Assessing the role of Heritage Site Attachment as a Mediator of Potential Traveler Responses to Scenic User-Generated Content

Shafaqat Mehmood[1]

Abstract

This research paper investigates the mediating role of heritage site attachment in the relationship between scenic user-generated content and travel intention towards heritage tourism. Data collection took place in Mount Danxia, one of the World Heritage sites and the most attractive tourist destination in China's Guangdong province. A sample of 682 respondents was collected from domestic tourists. The findings show that scenic user-generated content significantly influences travel intentions, and heritage site attachment mediates the relationship between scenic user-generated content and travel intention. The results have practical and managerial implications for effective tourism development and revival of heritage tourism during the Covid-19 era among online communities.

Keywords: Scenic user-generated content, heritage place attachmenD, travel intention, heritage tourism, Mount Danxia, China.

Introduction

The current study offers an essential insight into heritage tourism by investigating the primary resources of information on which a person builds travel aims, such as the user-generated content (UGC) based awareness, which is consistently considered essential in the selection of destination and purchases of travel-related products. Studying scenic user-generated content (SUGC) is an essential subject in the realm of tourism research as a researcher in the past looked as an essential construct in product placement and advertisement relationships as it supports in persuasion process (Lee & Gretzel, 2012), however in services, especially in tourism there still needed further research. More recently, a widespread appeal of information provision of commercial electronic WOM (e-WOM) via online platforms such as social media and mobile applications and awareness spread from UGC also become a prevalence growing resource that influences tourist intentions towards heritage sites (Mehmood et al., 2018; Naqvi et al., 2018). Marketers and destination planners are incredibly interested in the influence of SUGC on travel intention and site selection.

Similarly, place attachment is another essential construct for visiting potential places and is considered the basis for evaluating and selecting travel sites (Kim et al., 2017). Place attachment refers to an individual emotional link with the physical site through interaction (Milligan, 1998). The existing literature focuses on place attachment as an already experienced destination (Loureiro, 2014; Prayag & Ryan, 2012; Yuksel et al., 2010), hence lacking evidence of non-travelled or imagined places. Therefore, this study is the first of its kind that considered a heritage site attachment (HSA) as a mediator in our framework, and an individual may also attach to the destinations through pictorial stimuli shared via UGC (Hosany et al., 2020), which raised a fundamental question on how the place attachment mediates the relationship between SUGC and travel intention towards heritage sites.

2. Theoretical Perspectives

According to the theory of reasoned action (TRA), humans consider themselves rational actors with information processing ability resulting in some reasonable behavioral decisions. In previous studies, this theory has been widely used in tourism to predict behavioral intentions towards tourist destinations. (e.g., (Hosany et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2011; Prayag et al., 2013). The subjective norm and attitude towards the behavior are two main antecedents described by this theory under behavioral intentions. In subjective norms, the cognitive component evaluates other opinions and influences an individual's intention towards sites. Similarly, attitude towards this behavior is an attitudinal component referring to evaluating an individual's favorable and unfavorable travel targets (Byon et al., 2010). Another theory used in this study is the Awareness-Interest-Desire-Action theory, which is well-known with the AIDA Model as it considers awareness as a starting point of the process, which is a necessary component before an individual builds interest or desire and then eventually makes a destination choice (Kaplanidou et al., 2007). For example, a study by Milman and Pizam (1995) operationalized awareness by asking participants whether they recognized a specific destination or heard about the site.

The awareness generated from different sources of information affects a person's place attachment to making the final selection of travel destination (Confente & Vigolo, 2018). Thus, this research model was developed based on RAT and the AIDA theory with a fit between SUGC and the mediation role of HSA, leading to the intentions toward heritage sites.

3. Hypotheses development

3.1. Influences of SUGC

UGC-based awareness can be defined as the information generated by users and shared either through personal interaction with others or via an online platform such as social media. This shared content or information has different forms, including recommendations and reviews, photos and videos, blogs, and discussion forums (Durio, 2017). SUGC is declared an effective tool in the tourism

[1] School of Management, Hefei University of Technology, Hefei 230009, China *Email: shafaqatphd@gmail.com*

industry, and the awareness generated from UGC affects tourists' intention to decide on site selection (Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2017). Online social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TripAdvisor, and other related social applications have become equally influential tool that affects the tourism system; besides, it is considered a more perceived marketing tool for tourism perspective (Altınay et al., 2017). A recent study by Yang et al. (2019) investigated with Airbnb users that UGC-based awareness effect traveler behavior. Users who read reviews online made a mental perception about the site and behaved accordingly. The impact of SUGC on the user's intentions has been broadly studied in tourism site selection. Nevertheless, the heritage sector is still under-studied. Therefore, this study concluded the following hypothesis:

H1. SUGC has a significantly positive influence on travel intention.

