



From Virtual Journeys to Real Travels: Exploring the Impact of Chinese-Themed Digital Games on International Players' Tourism Intentions

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Abstract: This study examines the potential of Chinese-themed digital games as innovative tools for destination marketing and cultural promotion, focusing on their ability to influence international players' tourism intentions toward China. Using "Black Myth: Wukong", a popular Chinese action RPG, as a case study, this study investigates how the game shapes players' perceptions and motivates travel interest. Through analysis of 4,046 user reviews on Steam, this study address: (1) How international players perceive Chinese cultural elements in the game; (2) Which game features most effectively stimulate interest in Chinese culture and tourism; and (3) How the game fosters cultural curiosity and inspires intentions to visit China. Multi-method approach provides insights into these dynamics, contributing to understanding how digital games can serve as marketing tools in promoting tourism destinations. The results offer practical implications for leveraging digital media for tourism promotion.

Keywords: cultural marketing, game-induced tourism, Chinese cultural games, tourism intentions, digital cultural promotion

1. Introduction

"This game has made its journey to the West", and that's what global players say about "Black Myth: Wukong", China's first self-developed AAA game, which has achieved remarkable global success, selling over 4.5 million copies within 24 hours of its release. The game's deep roots in Chinese myth "Journey to the West" have sparked unprecedented interest in Chinese culture and tourism among international players while the game's primary filming location, Shanxi Province, has experienced tangible tourism benefits. Data from Meituan shows that on the game's release day, tourism interest in Shanxi's scenic spots increased by 156% compared to the previous day[23], revealing the potential of Chinese-themed digital games as tools for cultural exportation and tourism promotion.

While previous studies have recognized games as a lens for youth culture and everyday life politics[18], research into the impact of digital games on real-world tourism intentions and behaviors is limited. This study aims to examine how "Black Myth: Wukong" influences international players' perceptions of Chinese culture and their intentions to visit China, bridging the gap between virtual engagement and real-world travel motivations.

2. Literature Review and Research Questions

Digital games have emerged as significant components of the global cultural industry, serving as powerful mediums for cultural expression and dissemination[14]. Consalvo argues that games can serve as "cultural intermediaries," facilitating cross-cultural understanding and exchange[3]. The related term 'media-induced tourism' research has expanded to include digital games, with studies showing that exposure to destination images in games can significantly influence players' perceptions and intentions to visit[9][21]. Games can create or enhance curiosity about the cultures, histories, and locations they depict, stimulating the desire for cultural exploration and authenticity-seeking[11].

Combined with the push-pull theory of tourism motivation stated by Dann[5], the game's immersive function, cultural elements and virtual landscapes act as "pull" factors, creating a desire to experience the real-world counterparts of the virtual environments. And the curiosity and desire for authentic cultural experiences stimulated by the game serve as "push" factors, motivating players to consider visiting China.

The immersive nature of role-playing games (RPGs) like "Black Myth: Wukong" may enhance their influence on tourism motivation and behavior. Jernsand et al. argue that the interactive and participatory nature of games allows for deeper engagement with cultural content, potentially leading to stronger emotional connections and increased motivation to experience the depicted cultures firsthand[7].

However, the relationship between gaming experiences and actual travel behavior remains complex. While some research suggests a positive correlation between game playing and travel intentions[20], others caution that virtual experiences have

the potential of substituting for real-world travel in some cases[13].

Based on this review, this study proposes the following research questions:

- (1) How do international players perceive and engage with Chinese cultural elements in "Black Myth: Wukong"?
- (2) How does the gaming experience influence players' perceptions of China as a potential tourism destination?
- (3) Which game elements or themes most stimulate players' tourism intentions and potential travel behaviors?

3. Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

A sample of 4,046 reviews in English-language reviews for "Black Myth: Wukong" were randomly extracted from the Steam platform, focusing on the international player base. The sample was extracted approximately 10 days post-release to capture player reactions with actual play experience, chosen to ensure players had sufficient time to engage with the game while still capturing initial reactions.

