

Symbolic Production and Emotional Conflict in Rural Tourism from the Perspective of Media Sense of Place: A Computational Communication Analysis Based on Ctrip Tourist Reviews

Yuchen Zhou

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai 200093, China
Email: 18061848772@163.com

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Abstract

In the context of rural revitalization, rural tourism has become a key driver of rural economies. In the era of deep mediatization, tourists' perception of place has shifted from physical presence to symbolic construction. Drawing on the theoretical framework of media sense of place, this study analyzes 12,000 online reviews of the top ten rural tourist attractions on Ctrip. Through LDA topic modeling and sentiment analysis, it reveals the mediated logic of tourists' place perception in the digital age. Findings show that positive sentiments focus on the mediated transformation of natural landscapes and cultural symbols, while negative sentiments highlight the erosion of placeness by commercialization. This split in mediated sense of place reflects a failed negotiation between authenticity imagination and modernity demands. Accordingly, digital communication strategies for rural tourism destinations are proposed.

Keywords

Rural Tourism; Authenticity; Commercialization; Media Sense of Place

1. Introduction

Rural revitalization constitutes a national strategy in China's new era, and rural tourism plays a significant role in promoting rural revitalization, improving farmers' livelihoods, and protecting the ecological environment, thereby serving as a vital engine for rural economic development. According to the 2024 Rural Tourism Revitalization White Paper released by Ctrip, in the first three quarters of 2024, rural tourism destinations nationwide received 2.248 billion visitors, a year-on-year increase of 15.5%, and generated a total revenue of 1.32 trillion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 9.8%. These figures not only underscore the prominent

position of rural tourism in rural economic growth but also reflect contemporary tourists' robust demand for "rurality." In fast-paced urban life, people are increasingly inclined to abandon the model of checking in at popular online-famous cities in favor of slower-paced, more immersive forms of travel[1]. The countryside thus embodies tourists' imagination of "pristine ecology" and a "slower pace of life." However, the sustainable development of rural tourism confronts a pivotal issue: how to comprehend tourists' "sense of place" toward the countryside. In tourism studies, sense of place refers to travelers' yearning for a destination that offers pleasure and distinctive experiences. It positively enhances tourist satisfaction and revisit intentions and constitutes a profound emotional attachment to the destination[2]. In conventional research, sense of place has been perceived as an experience of "physical presence." Yet, in the digital age, online reviews have emerged as crucial mediated articulations of tourists' sense of place. Studies indicate that when making travel decisions, tourists regard user-generated content as an important reference for destination selection and pre-trip preparation[3]. Nevertheless, existing research on rural tourism predominantly emphasizes its economic impacts. Although some studies incorporate the theoretical lens of sense of place, they largely remain qualitative in nature and thus struggle to reveal the structural characteristics of place perception.

Against this backdrop, the present study utilizes online user reviews of popular rural tourism destinations on the Ctrip platform as analytical texts. Employing Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling and sentiment analysis, it seeks to uncover the core themes and affective orientations embedded in user reviews that represent a "mediated sense of place." The aim is to elucidate the mediated construction mechanism of sense of place in rural tourism within the digital era, thereby providing insights for optimizing digital communication strategies for rural tourism destinations.

2. Literature Review and Research Questions

2.1. Research on Media Sense of Place

In early scholarship, geographers largely perceived the influence of media on place as detrimental. Relph argued that one of the causes of "placelessness" was the production and dissemination of popular culture by mass media[4]. Similarly, scholar Meyrowitz proposed that media attenuates the distinctiveness of place, thereby weakening individuals' perception of their own spatial location[5]. However, with the advancement of media technologies, an increasing volume of information can be uploaded and shared, giving rise to more positive appraisals of media's role in shaping sense of place. Scott's research demonstrates that sharing and uploading one's location can engender a sense of belonging and environmental mastery[6]. Chinese scholar Shao Peiren introduced the concept of "media sense of place," positing that individuals can generate novel place experiences through the modes of

