

Research Article

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YouTube and TikTok as Platforms for Learning about Others: The Case of Non-Chinese Travel Videos in Shanghai Disneyland

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Abstract

Purpose: Due to existing Disney fandom and the increased popularity of online travel documentation, there is an opportunity to study brand internationalization, online video culture, and fandom. There are questions of whether video based social media allows for more humane representations of cultural others and to what extent the topic of content shapes representation.

Methodology: In this study, an inductive qualitative method is applied to top YouTube travel videos and TikToks to analyze how non-Chinese visitors to Shanghai Disneyland represent their experience and mediate cultural difference.

Findings: Videos often exhibit the technologically advanced attractions of the park, inspiring awe and envy in comments. A minority of videos discuss the behavior of Chinese guests and mark them as non-normative and different from expected Disney guest behavior. However, there are differences in representation on YouTube and TikTok from sub-genres, comments, gazes, and closeness to brand.

Practical implications: Brands entering the Chinese market must also be aware of how their accommodations appear to loyal non-Chinese online fandoms. This study shows how reoccurring tropes of travel writing influence online travel media, which also shapes perceptions of China, and is reinforced by platform incentives for controversy and sampling diverse cultures.

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Social implications: Technological awe and critiques of guest behavior are structured by Disney fan culture, which includes a possessive protectiveness over the brand due to its close association with identity. These elements play out slightly differently on the platforms of YouTube and TikTok. Top YouTube videos tend to feature outward-focusing gazes, whether they are disembodied ride-throughs or cultural “education.” Top TikToks turn the gaze inward and focus on experience.

Value: This study contrasts use of two major platforms, YouTube and TikTok, to examine mediation of Shanghai Disneyland. Studies contrasting platform use of the same topic are rare, as is the area of focus. This study shows the usefulness of comparing platforms on the same topic.

Keywords: Shanghai Disneyland, YouTube, TikTok, China, fandom

Social media sites are popular platforms to catalog travel and preview destinations (Crowel et al. 2014; He et al. 2021; Kim et al. 2015). On Instagram, accounts like @ofleatherandlace exemplify how travel vlogging can be a lucrative brand for influencers (Gulla 2021). Everyday users also turn to social media to document their own travels and express their ideal selves (Blackwood 2019). However, as western users post to social media documenting their travels, there is a risk of exotifying locals and locales, inadvertently reproducing colonial tropes from the travel writing genre (Smith 2018). An understudied area is how travel vlogging on sites like YouTube and TikTok enable and/or constrain the representation of cultural others. There is some promise that online travel videos are a more humanizing medium and genre when compared to the mainstream news media in representing others (Motahar et al. 2021).

In this paper YouTube and TikTok travel videos from non-Chinese social media users are analyzed as they document their travels to Shanghai Disneyland in China. Using Shanghai Disneyland as a site of study presents unique opportunities when looking at what YouTube and TikTok enable and constrain. First, there is a small cottage industry of Instagram profiles, YouTube channels, and viral short videos centered around Disney parks (Soto-Vásquez 2021). This presents a wider audience of viewers for content posted on YouTube and TikTok, as well as inviting inevitable comparisons of the park and guest culture to other Disney parks. Second, extending the first opportunity – Disney parks have been described as an evolving museum of U.S. American hegemonic values by cultural studies scholars, such as faith in technology and progress, suburban lifestyles, and a primarily visual culture (King 1981; King and O’Boyle 2011). So, there is also an element of cultural translation and controversy at play and another question is whether the focus on one narrow topic affects how cultural others are presented in travel videos.

Nevertheless, the focus of this article remains on doing what Hayles (2004) calls “media specific analysis,” to compare how YouTube and TikTok differ as platforms for the representation of cultural others. To begin the paper, the

uniqueness of travel as a social media phenomenon is reviewed, with a focus on travel video genre conventions and platform affordances on YouTube and TikTok in particular. Here, critiques of contemporary practices in travel media content are presented as part of the western tourist gaze in relation to genre conventions. Afterward, Shanghai Disneyland as a site of study is contextualized with a discussion on the dangers of cultural translation with an experience so closely associated with U.S. cultural hegemony. The analysis focuses on the unique ways in which travel videos are used to represent Shanghai Disneyland, including travel vloggers' depiction of the park as "distinctly Chinese," their portrayal of local customs, and the emphasis on technological innovation. Attention is paid though to how YouTube and TikTok differ as sites of representation.