3.2 Data Analysis

A multi-method approach is employed to address the research questions:

Thematic and Sentiment Analyses (RQ1): These methods help explore how international players perceive and engage with Chinese cultural elements in the game, aligning with approaches in tourism research that reveal traveler opinions and emotional responses to cultural content[1].

Content, Keyword, and Sentiment Analyses (RQ2): These methods are effective to understand how the gaming experience influences players' perceptions of China as a potential tourism destination, helping to uncover the perceived destination image of China as shaped by the game experience[10][17].

Network and Frequency Analyses (RQ3): To determine which game elements or themes most stimulate players' tourism intentions and map complex relationships between various game features and factors influencing travel motivation[16].

To ensure the reliability and validity of the coding process, a team of three coders independently coded a subset of the data. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, with a minimum acceptable value of 0.7.

4. Results and Discussion

RQ1: Players' Perceptions of Chinese Cultural Elements

The topic modeling analysis revealed five distinct topics reflecting players' engagement with the game's cultural elements (Figure 1). The prominence of terms such as "Chinese," "Wukong," and "story" across multiple topics indicates active recognition of Chinese cultural elements, particularly those rooted in the "Journey to the West" myth.

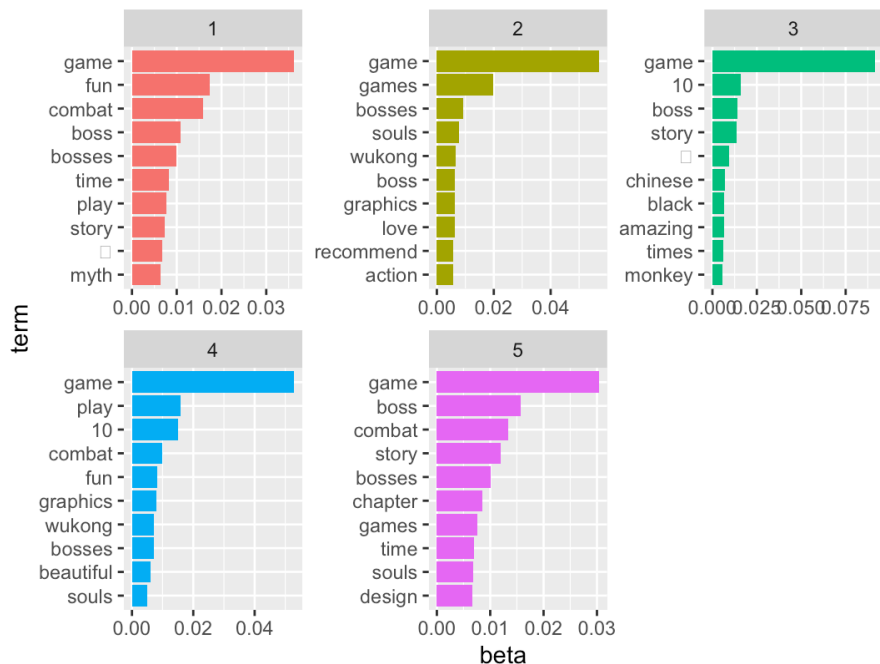


Figure 1: Topic Modeling Analysis of Player Reviews

Sentiment analysis (Figures 2 and 3) shows a predominantly positive attitude towards the game's Chinese cultural elements, with over 67% of reviews expressing positive sentiments.

