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A Qualitative Analysis of the Impact of Popular Culture on Destination Image: A Case Study of Korean Wave from Japanese Fans

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**A Qualitative Analysis of the Impact of Popular Culture on Destination Image:
A Case Study of Korean Wave from Japanese Fans**

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research was to investigate how a country's popular culture impacts its destination image through a case study. For this purpose, the research identified the characteristics of pop-star fans in this study. The study explored the phenomenon of the Korean wave through a case of a pop-star and his fans. Lastly, the study examined destination image perspectives and experiences of the pop-star fans who attended the pop-star's summer camp. The research found that popular culture is a significant agent of Korea's recent image. The study also revealed that the respondents' high level of interest and empathy for the pop-star was a key reason for their visiting in the destination and changing their perception. The findings suggest that further research needs to consider emotional elements and unconscious motives as a means in understanding the fandom toward pop-stars and the destination.

Key Words: popular culture; destination image; Korean Wave; special interest tourist

INTRODUCTION

Tourist image of a destination is a significant factor for its popularity and identification of the different attributes of the image might provide important information in developing promotion strategies (Ahmed, 1996). In an era when popular and mass cultures are positioned further up the symbolic hierarchy, special events such as sports, concerts, and festivals are deemed by countries to be valuable image tools (Smith, 2006). Given the worldwide interest in those events and the extensive media coverage, it has become relatively easier for people to become familiar with pop-stars. In addition, the special interest traveler has been identified as niche tourism in government tourism strategies worldwide (Macleod, 2003). Hence, a more holistic approach to the phenomenon of popular cultural impact on destination image is required.

There is considerable literature on destination brand marketing (Walmsley & Young, 1998). However, most of the existing research has focused on the destination image attributes and behavioral intentions, and as a result there is limited research with a focus on tourism in national branding associated to special events. Also, little literature has been found to explore pop-star fans as special interest tourists and their travel motives and behaviors. Furthermore, while it has been anticipated that the potential impact of popular culture would be noticeable in promoting and marketing a destination, research is still needed on destination marketing associated with the impact of mass culture. The present study aimed at providing a more in-depth understanding of destination image related to its popular culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A comprehensive model of destination image was constructed by Tasci and Gartner (2008), based on the evidence from the literature (Figure 1).

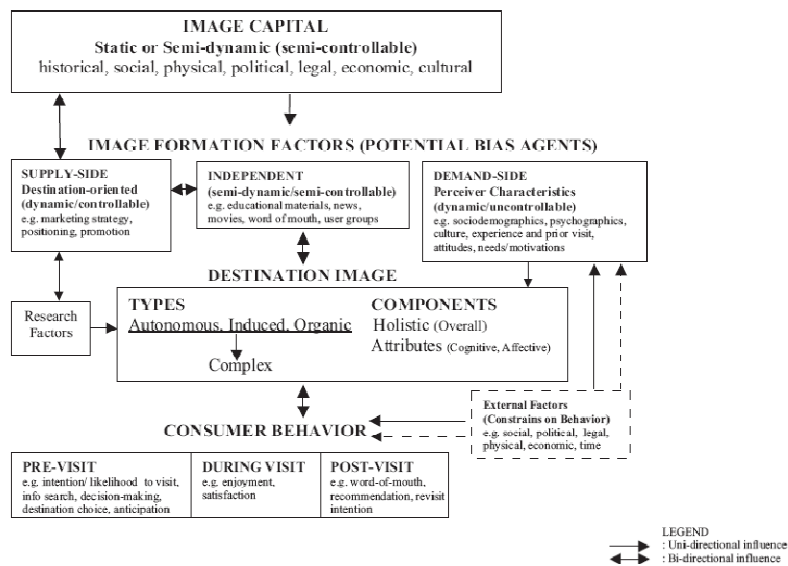


Figure 1. A model of destination image and its relationships

Note. From “Destination Image and Its Functional Relationships,” 2008, by A. Tasci and W. Gartner, 2008, *Journal of Travel Research*, 45(4), p. 422. Copyright by Sage Publications.

The model includes image capital, image formation factors, affective and cognitive systems, and consumer behavior. In the model, destination image appears to be a composite of a wide spectrum of inputs, including the two ends of the information transmission, destination (supply) and perceivers (demand). These inputs are grouped as controllable, semi-controllable and uncontrollable. Image formation factors include three sources: marketing efforts, independent, and potential market. In addition, the model discusses image formation agents: organic image, autonomous, and induced image (Gunn, 1972; Gartner, 1993). Organic image agent is a function of noncommercial information sources including word-of-mouth and actual visitation. Marketing efforts of destination promoters, promotional materials, are the induced image, whereas media relations are autonomous agents (Gartner, 1993). However, those agents are not mutually exclusive (Tasci & Gartner, 2008). Literature has also linked various external or situational factors as constraints on travel behavior, affecting pre-trip decisions including social, political, physical, financial, time, and distance. However, many facets of the complex construct needs to be investigated empirically (Tasci & Gartner, 2008)