1 YouTube Travel Vlogs and Short TikToks

1.1 Platform Comparison

From a "media specific analysis" perspective (Hayles 2004), YouTube and TikTok afford different kinds of representation by the way they are digitally architected (Nagy and Neff 2015). YouTube is owned by the U.S.-based technology company Google, and over a billion hours of content is watched on it every day (Goodrow 2017). YouTube defies easy categorization since it functions as a video sharing site with uploaded videos lasting anywhere from a few seconds to many hours. On YouTube major companies can share movie trailers, sports highlights, and news clips alongside user-generated content that may receive a range of views, from single digits to millions (Burgess and Green 2018). As such, YouTube has enabled user-generated content that defies common genres—from do-it-yourself (DIY) to product unboxing videos (Poell et al. 2021). Across its 18 genre categories the network effects are strong, with a small number of YouTube channels earning the most views (Bärtl 2018).

TikTok is owned by the China-based company ByteDance and has rapidly grown in popularity, with some reports showing it was the most accessed site in 2021, surpassing Google (Rosenblatt 2021). TikTok as a platform rewards short, memetic videos that make it onto users' for you page – enabling virality. Popular TikToks function memetically, meaning that the creator creatively reuses macro materials, in this case soundbites of music and/or narration, and layers an intertextual reference to the macro (Shifman 2014). TikTok has very similar application features to its Chinese counterpart, Douyin, minus some filter localization and different external governance (Kaye et al. 2021). More importantly, as Kaye et al. (2021) argue, TikTok and Douyin "circumscribe creativity by presenting users with suggestions for content creation via trending pages and hashtag search filters" (p. 246). They argue that circumscribed creativity, while setting parameters for

what can be made on the platform, also transforms users from content consumers to creators quickly. As memetic audio is played on the for you page, users can easily click on the audio and create their own interpretation of the audio.

Besides video length and ownership, the primary difference between the platforms is the barrier of entry. While YouTube is potentially open to any creator, as Bärthel (2018) shows, the channels with the most followers have sophisticated and pricey production capability—not to mention the hours of labor behind producing videos. For now, TikTok enables a lower barrier of entry since it is primarily mobile phone-based and the homepage promotes passive viewing, which exposes users to trending content quickly and converts them into producers easily. While both platforms allow and encourage user comments, TikTok also has a unique feature where a content creator can directly quote a comment and respond to it in a new video. Like elsewhere on the internet, comments from the so called “bottom half” of the web can be mean, infuriating, but also informative and irreverent – representing an important part of the online experience (Reagle 2015).

One area of note – both YouTube and TikTok utilize algorithmic and deep learning driven video recommendation systems designed to keep users on the platform as long as possible (Schrage 2020). Yet the two platforms differ in how they are architected in suggesting videos. Many have noted and criticized YouTube for leading users down “rabbit holes” of misinformation stemming from watching recommended videos since “YouTube creates filter bubbles where viewers are exposed to repetitive, homogenous, and often biased content” (Tang et al. 2021, p. 2). However, as Pietrobruno (2018) argues, the YouTube recommendation system also “counters cultural homogenization through its circulation of diverse representations produced by the creativity of its users” when user generated content is included alongside official representations (p. 524). TikTok’s algorithm of suggesting videos on its for you page has been called its “secret weapon,” and explains its rapid rise in popularity (Zhang and Liu 2021). As Zhang & Liu explain, the “the algorithm integrates the content of the user’s uploaded videos, and the categories of videos liked by the user,” which almost eerily adapts to the users’ content preferences by tracking the slightest signals of interest (p. 846).