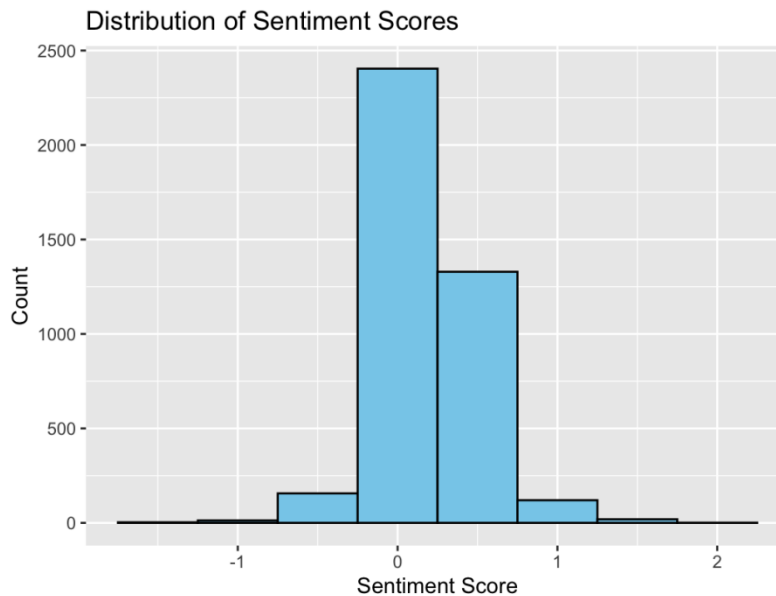


Figure 2: Sentiment Score Distribution of Player Reviews

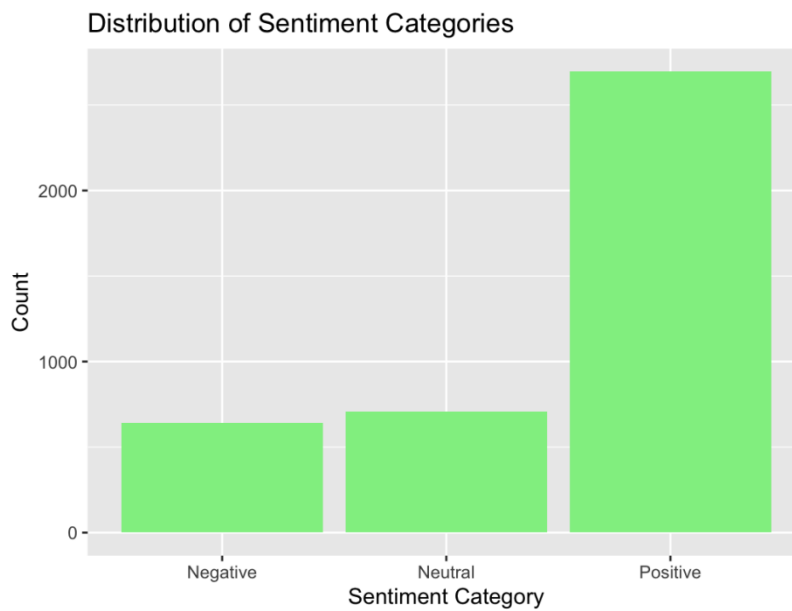


Figure 3: Comparison of Different Sentiments in Player Reviews

> "I would definitely recommend this game to anyone interested in Chinese folklore and mythology. The story is amazing; I was totally unfamiliar with anything related to this theme, and after playing it, I gotta say I really want to know more about the general theme and meaning behind these stories." - Player review

This positive reception suggests that games can effectively serve as cultural intermediaries, aligning with Consalvo's (2016) argument about games as facilitators of cross-cultural understanding.

RQ2: Gaming Experience and Tourism Perceptions

Word frequency and keyword analyses (Figure 4) reveal that "culture" and "scenery" were the most frequently mentioned tourism-related terms, both significant motivators for tourism (Pesonen & Komppula, 2010).

