ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.8, Issue 2: 91-98, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2025.080213

A Study on the Impact of Immersion and Empathy in Tourism Short Videos on University Students' Travel Intentions: A Case Study of the "Harbin Phenomenon"

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Abstract: *Short videos have become a vital channel for college students to access information and entertainment, profoundly influencing their lifestyle, including travel behavior. Grounded in the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) theory, this study takes the "Harbin Phenomenon" as a case study to investigate the impact of empathy and immersion in tourism short videos on college students' travel intentions. The frequency of short video viewing was set as a moderating variable, and data were collected and analyzed through a questionnaire survey. The findings reveal that empathy and immersion in short videos significantly and positively influence college students' travel intentions. However, the viewing frequency of short videos does not moderate the relationship between immersion, empathy, and travel intentions. This indicates that while the impact of immersion and empathy in tourism short videos is extensive, their influence on travel intentions is significantly positive. Based on these findings, the author recommends that tourism destination cultural and creative content producers prioritize the production of short videos, enhance the levels of empathy and immersion, and better stimulate the travel intentions of college students.*

Keywords: *Tourism Short Videos, Immersion, Empathy, Travel Intention*

1. Introduction

With the gradual control of the global pandemic, the tourism industry has begun to enter a period of recovery, and people's travel intentions have significantly increased. This is particularly evident among college students, whose positive attitudes towards life and openness to new experiences make them eager to travel during this period of recovery. As an important social group in China, college students represent the future of the nation and the emerging force of society. Their active thinking and strong ability to embrace new things contribute to their keen interest and enthusiasm for travel. Moreover, college students are significant consumers in the tourism market, and their travel intentions and behaviors have a substantial impact on its development.

In the era of new media, the rise of various short video platforms has compensated for the shortcomings of traditional media, such as slow dissemination speed and limited reach. The fragmented and focused nature of short videos enables them to vividly and quickly showcase the image of tourist destinations, effectively stimulating tourists' travel intentions[1].Nowadays, short videos have become an essential channel for college students to obtain information and entertainment, profoundly influencing their lifestyle, including travel behavior. Empathy and immersion are feelings that people experience while watching short videos. Previous research has shown that empathy and immersion can influence intentions and behaviors. Therefore, empathy and immersion may be important factors affecting college students' travel intentions.

The "Harbin Phenomenon" is a significant recent tourism hotspot on social media. Videos showcasing the Ice and Snow World in Harbin have spread rapidly on social media platforms, characterized by their high volume, rich content, and appealing audio-visual effects. These videos have generated extensive empathy and immersion experiences, leading to a travel boom in Harbin. This event not only demonstrates the power of tourism short videos in dissemination but also reflects college students' high level of attention and strong response to tourism short videos. Therefore, using the Harbin boom as a case study can provide an in-depth exploration of the impact of tourism short videos on college students'

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.8, Issue 2: 91-98, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2025.080213

travel intentions, which holds great research value and practical significance.

Investigating the impact of tourism short videos on college students' travel intentions can help us deeply understand the travel needs of this demographic. It also provides important strategic references for the recovery and further development of the tourism market. Additionally, this research represents an important exploration and study of tourism short videos as an emerging media communication method. It offers profound insights into more effectively understanding and utilizing this new type of media in the new media environment. In the era of new media, the study of tourism short videos holds significant theoretical and practical value. It not only promotes new developments in media research but also provides new perspectives and tools for tourism marketing and public relations strategies.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Research Hypotheses

2.1. Theoretical Foundations

2.1.1. Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) Theory

The SOR theory was initially proposed by environmental psychologists Mehrabian and Russell in 1974. This theoretical model posits that when an individual is exposed to an external stimulus (S), it elicits a specific emotional response (O) within the individual, which in turn triggers a behavioral response (R). It is a theoretical framework for studying how external environmental stimuli influence an individual's cognition or emotions and further predict behavioral responses[2]. By utilizing the SOR theory, we can gain a deeper understanding of the internal perception and subsequent reaction mechanisms of individuals after exposure to external stimuli. The SOR theory has been proven to be an effective theoretical model for studying individual behavior and has been applied in various contexts, including education, e-commerce, and advertising.

In the field of tourism research, the SOR theory has been widely used to predict and explain tourist behavior. For example, Xiang, and Fesenmaier (2015) explored how mobile applications influence tourists' behavior at destinations from the perspective of the SOR theory [3]. Wang et al. examined the impact mechanism of cultural and tourism short video promotions on users' impulsive travel intentions from the perspective of the SOR theory [4]. Nie and Chen (2024) investigated the process by which tourist-generated content, through cognitive evaluations of perceived trust and perceived usefulness, ultimately promotes travel intentions based on the SOR theory [5].