1.2 Travel Videos Online

So how do platform affordances shape online travel videos? Younger travelers are both avid consumers and producers of user-generated travel content, which is driving the future of travel destination marketing. Millennials (and likely Gen-Zers) represent a unique group when it comes to traveling; they’re often more willing to share their experiences online through social media posts and videos shortly after returning from an adventure (Kim et al. 2015). This consumption and production of

travel-related media occurs on various social media platforms. Travel vlogs have been studied on YouTube, where longer videos often enable viewers to vicariously relive travel memories, plan trips, and engage with places they may never actually plan to visit by developing a sense of place (Gholamhosseinzadeh et al. 2021; He et al. 2021; Peralta 2019; Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier 2009). There is also growing interest in what TikTok and other short-form video platforms enable regarding travel mediation. Du et al. (2020) find that the use of TikTok blurs the line between tourism and quotidian life, since the mediation of the visit is extended past the trip. Further research on short-form video platforms remains scarce, however.

While the platform is not used solely for video, studies of travel content on Instagram are quite relevant for this study. Soto-Vásquez (2021) finds that superfans of Disney parks often mediate their experiences of visiting the original Disneyland in California on Instagram using some common themes. Influencer posts primarily evoke childhood nostalgia and often portray an innocent femininity. There is also a strong genre of posts that focus on consuming and reviewing Disney park food, merchandise, and attractions, to the point that those accounts' "sense of identity is built by the consumption of experiences at places like Disneyland" (Soto-Vásquez 2021, p. 604). Travel posts by westerners on Instagram are the focus of Smith (2018), who observes the "consistent visual motifs on Instagram echo[ing] a colonial iconography that sees tourist destinations as available for possession and consumption" (p. 172). One of the ways travel influencers do this in their posts is by casting the inhabitants of the places they visit as the other, which is especially the case when they visit the Global South. These tropes resemble mid-century neo-colonial travel writing (Bruner 2005). Inhabitants are visually de-emphasized while the western traveler is foregrounded, both literally and figuratively. In several cases the western visitors don the customary clothing of the place they are visiting while also spending time with locals, hoping to consume a real and authentic experience. Smith (2018) argues that this also otherizes since "the 'resource' of local identity can thus be donned and discarded at will" (p. 185) and becomes a mere commodity. As Smith identifies, there is a risk when representing other cultures through online travel media of recreating colonial tropes. Jamerson (2017) shows how the medium itself can mystify Orientalism by arguing "it packages biased tourist representations of otherness as 'unbiased' online consumer reviews" (p. 132). And countries themselves risk missing out as a tourism destination if they do not also conform to established othering stereotypes (Carrigan 2011).

1.3 Are Video Based Social Media Platforms More Humanizing?

It is unknown if these othering practices studied on Instagram extend to travel videos on YouTube and TikTok. Dinhopl and Gretzel (2016) argue that travel videos

differ from travel photography in five distinct ways. First, travel vlogs require more extensive editing than photography. Second, the editing process increases the digital distance between the edited and unedited raw material. Third, travel videos form a distinct composite and unified experience, telling stories more coherently than snapshots in time and without accompanying captions. Finally, video making also privileges movement and action. These elements that distinguish travel videos from photography align well with the theme park experience too. Attractions tell stories and feature constant movement, usually taking place in dark lighting with effects that are diminished by flash photography (Langhof and Güldenbergh 2019; Rahn 2011). While there are fantastic landscapes in the parks for photography, the captions often work to provide the emotional context (Soto-Vásquez 2021).

In the context of how cultures are represented, Motahar et al. (2021) argue that YouTube travel vlogs of Iran allow for more humane portrayals than the mainstream media does. They find that travel vlogs on YouTube gave an opportunity for Iranians to speak for themselves on camera – humanizing them. Importantly, this also means separating the Iranian people from the policies and actions of their government, transforming a generalized and stigmatized other into an individual. Similarly, Rosa and Soto-Vásquez (2022) study the potential for representing migrant others on Instagram. They found that while most Latin American migrants were presented negatively in pictures, there were a few examples of videos where the migrant was presented more humanely, namely by being able to share their own story in their own voice.

On the other hand, other studies have found conflicting evidence. Peralta (2019) notes while the Philippines as a travel destination was presented in a positive light by non-Filipino vloggers on YouTube, locals were generally absent in their videos. Instead, the primarily messages in the videos were about the affordability of the Philippines and its natural beauty. And while not focused explicitly on travel, Guo and Harlow (2014) find not only that othering stereotypes were being reproduced by almost all (85%) of the content analyzed on the video sharing platform, but that content was more popular – receiving more views and engagement. Illustrating the potential for platform affordance to further entrench racial stereotypes, they say “the recommendation system and popularity-based search function on YouTube usually make the popular content even more popular” (p. 299).

