

Reflections on Emotional Labor in Online Spectator Tourism and the Development of New Media Cultural Tourism

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Abstract: The emergence of new media technology has given birth to the innovative form of online spectator tourism. The widespread adoption of its marketing models and the transformation of user behavior have made it a key to innovation in the tourism industry. Among these, emotional labor plays a crucial role in the development of new media cultural tourism in China, significantly enhancing communication effects, increasing brand influence, and promoting the improvement of audience participation and experience. Through case studies from places like Zibo, Harbin, and Gansu, this paper elaborates the application patterns, characteristics, and impacts of new media in cultural tourism brand marketing, and proposes strategies for the development of new media cultural tourism based on emotional labor.

Keywords: Online spectator tourism; Emotional labor; New media cultural tourism; Tourism marketing

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1. Introduction

The year 2023 is widely recognized as a pivotal year for the high-level recovery and high-quality development of the tourism industry in the post-pandemic era. Numerous “phenomenal” city marketing campaigns have emerged, utilizing new media channels such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and Xiaohongshu, along with their efficient and fast dissemination characteristics, propelling several cities into the ranks of “internet celebrity cities.” Zibo, which became popular through college students eating barbecue; Harbin, known for its ice and snow world; and Tianshui in Gansu, famous for its “amazing hot pot.” These successful cases not only demonstrate the tremendous potential of new media platforms in tourism marketing but also provide valuable insights for the future development of city tourism image shaping.

This paper will explore the dissemination methods and characteristics of information in online spectator tourism, as well as the role of emotional labor in the information dissemination process. Based on the analysis of emotional labor behavior, the paper will discuss how new media cultural tourism can cross-integrate and

strengthen content marketing through the construction of a multi-channel matrix, enhancing communication effects and city brand influence in the context of the continuous blossoming of “internet celebrity cities.”

2. Emotional labor and online spectator tourism

2.1. Theory of emotional labor

The theory of emotional labor is an important analytical perspective for the academic community to discuss the service industry. Arlie Russell Hochschild’s 1983 publication “The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling” is a classic document in the study of emotional labor^[1]. The document indicates that in the commercialization of emotional labor, different occupational types will give rise to different types of interpersonal interactions and new commercial profit models. In terms of research subjects, this theory not only covers traditional service industry practitioners such as flight attendants, catering, and domestic workers but also extends to emerging professional groups such as online hosts and self-media bloggers.

On new media platforms, creators play the role of “employees” and the works they publish need to achieve the satisfaction of “customers”, that is, the satisfaction of the new media platform audience. Therefore, effectively managing the emotional expression of creators is of great significance for attracting new media audiences, expanding fan groups, and increasing the influence of tourist destinations. Both Chinese and foreign scholars have conducted a large number of studies in the field of emotional labor, involving the differentiation of emotional labor types, discussions on power dominance in emotional labor, the revelation of gender perspectives in emotional labor, and the analysis of the consequences of emotional labor. These studies have not only enriched the content of emotional labor theory but also laid a solid foundation for its further development. The emotional labor in internet celebrity cities, as an emerging communication phenomenon, has relatively less discussion.

2.2. Online spectator tourism

Online spectator tourism is a derivative of online spectator behavior, referring to an emerging way of engaging in online interactions on travel topics through new media platforms. Leveraging the powerful interactive capabilities of new media platforms, online spectator tourism has gradually become an important way for people to share travel resources and experience travel culture. In online spectator tourism, with the distinct features of new media such as user-generated content (UGC) social interaction, personalized customization, and transpatial and temporal communication, the audience can use new media works produced by tourist locations, such as live streaming and virtual reality technologies, to watch from the comfort of their homes. While browsing and consulting information about travel cities on new media platforms, the audience is also engaging in online spectator activities. This form of tourism is no longer limited by time and space, and the audience can obtain travel information through new media platforms according to their interests.

Different from traditional tourism, the virtual travel experience adapts to the fast-paced, high-pressure lifestyle of modern society. It not only brings more diversified possibilities for cultural and tourism brands but also greatly expands the channels of interaction between brands and users, providing more opportunities for communication and exchange. This enables cultural and tourism brands to more accurately reach their target audience, continuously enhance the city’s image influence in user feedback, and promote the vigorous development of the cultural and tourism industry.

