

Study on the Formation Mechanism of Scenic Spot Internet Celebrities from the Perspective of Interaction Ritual Chains: A Case Study of "Wang Po" at Kaifeng Wansui Mountain Scenic Area

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Abstract

The "ritualization" process in society renders rituals ubiquitous in social life. Moreover, visiting internet-famous landmarks has become a prevalent tourism practice. To further understand this phenomenon, this paper systematically elucidates the formation mechanism of scenic spot internet celebrities based on the interactive ritual chain theoretical model, thereby providing theoretical support for how tourism destinations can develop such attractions to drive their growth. Research indicates that the formation mechanism of scenic spot internet celebrities based on the interactive ritual chain primarily unfolds in three stages: initial information reception, intermediate content replication, and final deepened interaction. Collectively, these stages constitute a continuous, stable, and open system of meaning production. This analysis of the formation mechanism offers insights into the emergence and dissemination of regional internet celebrities.

Keywords

Destination Influencers; Interaction Ritual Chains; Grounded Theory.

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, ritualized practices have become deeply embedded in daily life, serving as crucial mechanisms for shaping group identity and cultural memory. With the rise of short-video platforms, the "influencer check-in" phenomenon has evolved into a new form of tourism ritual. Through symbolic interactions both online and offline, tourists collectively construct travel practices resonating with shared collective emotions. This phenomenon reconfigures the attraction generation model of tourist destinations, giving rise to "scenic spot influencers" driven by emotional energy. These influencers serve as carriers of cultural symbols and focal points for collective emotional convergence. However, existing research predominantly focuses on the commercial logic or dissemination pathways of the influencer economy, lacking systematic deconstruction of the dynamic mechanisms of "ritualized interaction" in the formation of scenic spot influencers. Particularly regarding how emotional energy and collective euphoria catalyze influencer emergence, no comprehensive theoretical response has yet been established.

This paper employs the theory of interactive ritual chains as its analytical framework, selecting the case of "Madame Wang," a viral figure at Kaifeng's Wansui Mountain scenic area, to explore the generation mechanism of scenic area viral phenomena. In this case, amateur performer Zhao Mei achieved exponential follower growth—from 231,000 to 3.371 million within 13 days—through role-playing and improvisational interactions, with related topics garnering over 2.3 billion views[1]. Her explosive dissemination and sustained popularity provide a prototypical sample for observing the dynamic operation of interactive ritual chains. By analyzing 299 video clips and comment data from platforms like Bilibili and Xiaohongshu, combined with grounded theory coding methods, the study reveals a three-stage evolutionary logic for scenic area

influencers: from "virtual co-presence" to "collective euphoria." These stages include: platform algorithm empowerment and boundary construction during the information reception phase; emotional resonance across virtual and real domains during content replication; and emotional energy fission during deepened interaction.

The academic value lies in transcending conventional tourism studies' superficial interpretations of viral phenomena. By applying Collins's chain of ritual interactions theory to tourism contexts, the study systematically explains how emotional energy transforms into the internal driving force behind viral content creation through ritualized interactions. It further reveals how collective jubilation reinforces meaning-production systems. Practically, the study offers strategic insights for destinations to shape "cultural landmark influencers" through emotional mobilization and symbolic design, while also opening new perspectives on understanding the ritualistic reconstruction of tourism experiences in the digital age.

2. Literature Review

"Tourist attraction influencers" represent a product of digital-age destination marketing, specifically referring to travel attractions that rapidly gain popularity through social media dissemination and trigger large-scale offline check-in phenomena. Their forms encompass individuals (such as amateur actors), events (like signature performances), or spaces (such as viral photo spots). This concept evolved from the broader trend of the "influencer economy," yet its uniqueness lies in its deep roots within regional cultural contexts. Through collective visitor participation and symbolic interactions, it fosters a symbiotic relationship of "culture-emotion-traffic"[2]. [3]With the proliferation of short-video platforms, scenic area influencers have evolved from passive "landscape symbols" to active "collaborative agents" in content production. Their generation mechanism has shifted from unidirectional dissemination to multidirectional co-creation. Existing research on scenic spot influencers primarily covers three dimensions. Communication studies focus on content production and dissemination mechanisms, emphasizing the synergistic effects of algorithmic recommendations, user co-creation, and platform ecosystems. For instance, Li Li et al.[4] argue that short videos reconstruct tourism communication logic through the chain of "visual engagement-emotional resonance-cultural identification," with influencers serving as "emotional intermediaries" bridging virtual and real domains. Tourism scholars integrate the influencer phenomenon into destination marketing. Xie Yanjun and Xu Ying[5] propose the concept of "tourism field emotional energy," arguing that influencers generate destination appeal by stimulating visitors' empathetic experiences. Cheng Li et al.[6] further reveal that emotional touchpoints in influencer events (e.g., nostalgia, curiosity) significantly enhance visitor identity formation. Sociologists, meanwhile, approach the phenomenon from the perspectives of group interaction and cultural rituals to explore the collective action logic behind viral phenomena. Zhu Danhong and Lin Xudong[7] analyze emotional expressions among esports spectators through "cyber ritual" theory, noting that online celebrations and offline practices jointly constitute new social rituals.

