

Becoming The Destined One: The Commodification of Fantasy in Pilgrimage Tourism of *Black Myth:* *Wukong*

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Keywords

pilgrimage tourism, video game, cultural heritage, the commodification of emotion, *Black Myth: Wukong*

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Black Myth: Wukong (BMW) is a famous Chinese action role-playing game (Game Science, 2024). After being officially released on August 20, 2024, the game has gained an impressive success commercially, and quickly topped the sales charts on multiple platforms, selling more than 18 million copies worldwide within two weeks. BMW also showcases 36 real-world spots in China and 27 of them are located in Shanxi province, which launched a tourism boom in Shanxi (Shen & Zhao, 2024). The enthusiasm of thousands of gamers has ignited the market for pilgrimage tourism. This research uses BMW as a case to study how the commodification of emotion in video games stimulates pilgrimage tourism. The study bridges game culture and tourism motivation, offering insights into how fantasy, as a commodified emotion, fuels contemporary pilgrimage practices.

Pilgrimage tourism, traditionally rooted in religious journeys (Collins-Kreiner, 2020), has developed to encompass secular forms driven by popular culture (Tan, 2024). Fans visit media-depicted sites to fulfil their emotional needs and identity issues through the journey of pilgrimage, which aligns the background of emotional capitalism (Liu et al., 2022), wherein emotions drive the consumption and serve as tradable commodities or markers of identity (Illouz, 2007; 2017). Studies on pilgrimage tourism or anime pilgrimage, for example, reveal

Proceedings of CDiGRA 2025

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how fans engage in visiting their sacred sites, blurring the reality and fantasy (Li et al., 2024; Yamamura, 2015). Such visits construct the identities of pilgrims through immersive and affective practices (Liu et al., 2022; Tan, 2024). Tourists as pilgrims can seek authenticity in pilgrimage tourism and re-enact scenes to make connection with fantastic media narratives in films or animations, which consumes the emotion of fantasy as tradable experiences (Buchmann et al., 2010; Illouz, 2007). The commodification of emotion is particularly salient in interactive media including video games (Anable, 2018; Isbister, 2016). For example, Chinese mobile games use incorporate elements of China's intangible cultural heritage, for instance, Peking Opera, into gameplay to evoke cultural resonance among players and fulfil their emotional needs. (Que et al., 2025). While existing literature often explores pilgrimage tourism with films and animations, interactive media like video games deserve more academic attentions, especially in how the commodification of fantasy motivate the pilgrimage tourism in the consumption of video games. Current studies often reveal how pilgrims satisfy their emotional needs to recreate classic scenes through their travel practices, but little attention has been paid to how this emotional need is pre-implanted in the media, especially in the interactive media like video games. This paper argues that such emotions, such as fantasy, which are woven into games during the production process, should be considered in the study of pilgrimage tourism. This is an important part of the commodification of emotions and underscores the importance of destination involvement in pilgrimage tourism at the manufacturing stage.

This study will adopt in-depth interview with 20 BMW game pilgrims who completed the main storyline in the game and visited real-world prototypes. Semi-structured questions explore motives and perceptions of virtual-physical connections. Data will be analysed by NVivo, supplemented by participant observation of online fan communities (e.g. Bilibili pilgrimage guides). Player-as-analyst, which is a method to analyse games in game studies, is also introduced in the study to examine the fantastic symbols and gameplay in the game. The author can understand how the commodification of fantasy is produced in BMW through this method. The proposed findings of the study may include two main parts. The first part is about the weaving of fantasy in BMW through techno-cultural commodification. The developers of BMW use 3D scan scanning to turn real-world prototypes into wonders in the virtual world, which commodifies heritage into interactive fantasy, which develops important symbols to stimulate the game pilgrims' fantasies. The second part is about the understandings of game pilgrims who experiences the wonders in the game, which fuels the desire to visit the real spots. Pilgrimage therefore becomes a ritual of identity affirmation to re-enter the fantasy world through the consumption of fantasy, which provides the marketing chance for heritage sites to leverage BMW's intellectual property. This form of game pilgrimage makes subtle differences with film tourism or anime pilgrimage. Due to the strong interactivity of games, game pilgrims experience an interactive journey by controlling their virtual avatars within the game. However, the sense of authenticity experienced in the virtual world can inspire game pilgrims to visit real-world locations, allowing them to fulfil their fantasies in reality. Unlike existing studies that often focus on pilgrimage tourists, the author introduces the concept of the commodification of emotion into the research on pilgrimage tourism related to video games. This emphasizes the importance of analysing the production of fantasy symbols in interactive media like video games. It can better help researchers understand the "production-consumption" cycle of

emotions, particularly the emotion of fantasy in video game. The study also suggests that pilgrimage tourism destinations should proactively engage in production and future studies can focus on the detailed strategies of engagement from destinations.

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