Based on the above analysis, this study regards short videos as external stimuli, empathy and immersion as organismic responses, and travel intentions as the ultimate behavioral response. It aims to explore how empathy and immersion in short videos influence travel intentions.

2.2. Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

2.2.1. Empathy Theory

Empathy theory originated in the field of psychology and primarily focuses on an individual's understanding and perception of others' emotions (Davis, 1983) [6].. Most studies regard empathy as a capability in social interactions. Ickes (2003) defined empathy as “the ability of an individual to understand and judge others' psychological feelings”[7]. Singer (2006) argued that empathy is “the ability of an individual to react emotionally to others' feelings based on self- and other-awareness and evaluation” [8]. With the deepening of research, empathy theory has been widely applied in multiple fields, including sociology and communication studies. In communication studies, empathy is regarded as an important pathway for audiences to establish emotional connections with media content (Zillmann, 1994) [9]. In recent years, with the popularity of social media and online videos, empathy theory has found new applications in internet communication research. Studies have found that when audiences empathize with characters or scenes in online videos, it enhances their reception and understanding of the information (Sundar & Limperos, 2013) [10] . During the pandemic, empathy has led to the perception of destination images and further influenced travel intentions (Zheng et al., 2022) [11]. In the creation of short videos, the use of characters and plotlines can positively influence viewers' emotions and feelings, immersing them through visual language and evoking empathy. Empathy can, to some extent, prompt prosocial behaviors and thus influence individuals' actions (Meng, 1985) [12] . Based on the above studies, it can be concluded that short videos can induce empathy, which in turn affects individuals' intentions and behaviors. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

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H1: Empathy has a significant positive effect on travel intention.

2.2.2. Immersion Theory

Immersion theory was first introduced by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) in his "Flow Experience" theory [13], focusing primarily on the degree to which individuals are fully engaged in an activity. With the development of virtual reality technology, immersion theory has been widely applied in media research. Studies have found that immersive experiences can enhance the attractiveness and satisfaction of media content for audiences (Jennings & Weiler, 2006) [14]. In tourism research, immersion is considered an important factor in enhancing the attractiveness of tourist destinations (Tussyadiah, Wang, Jia, & Fesenmaier, 2017) [15] . Liu et al (2019) argued that immersion plays a significant role in the experience of tourism consumers, with stronger immersion leading to a greater intention to re-engage in the experience (Liu, 2019) [16]. Li Zhouming (2024) suggested that immersion positively influences tourism decision-making[17].Based on the above studies, it can be observed that in today's rapidly evolving media landscape, the multi-sensory experiences provided by short videos, such as music and visuals, can create a sense of presence and even immersion for viewers. This immersive experience can influence their cognition and behavior. Based on this, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Immersion significantly and positively affects travel intention.

2.2.3. The Moderating Role of Short Video Viewing Frequency

With the proliferation and development of new media, short videos have become increasingly integrated into people's daily lives, with many individuals developing a habit of watching short videos daily. As previously mentioned, watching short videos is associated with empathy and immersion experiences. The frequency of watching short videos may further enhance these experiences. Frequent viewing may lead to a deeper understanding of the video content, more reflection, and stronger emotional responses, thereby increasing viewers' immersion and empathy. On the other hand, due to the limited nature of video materials and content creators' innovation capabilities, frequent viewing may also cause viewers to become desensitized to the video content, thereby reducing their immersion and empathy. Based on this, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: The frequency of short video viewing plays a moderating role between immersion and travel intention.

H4: The frequency of short video viewing plays a moderating role between empathy and travel intention.

3. Research Methods

This study employed a questionnaire survey method, distributing electronic questionnaires via "Wenjuanxing" to collect data. The research sample consisted of users who had viewed Harbin tourism short videos during the peak period of Harbin's popularity. A screening question was set: "Did you watch Harbin tourism short videos during the peak period?" A total of 83 valid questionnaires were collected, with a response rate of 100%.

3.1. Case Selection

The Harbin boom event was selected as the starting point for this study. During this event, a large number of related short videos were posted on social media platforms, which facilitated data collection due to the high number of viewers. Additionally, during the three-day New Year's holiday, Harbin received over 3.04 million visitors and generated a total tourism revenue of 5.914 billion yuan, both of which reached historical peaks. These figures indicate that the event had a significant tourism impact and thus holds research value.