Collins's chain of ritual theory provides a foundation for explaining the formation of scenic spot viral phenomena. The theory emphasizes that social interaction builds group solidarity through the accumulation of "emotional energy" and the "collective elation" effect[8], a logic increasingly validated in tourism research. Yu Zhiyuan et al.[9] found that "field co-presence" in festival tourism triggers visitors' shared emotional experiences; Guo Yunjiao et al.[10] demonstrated that online aggregation around National Day military parade ceremonies reinforces collective memory through emotional solidarity. However, existing research predominantly focuses on ritual interactions within physical spaces, lacking in-depth exploration of the mechanisms behind viral phenomena in "virtual-physical hybrid" scenarios,

thus limiting theoretical explanatory power. First, most existing studies treat internet celebrities as static "outcomes of communication," overlooking their generative logic as "dynamic processes." They particularly lack phased analyses of emotional energy accumulation and ritual interaction reinforcement. Second, theoretical perspectives remain fragmented: communication studies emphasize technological empowerment, while sociology stresses group behavior, failing to effectively integrate the multidimensional "technology-emotion-culture" interaction mechanism. Finally, case studies predominantly focus on urban viral spaces (e.g., the Forbidden City, Chongqing's Hongyadong), with insufficient attention to practices where small-to-medium-sized scenic areas cultivate viral figures through ordinary individuals. Therefore, this paper adopts the interactive ritual chain theory as its core framework, examining the case of "Wang Po," an internet celebrity at Kaifeng's Wansui Mountain Scenic Area. By dissecting the three-stage evolutionary path-"virtual co-presence-emotional resonance-collective jubilation"-it aims to reveal the dynamic mechanism behind the generation of scenic area internet celebrities. Simultaneously, it integrates algorithmic mechanisms, emotional energy, and regional cultural symbols into a unified analytical system, providing theoretical support for internet celebrity strategies in digital-era tourism destinations.

3. Theoretical Foundation

This study investigates the formation mechanism of scenic area internet celebrities based on the theory of the interactive ritual chain. This theory posits that all human interactions occur within specific contexts, where the interactive rituals within these contexts are inherently causal and feedback-loop processes. Collins argues that a complete interactive ritual comprises four essential elements: two or more individuals gather in the same space, where they influence each other through their physical presence, regardless of whether they consciously focus on one another; establishing boundaries for outsiders; focusing attention on shared objects and activities through mutual communication of focal points; and sharing collective emotional experiences to achieve collective elation through ongoing mutual sharing. A deep analysis of the unique characteristics of the internet celebrity tourism phenomenon clearly reveals that this theoretical proposition finds strong empirical support within the tourism world, yet it has received scant attention from tourism theorists.

4. Research Methods and Material Analysis

(1) Research Subject

This study focuses on the internet celebrity "Madame Wang" from the offline matchmaking program at Wansui Mountain·Great Song Martial Arts City in Kaifeng, Henan Province. Actress Zhao Mei portrays the character "Madame Wang" from the classic novel *Water Margin*, acting as a matchmaker on stage without charging a penny-her sole wish is for you to find the right person. Through her trendy rhetoric, down-to-earth sweet talk, explosive songs and dances, affectionate nicknames, and thrilling stage presence, she resonates deeply with young audiences. Netizens have dubbed her the "down-to-earth version of *If You Are the One 2*."