Following the first shot of “breaking through the circle” in the spring of 2023 in Zibo, many cities have also ushered in their spring with the help of new media. The study of internet celebrity cities has changed from being accidental to being artificially inevitable, and the economic benefits brought by the sharp increase in city

traffic have also intensified the market competition of online spectator tourism. To make “internet celebrities” long-lasting, new media workers need to continuously provide high-quality digital labor.

3. Online spectatorship and offline check-ins of representative internet-famous cities

The year 2023 marks a strong recovery for the tourism industry, with the pent-up demand for travel over the past three years being unleashed. Travel gradually becomes a lifestyle for people, sparking a new craze for national outings. According to statistics from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, there were 4.891 billion domestic trips in 2023, an increase of 2.361 billion compared to the same period last year, a year-on-year growth of 93.3%, a significant rise, recovering to 81.38% of the 2019 level (6.01 billion trips), indicating an accelerated recovery of the domestic tourism market ^[2].

The following are three typical representatives of cities that have become popular on new media platforms: Zibo, Harbin, and Gansu. Through an in-depth study of their paths to becoming “internet-famous”, this study explores the laws and feasible paths for urban tourism development.

3.1. Zibo: The first city to pioneer the new media tourism

As of July 31, 2024, the Weibo topic “#Zibo Barbecue#” reached 1.05 billion views and 620,000 discussions, and the Douyin topic had 28.99 billion plays ^[3-4]. As a typical representative of a non-traditional tourist city, Zibo has become the first city to engage in the transformation and development of the new media era.

In May 2022, during the pandemic, more than 12,000 college students from Shandong University needed to be isolated and settled in Zibo. During this period, all teachers and students of the university were properly settled and taken care of by Zibo. The last meal the students had before leaving Zibo was “Zibo Barbecue”, and they agreed to return to Zibo after the pandemic. In early March 2023, the college students came as promised, and the hashtag #College Students Group to Zibo for Barbecue# topped the Douyin city hot search, with a play volume of 360 million times, sparking the first wave of the Zibo barbecue craze. Many internet celebrities “followed one after another” to check in and shoot videos, and Zibo became popular from then on; during the May Day holiday in 2023, Zibo’s accommodation reservations exceeded the previous year’s May Day by eight times, reaching a point where it was difficult to find a room or a barbecue skewer; during the May Day holiday in 2024, the city of Zibo once again “turned famous.”

The emergence of subsequent hot topics continues to attract people’s attention and maintain the heat of Zibo’s culture and tourism. As a marketing tool on new media platforms, topics such as hot topics, keywords, internet celebrities with goods, and live broadcasts have greatly promoted the popularity and influence of Zibo barbecue. A large amount of exposure and attention have been guided by topics for in-depth and comprehensive dissemination. Relevant topics about Zibo, such as “Why is Zibo Barbecue so popular”, “The barbecue boy in Zibo has been smoked black”, “Zibo’s efforts are beyond my imagination”, and “Immersive check-in of Zibo barbecue”, have successively topped the Douyin hot list, maintaining the trending of Zibo’s topic. The popularity of characters such as the old man selling mung bean cakes, the loud-voiced barbecue Xiao Pang, and the Quzhou duck head boy has made Zibo’s city image more vivid, attracting the attention of the online onlooker group, and the number of people rushing to Zibo for tourism is increasing day by day.

3.2. Harbin: The winter traffic relay

On December 18, 2023, the 25th Harbin Ice and Snow World officially opened. After that, with the support of online buzzwords such as “Southern Little Potato”, “Erbin”, “Little Sugar Tangerine”, and the enthusiastic service of the local people and government, this industrial city became the hottest place to play in just 20 days

(from December 18, 2023, to January 6, 2024); on January 5, 2024, the 40th China Harbin International Ice and Snow Festival opened; on January 6, 2024, Harbin successfully took over the traffic relay baton from Shandong Zibo and ushered in its highlight moment under the label of “Internet Celebrity Tourism City.”