identification afforded by media[7]. Subsequently, scholars such as Zeng Yiguo conducted systematic investigations into media sense of place, exploring its generative mechanisms, conceptual attributes, and cognitive dimensions[8]. Furthermore, numerous scholars have examined the impact of media on sense of place. Peng Xiaozhou and colleagues investigated the mechanisms through which digital interpretation effects influence sense of place, concluding that while digital interpretation exerts a direct positive effect on sense of place, it also shapes tourists' sense of place indirectly via tourism involvement and tourism experience[9]. Video media, with its visual discourse, carries significance in terms of "representation," "interaction," and "composition"[10]. Li Jia and colleagues argue that Cantonese-language videos on the Douyin short-video platform can strengthen affective identification by providing scenarized experience and immersive narrative, thereby consolidating audiences' psychological place identity[11]. This body of research clarifies that, in the process of using media during their travels, tourists interact with destinations both on-site and remotely through media means, thereby developing a deeper perception of place. A review of the existing literature reveals that the theory of media sense of place has predominantly been applied to studies of urban landscapes, with extremely limited application in rural tourism contexts. Moreover, the research methods employed are largely qualitative or questionnaire-based, failing to adequately illuminate the dynamic mechanisms underpinning the construction of tourists' sense of place.

2.2. Tourism Research Utilizing User Online Reviews as Data

User-generated content (UGC) refers to text, images, audio, and video that are non-professional and non-authoritative in origin, published on social platforms, and possess a certain degree of originality. Research indicates that UGC can stimulate potential information adoption and consumption behaviors, gradually becoming a significant data source and influential factor in tourism research.

A considerable number of scholars have selected user online reviews as their research focus. Lu W. et al. utilized online travel reviews as a data source and employed content analysis techniques to examine review texts, thereby identifying factors influencing ecotourism satisfaction[12]. Marios explored the impact of online reviews on both tourism consumers and providers[13]. Lisa analyzed over 3,000 online reviews of tourism product purchase experiences to investigate tourists' environmental awareness[14]. Ma Zhiwei developed a Glove-BiLSTM-CNN model for sentiment analysis of tourism reviews to determine their sentiment polarity[15]. Xi Yueting and colleagues employed ROST Content Mining software to study tourist reviews of Yongxingfang in Xi'an, finding that tourist perceptions were concentrated on culinary enjoyment, leisure and entertainment, and historical reminiscence, with positive perceptions outweighing negative ones, although negative sentiments existed regarding culinary innovation and entertainment experiences[16]. In research on destination image that uses travelogues and reviews as analytical texts,

scholars such as Zhang Pengyang have employed social network analysis to compare the discrepancies between officially projected destination images and tourist-perceived images[17].

In recent years, the utilization of user-generated textual data in the field of tourism has shown an upward trend. However, the integration of media sense of place theory into such research remains relatively limited. Existing studies predominantly examine the impact of UGC on tourist behavior and destination operations from a tourism management perspective, yet they do not fully incorporate media sense of place theory to analyze the construction mechanism of tourists' place perception embedded in reviews. Moreover, they seldom delve into the implications of such analysis for optimizing communication strategies in tourism promotion.

Therefore, based on the preceding analysis, this study takes user reviews of the ten most popular rural tourism destinations on the Ctrip platform as its research object and adopts a computational communication analysis approach. It aims to address the following questions: What are the core themes representing media sense of place in tourist reviews? What are tourists' affective orientations toward rural travel? Which place-based conflicts do negative sentiments primarily target? And how do critical expressions within reviews reconstruct the cultural boundaries of rural placeness ?

3. Research Design

3.1. Data Sample Collection

All data sample collection and big data analysis processes in this study were conducted using Python (version 3.10) within the PyCharm integrated development environment. Regarding sample selection, this study identified ten rural tourism destinations with the highest numbers of reviews from Ctrip's list of popular rural tourist attractions. These destinations are: Hongcun Village, Laga Monastery, Hemu Scenic Area, Zhaoxing Dong Village, Shiwai Taoyuan (Xanadu), Xidi Village, Zengcuo'an, Zhuquan Village, Wuyuan Huangling Scenic Area, and Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village. To mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism patterns, the study adopted the time span from January 1, 2023, to August 10, 2025, as the sampling window for data crawling. The collected data encompassed review content, posting time, account name, and rating. Following data cleaning, a total of 12,000 valid entries were obtained.