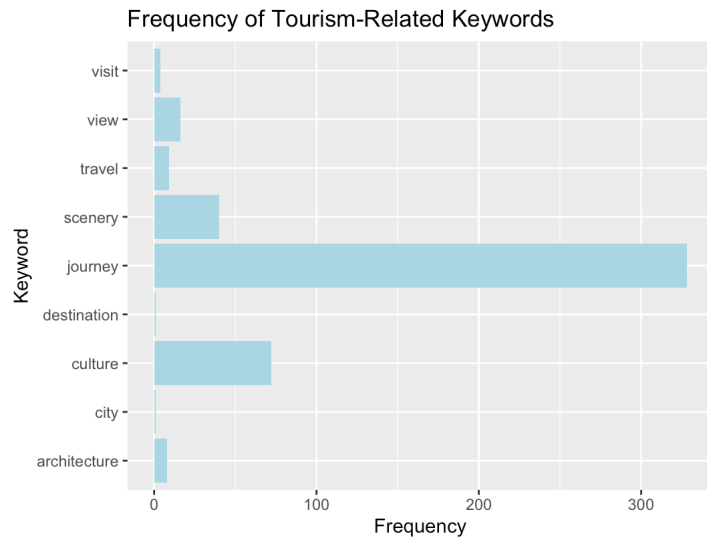


Figure 4: Frequency of Tourism-Related Keywords in Player Reviews

Sentiment analysis of these tourism-related keywords shows predominantly positive associations, indicating a favorable perception of China as a potential tourism destination.

> "ABSOLUTE MASTERPIECE - MOVING TO CHINA AFTER THIS GAME !" - Player review

A correlation analysis revealed a weak but statistically significant positive correlation ($r = 0.1286$, $p < 2.2e-16$) between game experience scores and travel interest scores (Figure 7). This finding supports the idea that digital games can influence destination image formation, as proposed by Kim & Richardson (2003), albeit to a limited extent.

RQ3: Game Elements Stimulating Tourism Intentions

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling and network analysis revealed that terms such as "masterpiece," "graphics," and "spectacle" were among the top elements linked to travel interest (Figure 5).