Popular culture such as TV programs, drama and pop-star is a very effective vehicle in attracting tourists to a destination while boosting the economic impacts (Beeton, 2001; Busby & Klug, 2001; Connell, 2005; Riley et al., 1998; Tooke & Baker, 1996) and reinforcing positive images of a destination (Connell, 2005; Crockett & Wood, 2002). In such points, this present study focuses on independent factors such as news, movies, word of mouth as an image formation factor in the model. In addition, this research discusses which information source has created a destination image of Korea among image formation agents: organic, induced, and autonomous. Recently, Lee, Scott, and Kim (2008) studied the influence of mass media in a modern society and the increased interests in pop-stars of pop-culture. And they indicated that the role of celebrities in shaping tourism demand has been rarely examined. Thus, this study examines the importance of understanding how pop-star attachment impacts destination image.

In recent years, Korean pop-culture has gained much recognition across many Asian countries through mass media entertainment such as dramas, movies, and songs. The trend is known as “Hallyu,” which literally means Korean Wave in English. In 1999, the word Hallyu was introduced by Chinese mass media for the first time and has been used to indicate the overwhelming popularity of Korean pop-culture in Asian countries. Currently, the new generation of consumers classified as the “Korean tribes” are aggressively adopting and emulating Korean lifestyles in fashion, food, and consumption patterns, collecting Korean culture items, learning the Korean language, and making pilgrim voyages to Korea (Cho, 2005).

The Korean wave affected intra-regional tourism, mainly from Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, and China, as well as United States. The Korean National Tourism Organization (KNTO) reported that approximately 3 million Hallyu induced tourists visited Korea as of November 2004, which was 37 percent higher than the previous year (Cho, 2005). In particular, the induced flow of Japanese tourists has been rapidly increasing. In 2005, the number of visitors to Korea reported a raise of 35.5% and 35.4%, as compared to those of 2003 and 2004, respectively (KNTO, 2006).

As an actor and a singer, Ahn Jae-Wook is a Korean pop-star. He is the first person to bring on the Korean Wave in Asia. Back in 1965, the Beatles were named “members of the most excellent order of the British Empire” and were honored as esquires, the rank below knight. Today, if Korea were to award the equivalent of British knighthood to a Korean celebrity, the first person on the list would be Ahn Jae-Wook (Choe, 2001). Since 1997 when his drama was on TV in Asia, he has now commanded unrivaled popularity in China, surpassing Leonardo Di Caprio as the most popular celebrity (Choe, 2001). Currently, “Forever,” his fan club has been in existence for more than 10 years with over 15,000 registered members from Mexico and United States as well as Asian countries such as China, Japan, Malaysia, and Singapore, as of 2008.

The purpose of the research was to investigate how a country’s popular culture impacts its destination image through a case study, using a focus group interview. For this purpose, the study explored the phenomenon of the Korean wave through a case of a pop-star, Ahn Jae-Wook and his Japanese fans because Japanese consist of 30 percent of the fan club. The study examined destination image perspectives and experiences of the pop-star fans who

attended the pop-star's summer camp. Lastly, the research identified the characteristics of pop-star fans that are considered as special interest tourists in this study.

RESEARCH METHODS

The tradition of inquiry used in this study is a case study that investigates the impact of a country's popular culture on its destination image. In particular, this research is a phenomenological case study that identifies destination image and cultural experiences in lifestyle, leisure, and travel behavior about the phenomenon as a phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).

As pop-culture reinforces positive images of a destination (Connell, 2005; Crockett & Wood, 2002), and the role of pop-star in tourism demand has recently increased (Lee, Scott, & Kim, 2008), this present study focused on a Korean pop-star's influence on Korea's image from the perspective of his fans. Specifically, three primary research questions were developed:

1. What are the characteristics of pop-star fans?
2. What is the perceived Korea's image as a destination?
3. What is the role of pop-stars in constructing the destination image?

Relatively broad questions were designed to identify the initial focus of participants' perception of general destination image and their motivations in relation to travel. A total of 16 questions had been developed into three sections: 1) characteristics of pop-star fans, 2) destination image, and 3) the role of pop-culture and pop-star.

Focus group interviewing was employed as a primary means of data collection because the method makes use of the group interaction to explore the research issue being studied (Fossey, et. al., 2002). The method is particularly useful when the topic to be explored is general. It appears to work best with homogenous groups because it allows experiences to be shared and opinions to be expressed.

