2002) believed that in addition to parasocial interaction, reflection (critical and/or referential) is another essential component of audience involvement. Kim (2012) and Bae and Lee (2004) supported this view. Reflection is the degree to which audience members consider a media message and integrate it into their own lives. It consists of referential reflection and critical reflection (Liebes & Katz, 1986; Sood, 2002). Referential reflection is “the degree to which audience members relate a media program to their own personal experiences” (Sood, 2002, p. 157). Critical reflection is defined as “the degree to which audience members distance themselves from, and engage in, [the] aesthetic construction of a media program” (Sood, 2002, p. 157). When audiences are highly involved in media programs, they exhibit high levels of referential and critical reflection.

Although vicarious experience is similar to the concept of audience involvement, it is a distinct concept. Vicarious experience measures the level of commitment of the audience watching the program, whereas audience involvement describes the relationship between the audience and the characters, and the process of critically analyzing media messages during and after exposure to them. Vicarious experience occurs only while viewing, whereas audience involvement happens during and after media exposure.

Another similar concept in marketing research is consumer involvement, which has been well studied by marketing scholars (Beatty, Homer, & Kahle, 1988; Laurent & Kapferer, 1985; Mitchell, 1979; Mittal, 1995). Muncy and Hunt (1984) classified five types of involvement: ego involvement, commitment, communication involvement, purchase importance, and response involvement. Referential reflection in media studies is similar to the concept of communication involvement, which has been referred to as the number of connections a person makes between a communication and the content in their life during that communication (Krugman, 1966). For example, members of the audience will relate episodes of a TV program to their own life experiences while watching the program.

Audience reflections on media programs may engender their identification with people in the program. Identification with the film characters may in turn have an influence on the audience's

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