In summary, YouTube and TikTok enable certain affordances. YouTube allows for a wide range of creative freedom but has a high production barrier of entry for subscribers. TikTok has a more circumscribed parameter of creativity but exposes videos to wider audiences more quickly. Travel videos as a genre appear on both platforms and can mediate place for those who have never been there. Travel media, however, can otherize through commodification and the Western gaze. The unresolved question is to what extent do these unique affordances allow for the

representation of others in travel videos, especially in relation to a distinct global brand.

2 Contextualizing Shanghai Disneyland as a Travel Destination

As Rosa and Soto-Vásquez (2022) argue, “representations derived from the mass media cannot be ignored, as they form a rhetorical and visual baggage with any study of social media representation” must contend with (p. 3). In this case, the history, legacy, and cultural baggage of the Walt Disney Company must be considered and placed in context. Shanghai Disneyland stands out as one of the most unique parks in the themed-experience portfolio of the Walt Disney Company. During his dedication speech at the opening of Shanghai Disneyland, then Walt Disney Company CEO Bob Iger noted that the park was “authentically Disney and distinctly Chinese” (Levine 2016). Shanghai Disneyland is the largest, newest, and most expensive international Disney Park and marks a different approach to internationalization for the company. Considering cultural differences and previous issues with translating the uniquely U.S. American values of Magic Kingdom parks in Paris and Hong Kong (Cheung and McCarthy 2019), the company strived to truly integrate local culture and customs into the theme park experience (Barboza and Barnes 2016; Weiss et al. 2017).

The juxtaposition of a brand strongly associated with U.S. American values next to a very conscious overture to Chinese tastes and values, presents a unique space for analysis. This is especially important given that Chinese tourists have been labeled by the media as bad tourists and this baggage might carry over into online representation (Zhang et al. 2019). Disney has a strong, international fanbase, which has been studied as an impressive content generating sub-genre on the internet as it has also exemplified some of the most toxic elements of online fan culture (Soto-Vásquez 2021; Tremaine 2021). The online travel vlogs studied here intervene right in the middle of this cultural juxtaposition. The notion of an authentically Disney and distinctly Chinese park is a theme of coverage in both mainstream press (Barboza and Barnes 2016) and the academic literature (Weiss et al. 2017).

From the outset, Disney was willing to make a few concessions to gain success in China and infused the “authentically Disney and distinctly Chinese” spirit into every step of the design and building process (Barboza and Barnes 2016). For example, Disney partnered with the Shanghai government to win local support for the project, including consultations with Chinese officials at each stage of construction. Classic Disney park attractions were discarded or revised to appeal to

local cultural values. For example, attractions like the Jungle Cruise and Big Thunder Mountain Railroad were discarded for their association with Western imperialism (Francaviglia 2011). The placement of Frontierland in the original Disneyland reflected Walt Disney's fondness for the nostalgic U.S. American West and "reveals [that] the conquest of the West was an event so significant, and so instructive, that it need[s] to be repeated endlessly as part of both the education and entertainment," according to Francaviglia (2011, pp. 82–83). However, this event has no significance to Chinese visitors and was thus scrapped. The Haunted Mansion was also discarded due to Chinese attitudes around respect for the dead (Jennings 2016). Adventureland was revised to become Adventure Isle and Treasure Cove, disassociating them from their historical colonial relationship and placing them within a fictional setting (Cheung and McCarthy 2019).

Other classic Disney attractions have been technically upgraded with the latest in projection, light & sound effects, and animatronics. The dazzling technology exhibited in shows like "Eye of the Storm: Captain Jack's Stunt Spectacular" and in attractions like Tron Lightcycle Power Run, inspires awe and even envy when compared to U.S.-based attractions, which are over 50 years old in some cases. For example, Disney fans used the hashtag #ThanksShanghai on Twitter to blame the cost-cutting of U.S. parks on the 2016 opening of the park in Shanghai using a zero-sum logic (Niles 2016), further showing how online Disney fandom is antagonistic to the company like many other fandoms (Johnson 2007).