3.2. Topic Model Analysis

For the extraction of core themes across different segments, this study employed Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modeling on the sample data. LDA is the most commonly utilized unsupervised machine learning model for thematic extraction from large-scale textual data (Blei et al., 2003)[18]and facilitates researchers' in-depth understanding of interactions within online communities

(Jelodar et al., 2019)[19]. In terms of specific operational procedures, the authors first cleaned and segmented the text samples, removed stop words, merged synonyms, and constructed a custom dictionary. Subsequently, the cleaned data and the custom dictionary were input into the model. The optimal number of topics was determined through perplexity and coherence curves, followed by topic clustering to reveal the core themes embedded within tourist reviews.

3.3. Sentiment Analysis

The study utilized Baidu AI Cloud's Natural Language Processing model to conduct sentiment analysis on the scraped reviews. A Python program was written to invoke the Baidu AI Cloud API interface, thereby calculating a positive sentiment score and a negative sentiment score for each review. Reviews with a positive score significantly higher than the negative score were classified as positive; conversely, those with a higher negative score were classified as negative, and reviews with scores in close proximity were classified as neutral. The results of the sentiment analysis not only reflect the public's overall attitude toward rural tourism but also facilitate the identification of specific reasons underlying different affective tendencies.

4. Research Findings

4.1. Core Theme Analysis of Rural Travel Reviews

The processed data were input into the LDA model. Based on the perplexity and coherence curves to evaluate the model's goodness-of-fit with the data, the optimal number of topics was ultimately determined to be five. The results of the topic analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Probability Distribution of Feature Words by Rural Tourism Topics

Topic 1		Topic 2		Topic 3	
Perception of Local Characteristics		Landscape and Cultural Perception		Service Process Experience	
Core Word	Probability	Core Word	Probability	Core Word	Probability
Commercialization	0.07022892	Worthwhile	0.1151207	Scenery	0.07308848
Ethnic characteristics	0.022086639	Scenic area	0.049213752	Entrance ticket	0.04325677
Quite serious	0.02206553	Beautiful	0.042202942	Commercialization	0.04121488
Hui-style	0.011077944	Landscape	0.03628364	Beautiful	0.033630785
Ancient village	0.006944092	Terraced fields	0.02051915	Shuttle	0.01993796
Beautiful scenery	0.005995845	Charm	0.017819272	Ticket inspection	0.018193949
White walls	0.00548946	Dong ethnic group	0.018544609	Chaotic	0.018033233
Preserved	0.004743502	Rich and varied	0.017819272	Experience	0.017819272
Disappointed	0.004312601	Program	0.015998004	Pick-up	0.014726137
Ancient architecture	0.004389036	Unreasonable	0.005055519	Accommodation	0.013411223
Scenery	0.004312601	Bonfire	0.004725569	Photo-taking	0.013075909
Village	0.004285711	Evening party	0.004401854	Scale	0.012874653
Charming	0.004201359	Scenery	0.004164427	Poor	0.011724961

Ancient village	0.004198695	Fresh air	0.003964867	Free	0.009738235
Topic 4			Topic 5		
Transportation Service Feedback			Consumption Space Experience		
Core Word	Probability	Core Word	Probability		
Recommend	0.014650674	Recommend		0.050783496	
One-way	0.014026737	Commercial street		0.023828767	
Scenic area	0.013813875	Model		0.021271044	
Parking	0.013392597	Wonderland		0.02105289	
Worthwhile	0.012082608	Room		0.015878202	
Not fun	0.012016618	Very poor		0.014699934	
Have seen	0.011193899	House		0.014666543	
Traffic jam	0.01033583	Inn		0.014495684	
Fully seated	0.010291116	Clean		0.014098055	
Waste	0.01007076	Selling		0.013850394	
Traffic	0.009952605	Convenient		0.013683714	
Charge	0.009815016	Accommodation		0.013455519	
Too many people	0.008911378	Luggage		0.013213435	
Beautiful	0.008101963	Service attitude		0.012156285	