According to the big data calculation provided by the Harbin Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, and Tourism, during the three-day New Year’s Day holiday in 2024, Harbin received a total of 3.0479 million tourists and achieved a total tourism revenue of 5.914 billion yuan, reaching a historical peak in the number of tourists received and tourism revenue, successfully creating a vivid practice of “ice and snow are also golden mountains and silver mountains”^[5]. Driven by Harbin’s ice and snow tourism, the tourism of the three northeastern provinces has flourished, stimulating the vitality of the tourism market in the Northeast region. The tourism revenue of Heilongjiang Province and Jilin Province in 2023 doubled that of the previous year, and the number of tourists received and revenue in Liaoning Province in 2023 both increased by more than 100%, making the tourism performance of the three northeastern provinces eye-catching^[6-7]. Against this background, Harbin, with its unique charm of ice and snow culture, quickly rose to become the second “internet celebrity city” after Zibo through extensive dissemination on social media, and its holiday tourism market has shown an unprecedented prosperous situation.

3.3. Gansu: Culture is the endogenous driving force for tourism development

On February 13, 2024, a female college student with the online name “A Cup of Liang White Open” filmed a short video titled “It is recommended to popularize Gansu hot and spicy soup throughout the country” after eating the “fresh and spicy” Tianshui hot and spicy soup, and the number of likes broke through one million. Subsequently, with the promotion of social media, the topic related to “Tianshui hot and spicy soup” played more than 5.3 billion times on the Douyin platform, and a large number of netizens praised and called for national promotion^[8]. From March 13 to 15, the Baidu search index of “Tianshui hot and spicy soup” soared from 0 to more than 12,000 in a straight line^[9]. On March 18, the hashtag “#Tourists lined up to eat Tianshui hot and spicy soup as soon as they got off the plane#” topped the Baidu hot search list; from March 16 to 17, the hashtag “#Tianshui held a hot and spicy soup guarantee meeting#” topped the hot search for two consecutive days. Data from the Gansu Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism show that since March, Tianshui has received a total of 5.84 million tourists, achieving a comprehensive tourism revenue of 3.38 billion yuan^[10].

As a small western city with unremarkable development, Tianshui’s economic volume and infrastructure construction cannot be compared with eastern coastal cities. However, the historical origin and cultural heritage of Tianshui hot and spicy soup are deeply rooted. Tianshui hot and spicy soup, as a unique cultural symbol of Gansu cuisine and a city card built with delicious food as the guide, has become the way to solve the problem of building the city image in Gansu.

4. Commonalities in the development of “internet-famous cities”

Analyzing the development process of Zibo, Harbin, and Gansu as “internet-famous cities”, high-quality emotional labor is one of the key elements, but it is not the only one. Online spectatorship and offline support work together to fuel the booming development of new media cultural tourism.

Firstly, new media platforms have played multiple roles in the breakout success of internet-famous cities, including dissemination, marketing, interaction, and information feedback, and are one of the key factors driving the success of these cities’ cultural tourism. For instance, a blogger named “Mr_Wood” on Douyin posted a video titled “A New Way to Eat Zibo Barbecue!” which received 275,000 likes and was shared 224,000 times^[11]. This “planting grass” effect has introduced more and more people to Zibo barbecue, sparking their

strong interest. In Harbin, in addition to conveying the ice and snow culture, the city's image is also established through anthropomorphic tags such as "enthusiastic" and "generous", making the core of the city's culture more concrete in the broadcast, injecting new vitality and momentum into the prosperous development of Harbin's tourism industry. Tianshui also values new media platforms, and interactive forms such as scoring, comments, and likes not only to promote food topics to pay more attention to humanistic care in content but also to pursue an expressive way that can resonate with the audience and please the public in form. This development trend not only enriches the connotation of food culture but also plays an increasingly important role in shaping the city's image.

Secondly, the emotional empowerment achieved by digital emotional labor is the key to the city brand's deep influence on people's hearts. New media communication continuously strengthens the participatory, creative, and empathetic nature of production and dissemination, achieving beneficial innovation in narrative methods. This innovation is not only reflected in the change of the narrative subject but also shows its unique charm in the creation of narrative space and emotional empowerment in the information dissemination process. On the one hand, more and more individual users are encouraged to participate in the shaping and dissemination of the city's image. They cleverly use hot topics to deeply explore emotional energy, record the bits and pieces of urban life through the lens, tell the story of the city, and inject new vitality into the dissemination of the city's image. On the other hand, in terms of narrative space, new media users are good at capturing and utilizing hot topics, using the "top flow effect" to increase the city's attention, making niche cities stand out in fierce competition.