Qualitative sampling requires identification of appropriate participants who can best inform the study (Fossey et al., 2002). Thus, the sample was not random but designed to reflect the selection of specific cases to understand Korea's destination image. The study used a purposive sampling strategy to identify appropriate participants and to maximize representation of a range of perspectives (Fossey et al., 2002). The interviewees were chosen through reviewing participants' information and the support from the summer camp administrators in summer 2008 in Korea. For the focus group interview, eight fans from Japan were selected to form a group as Japanese accounted for 50 percent of about 500 participants. The interview was conducted in Japanese. The study used semi-structured interviews for data collection, as it is advantageous in ensuring sensitivity to participants' language and privileging knowledge (Fossey et al., 2002). The focus group interview took approximately one and a half hours by going through interview guides containing a list of questions and prompts designed in a focused, yet flexible manner. This flexibility is controlled opportunism where the research takes advantage of the uniqueness of a specific case and the emergence of new themes to improve resultant theory (Eisenhardt, 1989).

As the research explores the meaning of the pop-star's event and participants' perception of Korea as a destination through a case study, meaning-focused analytic approaches were used in data analysis in that the approaches emphasize meaning comprehension. Particularly, phenomenological analytic techniques were applied to the research as the approach focuses on understanding the subjective meaning of experiences and situations for the participants (Fossey et al., 2002).

FINDINGS

Characteristics of pop-star fans

Table 1 shows the summary of interviewees' demographic information. Participants were all female and their age ranged between 41 and 60 years old. They were either housewives or freelancers. They had been the fan club members from 2 to 10 years. The number of visits to Korea varied from 5 to 40 times. Most respondents visited Korea at least two times a year to participate in the pop-star's events such as a summer camp and fan meetings. They spent from US\$700 to US\$1,400 for the current trip, including airfare, accommodation, registration fee for the summer camp, and transportation. It appeared that the more they visit, the less they spend on each trip.

Perceived Korea's image as a destination

Interviews revealed that media and popular culture has been a significant agent of Korea's recent image. Regarding the question about overall image of Korea, most participants indicated the unity of Korea from 2002 World Cup, Korean military service, demonstrations, and rally. The sources of the information were mainly media such as TV news, drama, and newspaper. One interviewee mentioned the color of red because of Korean spicy food, Kimchi (Korean pickled cabbage), pepper, and Korean soccer team's uniform, which symbolize the power of Korea. Two interviewees identified courtesy to older people influenced by Confucianism. Autonomous agents, such as news articles, educational materials, movies and popular culture, are postulated to be more influential on image formation because they have higher credibility and ability to reach mass crowds than the destination-originated information (Gartner & Shen, 1992; Hanefors & Mossberg, 2002). Therefore, the results suggest that autonomous agents helped the Japanese fans create general knowledge about Korea.

Table 1 Profile of interviewees

Interviewee	Age	Membership since	Membership	Number of	Total expenses
			visits to Korea	for the current trip (US\$)	
K	44	2006	7	1,400	
H	41	2004	14	900	
T	51	2002	5	1,400	
F	52	2004	15	900	
S	60	2006	11	1,000	
M	57	2006	11	1,000	
A	41	1999	40	700	
G	53	2003	20	700	

The role of pop-stars in constructing the destination image

Regarding a question of the reason why they became interested in Korea, four participants responded the pop-star, Ahn, Jae-wook was the main reason while the rest people answered a Korean drama such as "winter sonata" was the first medium. Interviewees gave the following responses:

- *First, I liked Ahn, Jae-Wook's soundtrack of "Star in my heart" and then listened to his three albums. Then I became a big fan of him and watched his drama. If I did not have a chance to listen to his music first, I wouldn't have the opportunity to watch his drama (interviewee G).*

- *Drama was the first chance for me to be exposed to Korean culture. The drama was very attractive due to the purity of the drama story (Interviewee M).*

According to the New York Times (Onishi, 2004), the main reason for the booming popularity of Korean TV series in Japan relies on stimulating emotional bonds and nostalgia that has been lost in the current Japanese society. Through interviews, the Japanese fans mentioned that Korean dramas are different from those of Japan in that Korean dramas evoked the importance of pure and self-sacrificing love partly missing from the current Japanese culture. In addition, interviewees indicated that TV drama and the actor have changed their perception of Korea as a friendlier and more attractive nation.

- *I watched “star in my heart,” where Ahn, Jae-Wook played as a main actor. His character in the drama was very similar to his nature in reality. He seemed to be a real person in the drama as human being. I feel very close to him. (interviewee S).*
- *I thought Korea was a developing country, imitating and following Japan. However, after watching Korean drama, I had to change my perception of Korea that its culture and fashion are moving fast and it is not really different from Japan. I wanted to know the actor more and to visit the country where the actor lives so that I could breathe the air with him. (interviewee A)*

Respondents reported that they had visited many locations featured in the dramas while participating in Ahn Jaw-wook’s events such as summer camp and fan meetings in Korea. Therefore, the results delineated that drama and actors were a medium to attract tourists to featured, actor-related, or original work-related locations. The popularity of backdrop destinations shown in visual programs is similar to the phenomenon of artistic and literary places as tourist attractions (Busby & Klug, 2001; Herbert, 1996; Newby, 1981; Seaton & Hay, 1998).