In summary, Shanghai Disneyland represents a break from past non-U.S. parks. Local culture was emphasized at every stage of development. The park is designed to cater to Chinese tourists first, and the result is a park that is different from any other Disney park. Nevertheless, non-Chinese visitors—perhaps due to it still being a Disney park—have mediated their experiences in the park via videos posted online.

3 Methodology

This study employs an inductive qualitative analysis to analyze Shanghai Disneyland travel videos from YouTube and TikTok. This approach mirrors the overall methodology that Asakura and Craig (2014) used in their study of LGBTQ+ YouTube videos, minus how the sample was constructed and the topic. Inductive qualitative analysis is a useful and appropriate way to study this topic since it allows for the researcher to identify emergent themes in the data without imposing preconceived codes (Cavanagh 1997). Hsieh and Shannon (2005) term this kind of qualitative analysis as conventional, specifying that it is most "appropriate when existing theory or research literature on a phenomenon is limited" (p. 1279). This is

certainly the case for travel videos that are not yet a well-researched or documented subgenre.

To collect the data, the term “Shanghai Disneyland” was searched for on YouTube and TikTok. The top 20 videos from each platform were included in the sample. For YouTube, the top 20 are the videos with the most views. For TikTok, views are not available, so video likes were used instead. The number of videos collected for each platform was determined to achieve a sample with maximum variation while limiting the number to a reasonable amount for deep qualitative analysis. Some videos were excluded from the final sample, including videos from official Disney accounts and from news organizations since neither fit the stated research purpose. The length of YouTube videos ranges from 3 min and 12 s to 27 min and 12 s. The length of TikTok videos ranges from 15 to 59 s. A graphical representation of the most common words in the video titles is presented in Figure 1.

Once the posts were collected and added into a spreadsheet, the author read the posts and engaged the data in several rounds of coding to identify themes and their relationship to each other (Lindlof and Taylor 2019; Tracy 2013). During the first reading, each video was viewed, and memo writing was used to document initial thoughts, reactions, and ideas using scratch paper (Charmaz 2006). During the memo writing stage, the author would jot down on paper the general topic, genre, and two-three words that describe the video. Top comments were also noted. As patterns and connections were being observed by the author, short memos were

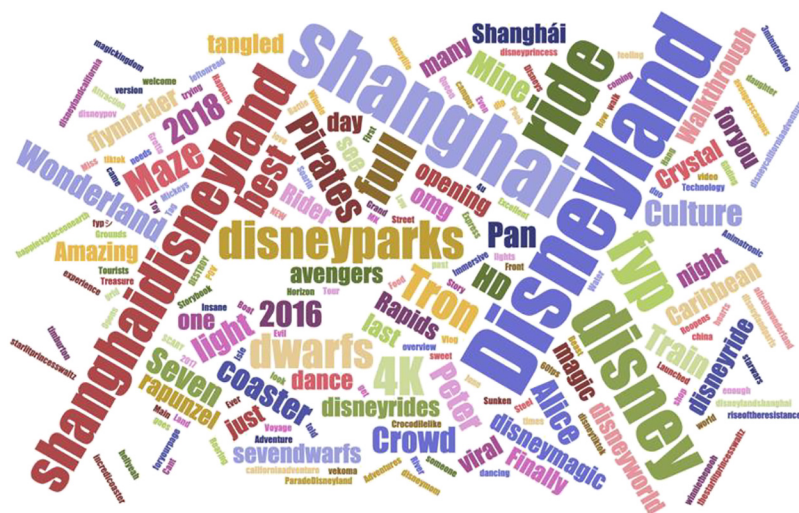


Figure 1: Wordcloud of titles used in most liked and viewed videos.

drafted to make the “conceptual leaps” from raw data to abstractions (Birks et al. 2008). For example, one early memo notes the reoccurrence of backgrounding of Chinese guests in videos. This was later explored in two categories of data, both as a sub-genre unique to YouTube and as a cultural trope. After the first reading, broad categories were initially defined. A second reading (focused coding) was then used to develop and describe codes as they reoccurred in videos. These codes were then sorted into categories, which also helped define the categories more clearly and explore concepts (axial coding). Given the sensitive nature of some of the data, the author’s background in approaching this data is important. The author is an early career junior scholar working at a U.S. institution of higher learning in a Communication department. The author identifies as a heterosexual Latino man who is a fan of Disney parks but also concerned with the cultural influence the company possess. This perspective has important implications for the data analyzed here. First, the author is quite familiar with Disney fandom culture online and has viewed similar videos to those presented here. As such, the author can contextualize what aspects of the video are unique to Disney culture and which are othering frames. However, despite this perspective, the author still is an outsider to Chinese culture and has not visited Shanghai Disneyland. While the author is comfortable critiquing Disney and its fan culture, he still retains an emotional and nostalgic connection to the brand. Nevertheless, this closeness to the topic is viewed as an asset by the author. Findings are presented in the next section.