3.2. Scale Design

The questionnaire used in this study included the following sections: demographics, short videos, short video viewing frequency, travel intention, empathy, and immersion. The demographics section consisted of gender, disposable income, and age. The short video section recorded whether participants had viewed Harbin-related short videos. The travel intention scale was adapted from the research of Lepp et al. (Lepp, A., & Gibson, H. 2008) [18]. The empathy scale was adapted from the research of Wang Ting et al[19].

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4. Results Analysis

4.1. Sample Analysis

Table1: Statistical analysis of the demographic characteristics of the respondents

Name	Option	Frequency	Percentage(%)	Cumulative Percentage(%)
Gender	Male	23	27.71	27.71
	Female	60	72.29	100.00
Monthly Salary(Yuan/RMB)	Under100 yuan	5	6.02	6.02
	1000-1500 yuan	19	22.89	28.92
	1501-2000 yuan	31	37.35	66.27
	2001-3000 yuan	19	22.89	89.16
	3001-4000 yuan	4	4.82	93.98
	4000 yuan above	5	6.02	100.00
Age	18-20	78	93.98	93.98
	21-25	4	4.82	98.80
	25above	1	1.20	100.00
Total		83	100.0	100.0

As table 1 shows, the majority of the samples in this data collection are female, with a total of 60.0 individuals, accounting for 72.29%. The disposable monthly income of the respondents is mostly distributed in the range of "1501-2000 yuan," which accounts for 37.35%. In terms of age, over 90% of the samples chose the option "18-20 years old."

Table2: Frequency of viewing short videos

Name	Option	Frequency	Percentage(%)	Cumulative Percentage(%)
How often do you watch short videos?	Never or almost never	5	6.02	6.02
	Less than half an hour per day	8	9.64	15.66
	Half an hour to 1 hour per day	27	32.53	48.19
	1 hour to 2 hours per day	20	24.10	72.29
	2 hour to 3 hours per day	10	12.05	84.34
	More than 3 hours per day	13	15.66	100.00
Total		83	100.0	100.0

As can be seen in Table 2, the highest number of respondents chose “Watch half an hour to 1 hour per day” and “Watch 1 hour to 2 hours per day,” indicating that the surveyed individuals are primarily college students who have the habit of watching short videos.

4.2. Reliability Analysis

Reliability analysis targets quantitative data and measures whether the responses from the sample are reliable, that is, whether the participants have genuinely answered the scale items. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Cronbach α value) indicates the level of reliability: if it is above 0.8, the test or scale is considered to have excellent reliability; a reliability coefficient above 0.7 is acceptable; if it is above 0.6, the scale should be revised but still holds value; if it is below 0.6, the scale items need to be redesigned.

Table3: Cronbach reliability analysis

Number of Items	Sample Size	Cronbach's α Coefficient
13	83	0.920

As can be seen from the table 3, the reliability of this study is 0.920, which is much higher than 0.8, indicating that the scale used in this study has excellent reliability.

4.3. Validity Analysis

Validity research is used to analyze whether the research items are rational and meaningful. Validity analysis employs factor analysis as a data analysis method. It conducts a comprehensive evaluation through several indicators, including the KMO value, communality, variance explained rate, and factor

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loading coefficients, to verify the level of validity of the data. The KMO value is used to assess the suitability of information extraction, the communality value helps to eliminate irrational research items, the variance explained rate indicates the level of information extraction, and the factor loading coefficients are used to measure the correspondence between factors (dimensions) and items.

Table 4: Validity analysis

KMO Value		0.866
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx Chi-Squre	801.499
	df	66
	sig	0.000

As table4 shows, The validity was verified using the KMO and Bartlett's tests. The KMO value is 0.866, which is greater than 0.8, indicating that the research data are highly suitable for information extraction (this also reflects good validity).

4.4. Relationship Analysis

4.4.1. Linear Regression Analysis

Linear regression analysis was employed to examine the measurement relationships between different dimensions. Immersion and empathy were used as independent variables, while travel intention was set as the dependent variable. Linear regression analysis was conducted to verify the proposed hypotheses.

Table 5: Linear regression analysis results of empathy, immersion and travel intention

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	p	Collinearity Diagnostics	
	B	Standard Error	Beta			VIF	Tolerance
Constant	1.878	0.297	-	6.326	0.000**	-	-
Immersion	0.314	0.134	0.356	2.337	0.022*	3.222	0.310
Empathy	0.307	0.142	0.329	2.160	0.034*	3.222	0.310
R^2	0.430						
Adjusted R^2	0.416						
F	F (2,79)=29.821,p=0.000						
D-W value	1.923						
Dependent Variable: Travel Intention							
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01							

As can be seen from the table 5, the model equation is: Travel Intention = 1.878 + 0.314 × Immersion + 0.307 × Empathy. The R2value of the model is 0.430, which means that immersion and empathy together explain 43.0% of the variation in travel intention.