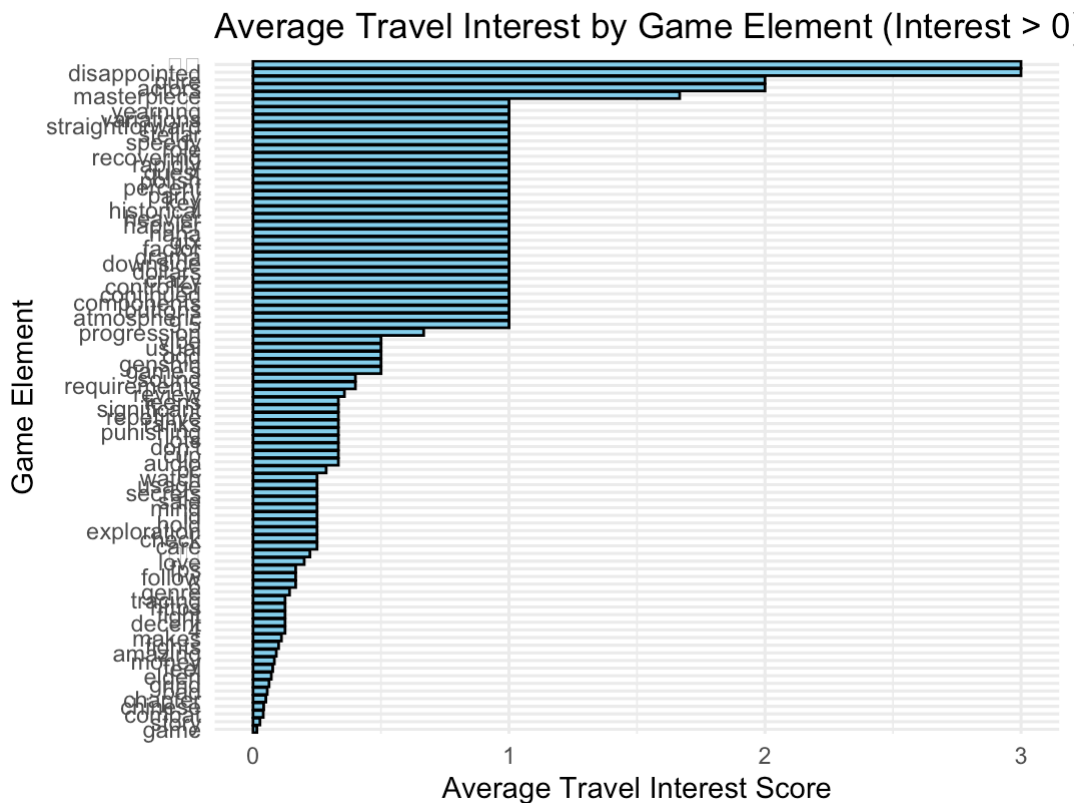


Figure 5: Game Elements Most Strongly Associated with Travel Interest

> "I could say it's absolutely one of the most beautiful games I've ever played. The details in the scenarios, the architecture, the clothes, the weapons, with all the rich Chinese ornamentations... I'm definitely adding these locations to my travel bucket list!" - Player review

These findings suggest that game elements creating immersive, visually impressive, and authentic representations of locations are most likely to inspire travel intentions, aligning with Pine & Gilmore's (1998) concept of esthetic experiences in the experience economy.

5. Conclusions and Implications

This study demonstrates that culturally rich digital games like "Black Myth: Wukong" can serve as effective tools for cultural exportation and tourism promotion. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature on media-induced tourism by highlighting the unique potential of interactive digital media in shaping destination image and travel intentions.

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

(1) Digital games as cultural ambassadors: The findings validate the role of digital games in shaping cultural perceptions and stimulating tourism interest, extending recent research on the influence of digital media on destination image[19].

(2) Novel methodological approach: The analysis of online game reviews provides an innovative method for understanding game-induced travel motivations, contributing to emerging methodologies in digital tourism research[22].

(3) Insights for cultural sector management: The study illuminates how cultural elements in games can spark interest in potential travelers, extending recent work on media-induced tourism promotion in the Chinese context.

5.2 Practical Implications

(1) Gamified tourism experiences: Destination managers should incorporate game-inspired elements into promotional strategies, creating immersive cultural experiences. This aligns with recent developments in gamified tourism experiences[15].

Recommendation: Develop augmented reality applications that overlay game-inspired content onto real-world Chinese landmarks, enhancing tourist engagement and cultural immersion.

(2) Targeted marketing: Tourism stakeholders should conduct targeted surveys of game-induced tourists to understand their unique motivations and behaviors before, during and after their trips, as suggested by recent studies on niche tourism segments[8].

Recommendation: Create marketing campaigns that highlight the connections between game elements and real-world Chinese cultural experiences, targeting gaming communities on platforms like Steam and NGA.

(3) Collaborative game development: Tourism boards and cultural institutions should collaborate with game developers to ensure authentic and appealing representations of cultural elements and destinations.

Recommendation: Establish partnerships between China's tourism board and game developers to create games that showcase cultural sites and traditions, developing potential tourist attractions according to popular chapters and characters players vote in the game.

5.3 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged:

(1) Single game focus: The focus on a single game limits the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could expand this approach to other games and cultural contexts.

(2) Indirect measure of travel intentions: This analysis suggests that while games can inspire travel interest, this effect may often be subtle or secondary. Future research could employ more direct measures of travel intentions, such as surveys or interviews with players who have been inspired to travel based on their gaming experiences [2].

(3) Lack of longitudinal data: This study captures a snapshot of player reactions. Future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to track how gaming experiences influence travel behavior over time.

(4) Cultural bias: As the game is based on Chinese culture, there may be a selection bias in the sample towards players already interested in Chinese culture. Future studies could compare the effects of culturally-specific games on players from different cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the potential of culturally rich digital games to serve as innovative tools for destination marketing and cultural promotion. As the gaming industry continues to evolve, understanding its impact on cultural perceptions and travel behavior will become increasingly important for both academics and practitioners in tourism, cultural studies, and game design.

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