Popular culture shaping tourism

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to discuss the relevance of popular culture in a tourism context, highlighting how it can impact the future of tourism.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Drawing upon existing research, the popularity of popular culture is discussed, and future developments are transferred to the field of tourism.*

Findings – *It is expected that the demand for popular culture related tourism activities and experiences will continue to increase, providing opportunities for destinations for visitor dispersal, the distribution of economic benefits across regions, and the tackling of industry-based challenges.*

Originality/value – *The paper draws attention to the potential of popular culture in positive and tourism development that reduces negative impacts.*

Keywords Destination management, Popular culture, Film tourism, Fan activism, Fandoms

Paper type Trends paper

Introduction

Research on the intersections between tourism and popular culture is ever increasing and becoming more varied. While the majority focuses on screen tourism (Beeton, 2016), it also includes literature (e.g. Hoppen *et al.*, 2014), music (e.g. Lashua *et al.*, 2014) or celebrities (e.g. Yen and Teng, 2015). In addition to this, theme parks (e.g. Waysdorf and Reijnders, 2016) and the increasing number of special events are to be considered – San Diego's original Comic Con convention for example draws over 150,000 visitors annually, is currently developing a Comic Con Museum to be opened in 2021 (Comic Con, 2019) and has led to various spin-off events across the world (FanCons.com, 2019). Numerous popular culture related tourism products have been developed globally and whole destinations draw upon popular culture for place identity and marketing (Bolan and Kearney, 2017; Alderman *et al.*, 2012). This paper will examine popular culture's increasing relevance for the global tourism landscape by illustrating the meaning it holds for individuals and exploring the relevance of popular culture for contemporary lifestyles and travel. Drawing upon the concepts of "fans" and "fandoms," it will highlight some potential impacts on the future of tourism.

The popularity of popular culture

Generally speaking, popular culture consists of commercially produced cultural products that are widely favored by many (Storey, 2018). Parker (2011) clarifies the link between cultural capital and popular culture in that none is required to both produce and consume it, thus leading to its accessibility and subsequent popularity. Much of popular culture is contemporary and reflects the social world within it is created and consumed, and the audience's autonomy in meaning-making lets it be utilized to provide alternative interpretations for the world and ourselves (Kidd, 2017). It provides an escape from reality (Katz and Foulkes, 1962) while simultaneously helping us make sense of it (Street *et al.*, 2015). Popular culture is often connected to what is termed "convergence culture,"

signifying a reciprocal dynamic between producers and consumers where social networks provide opportunities for consumers to actively participate in and co-create popular culture (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008) while inducing social change (Brough and Shresthova, 2011). It is this social component of popular culture, enabled through digitalisation, that makes popular culture a social phenomenon (Spracklen, 2015) as it allows individuals with similar interests to connect and create communities. These individuals are generally referred to as fans, having "a focused interest in a particular topic, subject, or person" (Thorne, 2011, p. 161). The popular culture related communities they create are then fandoms, subcultures of people "typified by a feeling of closeness to others with the shared interest" (Thorne and Bruner, 2006, p. 53). Fandoms are an increasingly important part of our social world as these communities foster social interactions and a sense of belonging (Plante et al., 2014). It is this sense of belonging, affiliation and acceptance (Obst et al., 2002) that contributes to the increasing popularity of popular culture. McCloud (2003) argues that fandoms allow us to negotiate self and belonging in a space where we are disconnected from previously clearly defined roles, communities and identities. Instead, we are confronted with the challenge of having to construct our "best" self-identity within a capitalist environment. This is also reflected in tourism-related decision making: "One of the problems for the modern traveller [. . .] is to establish identity and a sense of personal individuality in the face of the anomic forces of a technological world" (Wearing and Neil, 2000, p. 390).

Popular culture and the future of tourism

Popular culture related travel thus holds special meaning to those who consider themselves fans, and travel provides them with two opportunities: One is an immersion in the often fictional world depicted on screen or in books (Waysdorf and Reijnders, 2016), the other consists of face-to-face interactions with other fans, transferring the fandom community from digital to physical contexts (Kington, 2015). Although Croy (2018) points out that only a small percentage of, for example, film tourists consider themselves deeply involved fans, for these travelers it is the community building and subsequent sense of belonging and membership that lies at the core of their activities (Reichenberger and Smith, 2019). It signifies their affiliation with the fandom community (Coppa, 2014), contributes to both social and collective identity (Jenkins, 1992), and can be considered a form of serious leisure (Gibson et al., 2017).

In the future, popular culture's traditional core functions of escape, meaning-making, identity formation and social change (Kidd, 2017) are likely to remain, and it will continue to reflect the social world within it is created and the challenges it is facing (McRobbie, 2003). The intersections of popular culture and tourism will remain also – books and movies will be set in locations that fans seek to engage with, the need for belonging and communities is likely to increase in a world that will continue to be characterized by disruption and diaspora (Oliver-Smith, 2009) and will be sought out digitally as well as physically. Here, it is the notion of community building through fandoms that will drive popular culture tourism in the future – while co-creational components already contribute to successful popular culture tourism related activities (Reichenberger and Smith, 2019), visitors are expected to place increasing value on connecting with others with shared interests. More immersive, interactional, personalized, meaningful and engaging experiences are required that allow for community building that does not remain spatially and temporally restricted but extends beyond the space and place of the respective activity. The search for meaning, self and belonging will become increasingly relevant to popular culture tourists, and experiences need to be adapted to allow for this to happen. This requires adaptations in product development and delivery, and it is crucial for practitioners as well as researchers to further our understanding of the motivations, needs and impacts of this type of tourism within disrupted and digitalized societies.

Further, it is the potential of popular culture to induce social change that can be drawn upon to address some of the challenges the tourism industry is facing. The connections between popular culture and activism have been explored previously, utilizing popular culture phenomena and their fandoms to draw attention to and address civic, political and societal challenges. Prior activist movements consider, for example, women's rights, fair trade, marriage equality or indigenous rights (Brough and Shresthova, 2011). Tourism-related popular culture driven initiatives may relate to discrimination (Duffy *et al.*, 2018), exploitation (Armstrong, 2016) or inclusivity (Kama *et al.*, 2017) and provide opportunities to harness the power of tourists to induce positive changes within a challenging industry, simultaneously providing fan-based visitors with opportunities for positive self-development. For example, Tolkien's depiction of hobbits' connection with and value placed upon the natural environment would lend itself to environmentally sustainable travelling campaigns targeted at the 17 percent of all international visitors to New Zealand visiting the attraction "Hobbiton" (Matamata Piako District Council, 2019), thus utilizing the popularity of fiction to encourage real-life positive impacts.

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