Finally, the government has played a supporting role in promoting cultural and tourism cities, ensuring the carrying capacity of online popularity in the offline, and fully reflecting humanistic care and thoughtful service in various measures. Given the rapid growth of market demand, the Zibo Municipal Government and its relevant departments have acted quickly to comprehensively ensure the experience of tourists. For example, the innovative opening of "barbecue special trains" and other measures have continued to become the focus of online discussions, greatly enhancing the online influence of Zibo barbecue. As a unique cultural IP, Zibo barbecue has not only reached a broad consensus in all sectors of society but also achieved far-reaching dissemination online and offline, promoting the rapid development of Zibo's tourism industry. In Harbin, the Cultural and Tourism Bureau closely monitors comments and suggestions on new media platforms, and actions such as laying anti-slip pads on Central Street and cutting frozen pears have made the cultural and tourism experience warmer and are affectionately called "Erbin". The official call to action across the city assists tourists from other places in obtaining a better travel experience, turning traffic into staying volume through word of mouth. The local cultural and tourism department of Tianshui, Gansu, following the example of Zibo's "barbecue special train", launched the "hot and spicy soup bus line" and created a hot and spicy soup street, selecting 39 well-received and popular hot and spicy soup operators in Tianshui to settle in, further promoting the popularity of Tianshui hot and spicy soup; online and offline publicity and promotion activities are carried out simultaneously, such as holding food festivals and opening online live broadcast rooms, quickly introducing countermeasures when the flow stops.

5. Reflections on the development of "internet-famous cities"

The frequent emergence of "internet-famous cities" in China is one of the characteristics of the digital age. Continuously leveraging "non-standard" traffic entrances to lock in a relatively stable level of popularity to achieve "long-term popularity" is not only a question that Zibo, Harbin, and Gansu need to consider but also a

concern for every city that craves the opportunity of traffic. More and more non-traditional strong tourism cities have become the “new nobility” of tourism, bringing more opportunities to the development of the tourism industry, but also bringing more challenges to industry management.

The internet celebrity effect is a “double-edged sword.” The increasingly frequent replacement of “internet-famous cities” and the shorter time to become an internet celebrity indicate that the effectiveness of internet-famous cities is gradually weakening. Whether the audience will become more numb and tired in the face of the frequent replacement of internet-famous cities still needs further research. Dai Bin, the dean of the China Tourism Research Institute and the director of the Data Center of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism said in an interview with *The Beijing News*, “Tourism needs the effect of internet celebrities, but internet celebrities are by no means all of tourism”^[12]. Traffic is indeed important for urban development, but tourism resources, tourism services, tourism markets, and tourism products are also important factors affecting the creation of the city’s IP. The local party committee and government should first pay high attention to creating a market environment and improving urban infrastructure. Grasping the basic laws of the operation of the tourism economy and the construction of tourist destinations, as customer satisfaction is the biggest foundation for “internet celebrities.” By doing a good job in supporting services, the arrival of tourist traffic will be a natural thing.

Online spectator tourism, which brings convenience and speed to the audience as a supplement to physical tourism, still cannot replace physical tourism, and the deep integration of the two has become a new route for tourists to make travel plans. New media cultural tourism creators have a purpose in the content production process, and different travel strategies serve the landing of physical tourism behavior. Therefore, the gathering of online spectator tourism can bring great opportunities for urban development. The internet popularity of many cities relies on the strong gathering of the online spectator tourism group and the high-density output of new media cultural tourism creators. The two complement each other and are indispensable.

The fast-paced dissemination methods of the digital age have accelerated the emotional fatigue process of the audience^[13]. The high saturation output of homogenized content can make the audience feel bored during browsing, and the high investment in high-quality digital labor may also bring disproportionate emotional feedback. Whether the “internet celebrity” name is a long-term plan for urban development planning is a reference indicator for future urban transformation^[14].

There are also deficiencies in this research. There is still room for improvement in research from the consumer perspective. Deep excavation of consumer needs, experiences, and opinions helps to better understand the market dynamics and development direction of new media cultural tourism. In terms of economic impact, there is still room for in-depth analysis of the specific impact on the city’s economy to more comprehensively evaluate its economic value and contribution; the impact of new media cultural tourism on the social and cultural level needs further discussion and thinking. These are directions worth continuing to pay attention to in the next research.

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