(2) Data Sources and Analysis

This paper focuses on how Zhengzhou's scenic spot internet celebrity "Madame Wang" emerged. Grounded in Collins's theory of the chain of ritual interactions, it addresses this question by collecting and analyzing visual content and related commentary posted by tourists or platform users on social media. Content was filtered based on comprehensive popularity rankings and platform selection. The final materials analyzed comprise video footage, thematic texts, and comment section content from 299 posts on Bilibili and 25 posts on Xiaohongshu. These materials constitute the codified textual corpus for this study. Guided by the interactive

ritual chain theory, the analysis focuses on the formation mechanism of scenic area influencers. The coding process and results are presented in Table 1 below, with the core formation mechanism illustrated in Figure 1.

Table 1. Coding Process and Results for " "

Category	Subcategory	Category	Code
Setting	Shared Spacetime	Time	"Avoid holidays," Qingming Festival, Labor Day, weekends, weekdays, year-end, "We recommend visiting next year"
		Location	Henan, Kaifeng, Wansui Mountain
	Demand Stimuli	Personal Needs	Matchmaking services imply your partner is already secured
		Social Hotspots	People's Daily Hot Topic Commentary: "Matchmaker Wang" Boosts Cultural Tourism Vitality; Online Micro-Dramas Go Viral!
Scenario Creation	Group Gathering	Platform Engagement	Every platform is... Dominating trending topics, repeatedly surfaced, diverse perspectives—all about its livestreams
		Individual Engagement	Tourist numbers surge by about 30%! Kaifeng's matchmaker Wang Po appears in Jiangxi to arrange marriages, drawing massive crowds and creating an incredibly lively atmosphere. A 26-year-old beautiful teacher sends the entire venue into a frenzy. At Wang Po's matchmaking event, they're having such a blast!
	Barrier Design	Environmental Rendering	Forward Rendering (Wang Po's inherent ability: "Auntie's Mandarin is so smooth and pleasant to listen to—it's like watching a TV drama. This auntie has incredible command of the situation!") Reverse Rendering (For the swarm of influencers and participants with ulterior motives: "Wang Po isn't scripted—it's the attendees who bring their own scripts.")
		Specific Symbols	Wang Po's persona (charming in her own way, graceful with enduring appeal, genuine, warm-hearted, neither arrogant nor impatient, neither servile nor overbearing), the program's image (a "If You Are the One" tailored for young people—not just "If You Are the One," but also "The Love Defense"), the matchmaking platform's image (currently demolished; the original was smaller and seemed slated for expansion)
Emotional Essence	Shared Emotions	Similar Experiences	On-site Experience (Crowded, front rows dominated by livestreamers), Program Effect Experience (Authentic, full of humor), Surrounding Environment Experience (Low food prices in scenic areas, affordable admission tickets, dense cluster of nearby attractions), Similar Recommendations (Highly recommend "Three Strikes Against Zhu Jiazhuang" and "Iron Flower Fireworks")
		Similar Attitudes	Admiration for "Madame Wang," appreciation for her role as a matchmaker, attitudes toward arranged meetings, views on dowries, perspectives on love and marriage, and opinions on matching social status
	Emotional resonance	Influence	Recently obsessed with Hu Zongxian's adage: "What brings you to power will also be your downfall." Now that Auntie Wang has been precisely positioned—shifting from comedic performer to matchmaker—taking this role seriously represents a significant leap in difficulty. Performing on stage is far simpler than being a real matchmaker. Wealthy and handsome? You're called "Uncle." Poor and plain? You're called "Master."
		Continuity	The core of social interaction is value exchange—attractiveness, physique, youth, assets, emotional value, connections (power/influence), etc. Love is merely lust triggering a flood of hormones, so there's nothing noble about it, and no need for coyness or secrecy. Why feel embarrassed about animal mating?
	Psychological	Sense of Belonging	Sympathy for the old lady, praise for the old lady

Collective Exuberance	Identification	Sense of self-worth	Praise for the "Matchmaker Wang" TV show and commentary on this phenomenon
	Spiritual Focus	Shared Beliefs	Attitudes toward love and affection, dowry, social compatibility, traffic and exposure, matchmaking, and the role of matchmakers
		Common Goals	Finding a life partner
Intent Reinforcement	Group Cohesion	Sense of Boundaries	A language unique to the group, topics unique to the group, an audience unique to the group, a subject unique to the group, stories unique to the group
		Community of shared interests	Racking our brains over birth rates, taking pride in Henan's cultural tourism, wanting to date—let "Wang Po" set me up with friends, "One in nineteen falls, ten thousand in nineteen are born," platforms catering to mainstream market trends
	Moral elevation	Group Norms	Social norms, group norms, personal preferences
		Worldview	The viral success of Kaifeng's matchmaker Wang Po reflects the demise of love among young people. Liking is indulgence; love is restraint. Love comes easily, but marriage and cohabitation are difficult—these are fundamentally two different things. Love can be intoxicating, yet its joy is fleeting; it simply isn't essential. Families that accumulate virtue will surely reap blessings. Matchmakers are the earthly stewards of the Matchmaker God. . Love cannot blossom from a marriage of equal social standing. Matchmakers perform immeasurable merit; rejoice in their virtue.