4.1.1. The Erosion of Ethnic Characteristics by Commercialization: The Rupture of Place Identity

In 1983, Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff introduced the concept of place identity from the perspective of environmental psychology. They defined it as a means of identifying and integrating an individual's positional identity by assessing whether specific elements of a given place, the process of human-place interaction, and the individual's perceptual experience of the physical environment effectively satisfy their biological, psychological, social, and cultural needs [20]. In Topic 1, centered on "commercialization" and accompanied by negative terms such as "ethnic characteristics," "quite serious," and "regret," the findings reveal a rupture in "place identity" within the mediated sense of place. Local distinctiveness constitutes the core attraction of rural tourism and serves as the foundation of the mediated sense of place. LDA topic analysis indicates that terms such as "Hui-style," "ancient village," "ethnic characteristics," and "beautiful scenery" appear with high frequency in tourist reviews. These symbols form the core carriers of place sense in rural tourism. Tourists transform the authenticity of the countryside into transmissible media symbols, reinforcing their own place identity through positive terms like "beautiful scenery" and "charming." However, the high frequency of keywords such as "commercialization," "disappointed," and "quite serious" reveals the dissolution of authenticity by commercial forces. This reflects tourists' anxiety regarding the delocalization of place-specific symbols. While media reproduction strengthens tourists' identification with local characteristics, commercialization simultaneously engenders the "alienation" of these very symbols.

4.1.2. Perception of Landscape and Cultural Scenery: The Reinforcement of Place Attachment

The concept of place attachment was initially proposed in environmental

psychology and primarily refers to the affective bond between individuals and their environment[21]. Subsequently, fields such as human geography, anthropology, and sociology have also engaged in related research. A point of divergence lies in the focus of inquiry: anthropologists concentrate on the emotional factors that evoke place attachment, whereas human geographers' conception of "sense of place" emphasizes the objective role of the environment—that is, the place itself. Topic 2, with core terms such as "charm," "bonfire," "evening party," and "terraced fields," revolves around "landscape and local culture" and is dominated by positive affective terms like "worthwhile" and "rich and varied." Through positive descriptions of natural scenery and cultural landscapes, this topic reinforces emotional attachment to the countryside. In the era of deep mediatization, the separation of time and space transforms the subject's perception of space. Consequently, the local emotional experience derived from bodily practice and perception is supplanted by an immersive experience formed through direct visual and perceptual engagement. Tourists catalyze the formation of a digital sense of place by transforming material elements into symbolic representations and emotional expressions.

4.1.3. Service Experience Conflicts Induced by Commercialization: The Contradictions of Place Dependence

The content focused on in Topics 3, 4, and 5 all pertains to service experiences in tourism. LDA results indicate that keywords such as "entrance ticket," "commercial street," and "consumption" appear with high frequency in reviews. Tourists' expectations regarding consumption are characterized by desires for "reasonable" pricing, "distinctive" offerings, and "value," yet actual experiences frequently fall short. These themes reveal conflicts in "place dependence" within the mediated sense of place. Tourists harbor modern expectations for service facilities in rural tourism, but commercial development leads to a decline in service quality, triggering negative experiences, with commercialization acting as the primary source of conflict in place dependence. Simultaneously, however, terms such as "enthusiasm," "clean," and "service attitude" constitute compensatory mechanisms of identification within the conflict of place dependence. The warmth of villagers embodies tourists' imagination of rural authenticity, and the essence of constructing a rural sense of place lies in the continuous negotiation between modernity demands and authenticity imagination within the rural field.

4.2. Tourists' Affective Orientations Toward Rural Tourism

4.2.1. Overall Sentiment Distribution Characteristics

Sentiment analysis of user reviews on popular rural tourism destinations from the Ctrip platform reveals that positive sentiments account for 78% of all reviews, negative sentiments for 13.5%, and neutral sentiments for 8.5%. Specifically, positive sentiments are highly concentrated in reviews of natural landscapes, where seasonal imagery is imbued with potent symbolic meanings. For instance, autumnal

"forests ablaze with color" (sentiment score: 0.9999) are metaphorically rendered as "God's palette," while "winter blue ice" (score: 1.0) is elevated to the visual label of a "fairy-tale world." Tourists reinforce immersive imagination through multisensory narratives and, in conjunction with photographic practices and expressions such as "wallpaper-worthy views" (score: 0.982), transform physical landscapes into transmissible digital symbols. Conversely, negative sentiments are densely concentrated on service facilities and explicitly critique the erosion of placeness by commercialization. Expressions such as "guesthouses costing thousands per night" (score: 0.015) and "standing for an hour waiting for the shuttle bus" (score: 0.0001) reveal the experiential alienation induced by commercial development.