Regarding the role of the summer camp, respondents mentioned that the pop-star was instrumental in bringing Korean culture close to them. Interactions with other participants also helped to stimulate motivation to travel after the summer camp.

- *For my first time to the event, I still remember that Korean fan club members were very kind to me. And as I visit Korea more and more, I have found many times that Koreans are, in general, very friendly and nice, for example, like they help me carry my luggage in the subway. It doesn’t happen in Japan any more. I truly believe Koreans are so warmhearted. (interviewee M)*
- *I remember that for my first visit to the event, Korean fans were so kind to me even though my Korean was not good enough to communicate with them. In fact, now I participate in the event to not only meet the pop-star but also interact with Korean fan club members. Even I want to travel to some other cities that I have never been to before. (interviewee A)*

Results indicate that the event provided participants with an opportunity to visit Korea, experience Korea, and meet Korean people. Thus, the event of pop-star seemed to be important in shaping tourism demand and changed the perception of Korea.

Most studies have observed the phenomenon of Korean Wave only from general mass media audience, not from the particular pop-star’s fans who actually generate and lead the trend of the phenomenon, because it is difficult to have access to pop-stars and their fans for academic research. This study gained access to pop-star fans as the research subjects. Therefore, closeness to the people and the phenomenon through intense interactions was able to provide subjective understandings that can greatly increase the quality of qualitative data (Toma, 2000). As the findings indicate, the Korean Wave can be considered a vehicle for improving the image of Korea and Korean tourist destinations.

DISCUSSION

Result of this study revealed that the respondents' high level of interest and empathy for the pop-star was a key reason for their visiting in the destination and changing their perception. This implies that celebrities shown in movie, drama, and music can act as positive push factors for tourism. Thus the popularity of mass media can be increased by actors or actresses as well as their themes, featured locations, and the music. Previous studies found that culture has played an important factor in people's perceptions, impressions and interpretations (Reisinger & Turner, 2002a, 2002b). Therefore, this study suggests that further research consider cultural factors to understand fans' behaviors.

Popular cultural forms of the media such as films, television, and literature create mythical or imagined worlds that can be re-created or experienced through a visit to the associated locations (Riley et al., 1998). The findings indicated that autonomous agents formed the respondents' general perception of the destination but popular culture reconstructed their perception in more positive ways. Although autonomous agents are out of a destination's immediate control (Gartner, 1993), an opportunity of actual visitation associated with popular culture can help the destination change people's previous image derived from the autonomous agents. Therefore, further research needs to explore the effect of image on post-visit behavior, seeking relationships between destination dimensions and respondents' evaluative variables.

Memory and emotion play an important role in destination decision-making process. In particular, as popular culture offers emotional representations (Iwashita, 2006), representations and images of tourist destinations constructed by popular culture play a significant role in influencing people's travel decision-making process. That is, popular culture including specific images, memories, and emotional elements can eventually create destination awareness and images, which leads to strong interests in the destination and actual travel to destinations in different parts of the globe. Therefore, further research need to consider emotional elements in destination image construction and destination choice, which can help to explore special interest traveler's emotions and unconscious motives as a means toward building a comprehensive understanding of the underlying dimensions of fandom toward the pop-star and the destination.

The present study was designed to understand its impact on destination image through a case study from Japanese fans; thus, this research can help to build theory as case study research is the most appropriate approach in the early stages of research on a topic (Eisenhardt, 1989). Particularly, this study conducted a focus group interview with Japanese participant, which indicates that the generalization of findings should be limited to Japanese fans. Therefore, more extensive research should be conducted with other countries to understand the impact of Korean Wave thoroughly. Additional quantitative research will provide triangulation by exploring the phenomenon and understand destination image formation with a greater sample size and an effort of maximizing standardization. Overall, tying the emergent findings to existing literature will enhance the internal validity, generalizability, and theoretical level of theory building from this research.

This research revealed that the successful movement of the pop-culture has produced positive economic effects to a featured location. Also, the study found that the pop-star's events brought Japanese fans to the destination, providing them with opportunities to travel to the destination, experience its culture, and meet people in the destination. The special events that the pop-stars involve will benefit the local destination both socially and economically. Hence, understanding of the current movement will be helpful for tourism marketers to attract visitors to a destination. Further research on special interest tourists will be useful to tourism planners in their efforts to understand their likely behaviors within that destination. Destination marketing organizations can utilize the study results to formulate destination image and promote destination to the right target audience.

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