H2. SUGC has a significantly positive influence on heritage site attachment.

3.2. The mediating role of heritage site attachment

Place or heritage site attachment (HSA) is the degree of individual cognitive and emotional attachment with a particular location or place (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Previous studies elaborated on place attachment as a multi-dimensional concept and can be understood as bonding people with places (Williams & Vaske, 2003). Halpenny (2010) proposed three categories of place attachment: identity, dependence, and affect. Scholars have long studied place attachment in the recreational context, and tourist scholars applied these categories to describe tourist behaviour. (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000; Moore & Graefe, 1994; Williams & Roggenbuck, 1989). However, Changuklee and Allen (1999) first investigated this attachment from the tourism perspective and observed that tourists' emotional associations have symbolic meanings with the site they travelled to or want to travel.

Existing literature focuses on place attachment as an already experienced destination (e.g., Loureiro 2014; Prayag and Ryan 2012), hence lacking evidence of non-travelled or imagined places. A recent study by Han et al. (2019) examines place attachment and its positive relationship with tourist intentions. These studies mainly focused on leisure tourism and neglected the heritage tourism perspective. Therefore, HSA as a mediator in the heritage site perspective is supposed to be very fruitful; thus, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H3. Heritage site attachment has a significantly positive influence on travel intention.

H4. The relationship between SUGC and travel intention is mediated by heritage place attachment.

4. Methods

4.1. Data collection

Data were collected through an online questionnaire using a multi-item approach. Secondly, respondents were asked to recall their recent travelling experience of tourist sites and fill out the questionnaire. Participants aged 18 who recently visited tourist sites were eligible to participate in the online survey. 682 valid samples were used for the data analysis. Responders had a mean age of 43.7 (SD = 16.9), 41.8% were female, and 58.2% were male. Regarding qualification, 24.5% had some higher school

education, 21.6% had some universality, but no degree, and 45.2% had bachelor's degrees.

4.2. Construct measures

Three items measuring travel intention were taken with minor modifications adopted from Chaulagain et al. (2019). Seven items measuring heritage site attachment were adopted from Lee (2011). Three items measuring SUGC were taken with minor modifications adopted by Kim & Johnson (2016), and each response is given on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7), which is in line with the previous literature (see supplementary materials for complete questionnaire). While applying structures containing different scale dimensions is not directly comparable to description statistics, it forces participants to independently assign the scores to concerned constructs that limit common method bias (CMB) variance. The value of Herman's single factor is 0.548, which shows that CMB variance is not significant.

5. Results

Table 1. Construct reliability and validity.

	Loading	Mean	SD	α	CR	AVE
Heritage site attachment (HSA)[a]				0.92	0.93	0.68
HSA1	0.816	5.106	1.342			
HSA2	0.900	5.163	1.126			
HSA3	0.856	5.182	1.116			
HSA4	0.768	5.544	0.976			
HSA5	0.789	5.315	1.01			
HSA6	0.816	5.37	1.063			
HSA7	0.820	5.163	1.048			
Scenic user-generated content (SUGC)[a]				0.72	0.84	0.64
SUGC1	0.802	5.541	0.991			
SUGC2	0.811	5.658	1			
SUGC3	0.789	5.613	0.975			
Travel intention (TI)[a]				0.72	0.84	0.64
TI1	0.809	5.526	0.935			
TI2	0.786	5.545	0.923			
TI3	0.819	5.585	1.057			

Note. SD, α, AVE, and CR denote the Standard Deviation, Cronbach's Alpha, average variance extracted, and composite reliability.
[a] Measured using a 7-point scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree.

The Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.721 to 0.921 (≥ 0.60, Cortina, 1993), factor loadings' values ranged from 0.768 to 0.900 (> 0.707, Hair et al., 2011), composite reliability values ranged from 0.843 to 0.937 (> 0.7, Hair et al., 2017), values of average variance extracted ranged from 0.624 to 0.739 (> 0.5, Chin, 2010) are all also above the required values and met the suggested requirements (Hair et al. 2017; Schuberth et al., 2018). These AVEs' values also less than the CR values: 0.80, 0.859, 0.861, 0.919, 0.841, and 0869 of the six constructs. The AVEs' values were also greater than their estimates of squared inter-construct, which shows an adequate level of discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

Table 2. Discriminant validity.

	HSA	SUGC	TI
Fornell-Larcker (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) Criterion < 0.85 (Kline, 2015)			

HSA	0.825		
SUGC	0.612	0.801	
TI	0.73	0.572	0.805

Table 3 presents the hypotheses testing the direct effects. First, SUGC effects on TI (ß = 0.276, t = 3.205) were significant, supporting H₁. Second, SUGC effects on HAS were also significant (ß = 0.750, t = 19.732), supporting H₂. Finally, HSA positively and significantly affects TI (ß = 0.077, t = 8.926), supporting H₃.