4.2.2. The Mediated Construction Mechanism of Positive Sentiment

In the domain of positive sentiment generation, tourists actively participate in the production of place meaning through spatiotemporal rituals and digital tools. For example, over half of the reviews concerning Hemu mention the sunrise ritual of "securing a spot at the viewing platform by 6 a.m." (score: 0.997), thereby constructing "morning mist" (score: 0.999) as a pilgrimage event that must be witnessed. Dissemination through social media further solidifies this into the visual paradigm of "Hemu Sunrise," reinforcing the symbolic authority of the landscape. Furthermore, reviews demonstrate the symbolic transformation of cultural nostalgia. Experiences such as "folk customs" (score: 0.999) and "horse-drawn sleigh rides" (score: 0.976) are endowed with the label of primitive charm. Nostalgic references to "ancient ethnic groups" and "the last settlement" also feature prominently in the comments. Certain local elements undergo a metamorphosis from practical attributes to cultural symbols within tourist narratives, such as the transformation of log cabins from a dwelling function to a fairy-tale symbol.

4.2.3. The Structural Roots of Negative Sentiment

The core contradiction underlying tourists' negative sentiment resides in the conflict between commercial modification and local authenticity. The commercial distortion of spatial meaning engenders numerous negative reviews, as exemplified by complaints that "barbecue stalls are proliferating everywhere" (score: 0.013), which dissipates the indigenous atmosphere. A deeper issue, however, lies in the lagging modernization of infrastructure. Public service gaps—such as accommodation shortages during peak seasons (score: 0.486) and the absence of medical facilities—reveal a common predicament for rural tourism destinations in the digital age: while online dissemination fuels internet fame and a surge in visitor numbers, destination management fails to upgrade synchronously. This results in the degradation of the local experience from a restorative journey to a crowded consumption arena. Moreover, most destinations exhibit seasonal affective disparities, such as positive sentiments toward winter skiing contrasting with

negative sentiments regarding off-season transportation. This further underscores a deficiency in destination design, namely, an over-reliance on natural symbols and a lack of all-season experiential planning.

5. Digital Communication Strategies for Rural Tourism Destinations

5.1. Constructing Symbolic Place Identity and Reinforcing Narratives of Mediated Authenticity

In the era of deep mediatization, tourists' perception of place has shifted from physical presence toward symbolic construction. This study finds that positive sentiments are highly concentrated on the mediated transformation of natural landscapes and cultural symbols, whereas negative sentiments are directed at the erosion of placeness by commercialization. Consequently, communication strategies must reconstruct the symbolic system of "authenticity." This can be achieved by distilling core local symbols—transforming ritualized scenes such as sunrise viewing amidst morning mist or sunset by the stream into standardized visual paradigms, and leveraging short-video platforms to amplify their cultural pilgrimage significance while circumventing overly commercial labeling. Furthermore, a stratified narrative mechanism should be established. In response to tourists' cognitive conflicts between ethnic distinctiveness and commercialization, it is essential to differentiate the communication positioning of cultural preservation zones from that of commercial service zones. The cultural zone should foreground the role of authenticity guardians, conveying cultural continuity through documentation of villagers' daily lives (e.g., recordings of Dong ethnic ballads, restoration of Hui-style architecture). The commercial zone, conversely, should emphasize modernity adaptation, guiding expectations through keywords such as "reasonable consumption" and "distinctive cultural and creative products."

5.2. Digitally Mediating Place Conflicts and Enhancing Service Communicability

By constructing narratives of service modernization, the local adaptability of commercial elements can be reimagined. For instance, compensatory identity terms can be cultivated based on positive descriptors articulated by tourists, such as "clean" and "convenient." This involves producing a series of content that translates modernity into local idioms—showcasing guesthouses renovated using traditional craftsmanship (e.g., smart heating within wooden cabins) or distinctive commercial streets operated by local villagers—thereby reconciling tourists' dual expectations for "modern convenience" and "cultural authenticity." Moreover, in promotional efforts, interview videos featuring villagers can be disseminated. By relying on the villagers' own voices to articulate the necessity of commercial adaptation, local discursive authority can be strengthened, thereby circumventing the perceived monopoly of commercial narratives.

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