When conducting the F-test on the model, it was found that the model passed the F-test ($F = 29.821$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$). This indicates that at least one of the variables—immersion or empathy—has a significant impact on travel intention. Additionally, the model was tested for multicollinearity, and all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were found to be less than 5, indicating that there is no multicollinearity issue. Moreover, the Durbin-Watson (D-W) value is close to 2, suggesting that there is no autocorrelation in the model, and the sample data are independent of each other. Overall, the model is well-fitted.

The specific analysis reveals that the regression coefficient for immersion is 0.314 ($t = 2.337$, $p = 0.022 < 0.05$), indicating that immersion has a significant positive impact on travel intention. The regression coefficient for empathy is 0.307 ($t = 2.160$, $p = 0.034 < 0.05$), indicating that empathy also has a significant positive impact on travel intention. In summary, both immersion and empathy have significant positive impacts on travel intention. These findings validate Hypotheses H3 and H6.

4.4.2. Moderating Effect

The study of moderating effects examines whether the impact of independent variables (immersion and empathy) on the dependent variable (travel intention) varies significantly under different conditions of the moderating variable (short video viewing frequency). In this study, the independent variables (immersion and empathy) and the moderating variable (short video viewing frequency) were processed using centering, while the dependent variable (travel intention) was left unprocessed.

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Table 6: Analysis results of short video viewing frequency playing a moderating role in immersion and travel intention

	Model 1					Model 2					Model 3				
	B	Standard Error	t	p	β	B	Standard Error	t	p	β	B	Standard Error	t	p	β
Constant	4.104	0.063	64.876	0.000**	-	4.104	0.063	65.304	0.000**	-	4.099	0.065	62.701	0.000**	-
Immersion	0.555	0.077	7.250	0.000**	0.630	0.585	0.079	7.418	0.000**	0.664	0.589	0.081	7.307	0.000**	0.669
Short Video Viewing Frequency						-0.067	0.047	-1.435	0.155	-0.128	-0.066	0.047	-1.397	0.166	-0.126
Immersion × Short Video Viewing											0.016	0.055	0.297	0.767	0.026
R^2	0.397					0.412					0.413				
Adjusted R^2	0.389					0.397					0.390				
F Value	F (1,80)=52.568,p=0.000					F (2,79)=27.663,p=0.000					F (3,78)=18.258,p=0.000				
$\triangle R^2$	0.397					0.015					0.001				
△F Value	F (1,80)=52.568,p=0.000					F (1,79)=2.061,p=0.155					F (1,78)=0.088,p=0.767				
Dependent Variable: Travel Intention															
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01															

As table 6 shows, the moderating effect is divided into three models. Model 1 includes the independent variable (immersion). Model 2 adds the moderating variable (short video viewing frequency) based on Model 1, and Model 3 further incorporates the interaction term (the product of the independent variable and the moderating variable) based on Model 2.

For Model 1, the purpose is to examine the impact of the independent variable (immersion) on the dependent variable (travel intention) without considering the interference of the moderating variable (short video viewing frequency). As shown in the table, the independent variable (immersion) is significant ($t = 7.250$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$), indicating that immersion has a significant impact on travel intention.

The moderating effect can be examined in two ways: First, by checking the significance of the change in the F-value from Model 2 to Model 3; and second, by examining the significance of the interaction term in Model 3. This analysis adopts the second approach. As shown in the table, the interaction term between immersion and short video viewing frequency is not significant ($t = 0.297$, $p = 0.767 > 0.05$). Additionally, since Model 1 shows that X (immersion) has an impact on Y (travel intention), this indicates that the effect of immersion on travel intention remains consistent across different levels of the moderating variable (short video viewing frequency).

Conclusion: Short video viewing frequency does not play a moderating role between immersion and travel intention. Therefore, Hypothesis H3 is not supported.

Table 7: Analysis results of short video viewing frequency playing a moderating role in empathy and travel intention

	Model 1					Model 2					Model 3				
	B	Standard Error	t	p	β	B	Standard Error	t	p	β	B	Standard Error	t	p	β
Constant	4.104	0.066	62.462	0.000**	-	4.104	0.066	62.251	0.000**	-	4.114	0.067	61.287	0.000**	-
Empathy	0.529	0.081	6.549	0.000**	0.591	0.539	0.082	6.541	0.000**	0.602	0.533	0.083	6.440	0.000**	0.596
Short Video Viewing Frequency						-0.033	0.048	-0.678	0.500	-0.062	-0.035	0.048	-0.726	0.470	-0.067
Empathy × Short Video Viewing											-0.048	0.058	-0.835	0.406	-0.076
R^2	0.349					0.353					0.358				
Adjusted R^2	0.341					0.336					0.334				
F value	F (1,80)=42.888,p=0.000					F (2,79)=21.529,p=0.000					F (3,78)=14.530,p=0.000				
$\triangle R^2$	0.349					0.004					0.006				
△F value	F (1,80)=42.888,p=0.000					F (1,79)=0.460,p=0.500					F (1,78)=0.697,p=0.406				
Dependent Variable: Travel Intention															
* p<0.05 ** p<0.01															