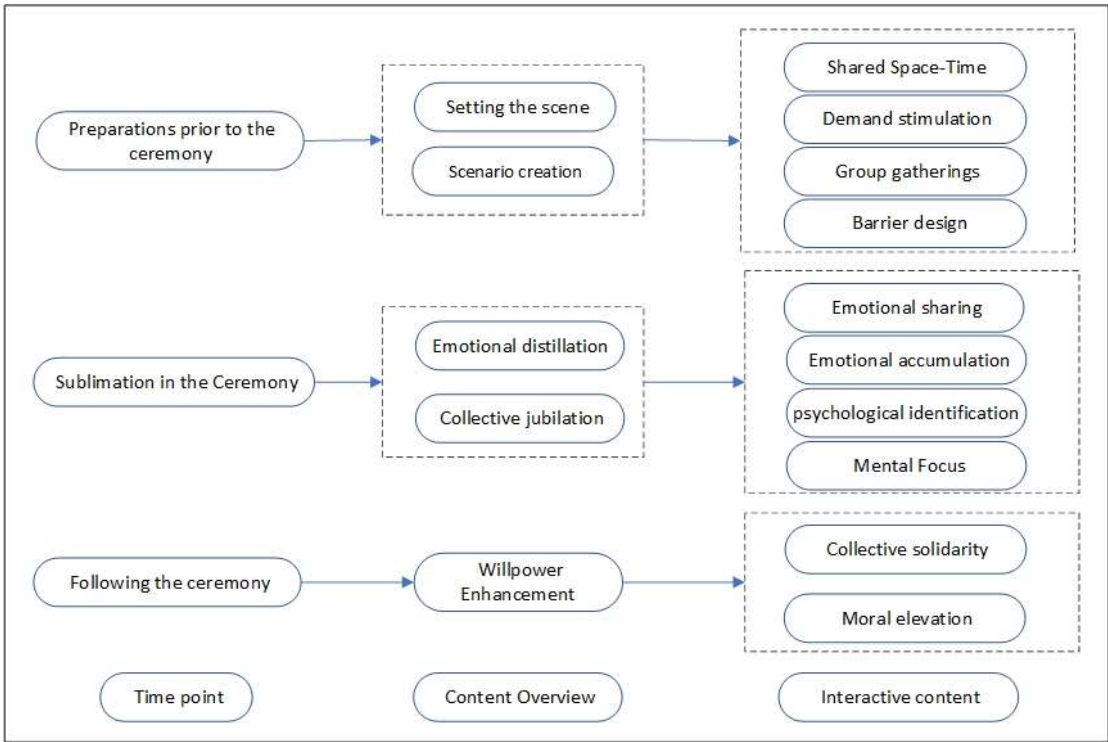


Figure 1. Core Mechanism Diagram of the Formation Process for Scenic Area Internet Celebrity "Madam Wang"

5. Analysis of the Formation Mechanism of Scenic Spot Internet Celebrities

(1) Information Reception: "Virtual Co-Presence" and "Boundaries" Within Platform Fields

Collins' theory of ritual chains posits that "group assembly" and "boundary setting" are key prerequisites for initiating interactive rituals. In the digital age, these elements manifest new characteristics within virtual spaces. Participants on social media platforms gather through virtual spaces, forming unique social barriers[11]. Through digital interactions such as liking, reposting, and commenting, they collectively engage in the process of symbolic construction. The group assembly of the internet celebrity "Wang Po" in virtual space is primarily realized through short video platforms as a new social medium. This platform transcends geographical constraints, gathering dispersed individuals onto a unified interface[12,13]. The platform's algorithmic mechanisms play a role analogous to similarity experiences in traditional interactions, facilitating the formation of virtual co-presence by precisely identifying user needs and content trends[14]. Compared to face-to-face interaction settings, the virtual nature of online social platforms significantly reduces real-world social constraints. Traditional group norms and familiar social pressures are weakened in virtual spaces[15], enabling participants to express their mate selection needs and expectations more directly. This provides a more open interactive space for the formation of internet celebrities.