Table 3. Path coefficients of direct effect.

	β	SD	T-Values	P-Values
SUGC → TI	0.276**	0.086	3.205	0.001
SUGC → HSA	0.750***	0.038	19.732	0.000
HSA → TI	0.685***	0.077	8.926	0.000

The mediation results revealed that the total and direct effects of SUGC on TI were significant. The results also revealed a significant exogenous variable's specific indirect effects. Specifically, HSA (H4a: ß = 0.513, t = 8.985, p = 0.000) mediated the relationship between SUGC and TI.

Table 4. Mediation results.

	β	SD	T-Values	P-Values	Remarks
SUGC → HSA → TI	0.513***	0.057	8.985	0.000	Supported

6. Conclusions

This study investigates the impact of SUGC on TI and mediating role of HAS. Data collection took place in Mount Danxia. The findings indicated that SUGC positively and significantly influences TI. Results also show that the influence of SUGC on TI is significantly mediated by HSA, which indicates that travelers' place attachment is also responsible for TI. Therefore, tour operators and destination management originations should focus on place attachment improvement policies that will push travelers' intentions toward target destinations. The government's policy has dramatically impacted the tourism sector. These findings indicate that when the heritage tourism business reopens, the SUGC promoting strategies and initiatives in the heritage tourism business are more constructive interference to revitalize the tourism sector and regain travelers' intentions.

The contribution and novelty of the research can be divided into four points. Firstly, this research attempted to bridge the gap between SUGC and TI regarding heritage sites. This study reveals research gaps and checks the relationship between TI and SUGC, mediated by the HSA. Secondly, this research provides new insights into understanding the connection between TI and HUGC measures related to HSA by incorporating RAT and the AIDA theories. This study strengthens the understanding of TI in the post-COVID-19 era.

6.1. Implications and future research

This research has enriched practical significance and implications for heritage tourism, especially in China. First, measures to promote place attachment in the post-COVID-19 era are essential to enhance potential travelers' travel intentions toward heritage sites. The most necessary and significant scheme to revive during the post-COVID-19 period is to regain travelers' attachment to heritage sites. Although tour operators, travel management companies, and destination management organizations in China should offer measures regarding SUGC. Secondly, promotional activities and offers are helpful for potential travelers who participate in loyalty programs or are aware of heritage tourism. The impact of this research is not narrow to the tourism sector but can also be extended to other industries. Future research may further expand to the on-site surveys of heritage tourism, which helps to realize the connections among concerned variables. Finally, the research sample is limited to domestic Chinese tourists. Other locations and periods should also be considered for sampling purposes to generalize the results of this research in future research.

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Questionnaire/Measurement Scale

Gender: male □ female □

Age: 18-**24** □ **25-34** □, **35-44** □ **45-54** □ **55-64** □ more than 6**5** □

Educational Level: primary school □ middle school □ high school □ university degree □

Annually household income (US$): 20000-30000 □ 30001-40000 □ 40001-50000 □ more than 50000 □

Visit: 1-2 times □ 3 or more □

Travel Intention: Please respond to statements on a 7-point scale

"I intend to travel to a heritage site in the future because of its environmental concern".

Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Very Disagree	Very strongly agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

"I predict I should travel to heritage sites in the future because of their environmental performance".

Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Very Disagree	Very strongly agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

"I am willing to visit a heritage site in the future because it is environmental-friendly".

Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Very Disagree	Very strongly agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Place attachment: Please respond to statements on a 7-point scale

"This place is meaningful to me".

Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Very Disagree	Very strongly agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

"Very attached to visiting here".

Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Very Disagree	Very strongly agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

"Identify strongly with visiting here".

Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Very Disagree	Very strongly agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

"Special connection to visiting here".

Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Very Disagree	Very strongly agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

"Enjoy visiting here more than any other place".

Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Very Disagree	Very strongly agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

"Get more satisfaction here more than any other place".

Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Very Disagree	Very strongly agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

"Visiting here is more important than any other place".

Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Very Disagree	Very strongly agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Scenic user-generated content: Please respond to statements on a 7-point scale

"The posts on the digital tourism platform create a positive atmosphere about the heritage tourism services".

Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Very Disagree	Very strongly agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

"The posts on the digital tourism platform create positive emotions about the heritage tourism services".

Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Very Disagree	Very strongly agree

| ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

"The posts on the digital tourism platform create positive feelings about the heritage tourism services".

Very strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Very Disagree	Very strongly agree
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