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.8, Issue 2: 91-98, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2025.080213

As can be seen from the table 7, the moderating effect is divided into three models. Model 1 includes the independent variable (empathy). Model 2 adds the moderating variable (short video viewing frequency) based on Model 1, and Model 3 further incorporates the interaction term (the product of the independent variable and the moderating variable) based on Model 2.

For Model 1, the purpose is to examine the impact of the independent variable (empathy) on the dependent variable (travel intention) without considering the interference of the moderating variable (short video viewing frequency). As shown in the table, the independent variable (empathy) is significant ($t = 6.549$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$), indicating that empathy has a significant impact on travel intention.

The moderating effect can be examined in two ways: First, by checking the significance of the change in the F-value from Model 2 to Model 3; and second, by examining the significance of the interaction term in Model 3. This analysis adopts the second approach. As shown in the table, the interaction term between empathy and short video viewing frequency is not significant ($t = -0.835$, $p = 0.406 > 0.05$). Additionally, since Model 1 shows that X (empathy) has an impact on Y (travel intention), this indicates that the effect of empathy on travel intention remains consistent across different levels of the moderating variable (short video viewing frequency).

Conclusion: Short video viewing frequency does not play a moderating role between empathy and travel intention. Therefore, Hypothesis H4 is not supported.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Research Conclusions

5.1.1. Empathy and Immersion Have a Significant Positive Impact on Travel Intention

The research findings indicate that the empathy and immersion experienced by viewers while watching short videos significantly enhance their travel intentions. Specifically, viewers are emotionally affected by the characters in the videos or are drawn to the cultural and natural scenes presented, leading to strong empathy that promotes their willingness to visit the featured tourist destinations. Short videos that combine audio and visual elements to recreate the context of a tourist destination can provide viewers with a sense of presence, or immersion, which in turn fosters their travel intentions.

5.1.2 Short Video Viewing Frequency does not Moderate the Relationship between Immersion, Empathy, and Travel Intention

The research results show that regardless of how frequently viewers watch short videos, the degree to which they are influenced by immersion and empathy remains the same. This suggests that the impact of empathy and immersion in tourism videos on viewers is uniform, regardless of whether they are frequent or occasional viewers. This finding highlights that the immersive and empathetic effects of tourism short videos have broad influence and should be recognized for their ability to transcend viewing habits and significantly impact travel intentions.

5.2. Recommendations

5.2.1. Uncover and Display Relevant Elements to Enhance Empathy

When creating short videos, producers should delve deeper into and highlight elements such as the cultural stories, historical backgrounds, and natural landscapes of tourist destinations to evoke empathetic responses from viewers. For example, by telling the life stories of local people or showcasing unique natural and cultural attractions, viewers can be emotionally resonated with, thereby enhancing their appeal to the tourist destination.

5.2.2. Optimize Video Design to Improve Immersive Experience

Producers should pay more attention to the visual quality and audio design of short videos, enabling viewers to better immerse themselves in the environment of the tourist destination. For instance, using high-definition visuals and stereo sound effects can make viewers feel as if they are on-site, enhancing their sense of immersion. Additionally, the editing and storytelling of short videos should be designed to be smoother and more engaging to avoid disrupting the immersive experience of viewers.

5.2.3. Implement Interactive Strategies to Deepen Empathy and Immersion

Social media platforms can offer interactive features such as commenting, sharing, and liking, which

ISSN 2616-5783 Vol.8, Issue 2: 91-98, DOI: 10.25236/AJHSS.2025.080213

allow viewers to become more actively involved in the process of watching short videos and further enhance their empathy and immersion. For example, producers can encourage viewers to comment and share within the video or design interactive segments that involve viewers in the creation of video content.

5.2.4. Continuous Research and Feedback to Better Meet Market Demands

Tourism organizations and related enterprises should continuously track and study viewers' feedback to understand whether their empathy and immersion experiences have improved and whether this has positively impacted their travel intentions. Based on this feedback, producers can continuously adjust and optimize the content and format of short videos to better meet the needs of the audience.

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