(2) Content Following: Emotional Energy in Gaze and Ritual Interaction

The ritual chain theory posits that after fulfilling the preconditions for ritual initiation, the stimulation and sharing of emotional energy become pivotal for deepening the ritual. Collins emphasizes that "Mutual Focus" and "Emotional Solidarity" form the core mechanisms driving the ritual's dynamic progression. Emotional solidarity plays a pivotal role in this process: it not only fosters symbolic identification and belonging but also activates participants' intrinsic motivation, prompting them to exhibit proactive emotional energy[16]. Simultaneously, this solidarity cultivates group members' moral commitment to uphold shared symbols, encouraging spontaneous resistance to inappropriate behavior. Although the internet celebrity "Wang Po" constructs an interactive space of "virtual co-presence" on short video platforms, this communication transcending physical boundaries suffers from a lack of deep interaction[17]. Therefore, participants shaped by "Wang Po" actively identify and understand the emotional states of the narrative subject and other participants, enhancing individual engagement through shared experiences and attitudes. This process not only deepens comprehension of symbolic meanings but also fosters positive feedback loops, driving sustained accumulation and release of emotional energy to achieve ritualistic emotional sublimation. Further observation reveals that when participants' behaviors achieve coordinated alignment, group interactions enter a highly active state. In this state, participants often become "emotional captives," generating intense emotional energy through dense interactions.

(3) Deepening Interaction: Emotional Accumulation and Symbolic Reinforcement in Ritual Interaction

As the communication process deepens, participants progressively perceive and accumulate unique emotional energy. This energy, akin to the symbolic capital described by Bourdieu[18], jointly propels the evolution of ritual interactions. In the matchmaking rituals of "Wang Po," group members form an immediate field of emotional resonance through shared focal points and emotional bonds[19]. This emotional field intensifies through sustained interaction, tightening bonds among participants and ultimately fostering a collective ritual atmosphere of revelry. As emotional accumulation deepens, "Wang Po's" cultural influence and social impact significantly increase. Notably, the emotional energy generated within the interactive ritual serves as an endogenous force for group cohesion, propelling single interactions toward a sustained chain of rituals[20]. Throughout this process, participants' understanding of symbolic meanings gradually evolves from superficial cognition to grasping deeper connotations, ultimately achieving moral elevation.

In summary, the formation mechanism of scenic area internet celebrities from the perspective of the interactive ritual chain primarily unfolds in three stages: initial information reception (virtual co-presence and boundaries within the platform domain), intermediate content following (emotional energy and ritual interaction under the gaze of both platform and physical domains), and final deepened interaction (emotional accumulation and symbolic reinforcement within ritual interaction). collectively forming a continuous, stable, and open symbolic meaning production system for viral IPs.

6. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the internet celebrity "Wang Po" from Wansui Mountain Scenic Area, using the interactive ritual chain theory as its theoretical foundation to explore the formation mechanism of scenic area internet celebrities. The analysis concludes that the formation mechanism of "Wang Po" can be decomposed into three progressive stages. First, during the information reception phase, visitors form a cross-regional "virtual co-presence" through digital platforms. At this stage, the platform interface serves as a medium that simultaneously constructs the perceptual boundaries between the virtual and real worlds. Subsequently, the process enters the co-creation phase, where online content interaction and offline experiential engagement generate a dual gaze. Visitors complete an exchange of emotional energy through ritualized interactions within scenarios that blend the virtual and real. Finally, the relationship deepens. Continuously accumulated emotional energy undergoes exponential amplification through multidimensional interactions, creating a reinforcing cycle akin to a snowball effect. These three dynamically interconnected stages collectively form an open, mutually constitutive, and sustained system of meaning production. Throughout this process, the significance and value of the scenic area's internet celebrity are continually amplified until they gradually stabilize. Therefore, when shaping destination influencers, destinations and attractions should deeply leverage various platforms to meticulously uncover and understand the emotional structures of target groups. This not only involves precisely grasping the psychological needs of target audiences but is also a crucial step in mobilizing broad participation from all stakeholders to foster shared cultural identity. However, this paper focuses on a single case study and lacks comparative analysis across different cases. Future research could contrast the differences in influencer production between attractions of varying scales, such as urban landmarks and rural scenic spots.

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