4 “It’s a Shame I Don’t Speak Chinese, or Else I Would Have Scolded Him So Bad”: Othering & Learning in Disney Travel Videos

The overarching theme of travel videos documenting the guest experience in Shanghai Disneyland is one of constant comparison. The park is compared to other Disney parks, especially focusing on the most technologically advanced and awe-inspiring attractions. Local Chinese guest behavior is held up against what the creator often portrays as normative guest behavior. Both streams of comparison differ by platform affordances, which will be discussed in much further detail. Comparison is also structured by the unique aspects of online Disney fandom, which are seen in the channels and accounts that tend to post Disney content and are reinforced by what kind of content seems to do well on YouTube and TikTok. A summary of themes is presented in Table 1.

Before each of the analytic categories is discussed in this paper, it is worth discussing why comparison might appear in online travel videos. Returning to

Table 1: Emergent themes.

Category	Attraction awe & envy	Distinctly tourists, authentically others	Fandom ecologies: promotion & critique
Themes	Technological awe	Non-normative guest behaviors	Brand as identity
	Disembodied video ride-through	Punctuated cultural differences	Toxic fandom
		Diverse consumer experiences	Political association

Smith (2018), contemporary online travel media often revives the tropes of Western travel writing established in the 19th century. These tropes function to self-authenticate the traveler amid difference. In other words, when the traveler sees a different culture, they can then understand what their culture is through comparison. By documenting who they *are not* in writing—or now, through online video—the Western traveler both turns the experience into a commodity and others the non-Western people they encounter. As Bruner (2005) argues, the process of documenting the travel here is key, because the process of narrating and translating the experience must use intercultural assumptions.

The added layer of the Walt Disney Company further complexifies this arrangement. Disney commodifies a lot of culture. The non-Chinese travelers studied here often have experience with other Disney parks, where their expectation is a highly normative performance of emotional labor, staging, and “magic” (Bryman 2004). This is important because given the nature of YouTube and TikTok, the most likely audiences for these videos are users already drawn in by the recommendation systems discussed by Schrage (2020). The audience for these travel videos is likely Disney park fans or travel enthusiasts in general. The comments analyzed in some of the videos collected give credence to this. Thus, the comparison done by the video authors and commentors are also used to establish who is a “real” Disney fan online on top of ethnic and national difference. The following sections are the main categories of video content that flow from this theme of comparison.

4.1 Attraction Awe & Envy

Tron Lightcycle Power Run opened as part of Shanghai Disneyland in 2016. The Dutch TikTok account @thepark_explorers described it as the “coolest coaster

in the world.” The most viewed video as of April 1, 2022, on YouTube of Shanghai Disneyland is a ride-through video of the same coaster with 29.1 million views. Themed to the Tron film franchise, the attraction is notable for its unique ride vehicle, as guests ride on a motorbike instead of a traditional coaster train seat, and its futuristic lighting. In his travel vlog of Shanghai Disneyland vlogger Alan Estrada (alanxelmundo) dedicates three full minutes out of his 27-min-long video to majestic slow-motion shots of the coaster at night, with the spectacular lights glowing in the dark alongside his ride-through of the attraction. He narrates his amazement, stating, “an applause for the engineers who designed this,” and calls it an incredible experience. Three of the top YouTube videos and six of the top TikToks feature the attraction.

The fixation on the Tron attraction exemplifies a reoccurring theme of videos about Shanghai Disneyland—that of *technological awe*. Here attractions like Tron, Pirates of the Caribbean: Battle for the Sunken Treasure, and Peter Pan are described as immersive and amazing with a framing that the audience must experience these rides. And the general tenor of comments seems to agree. One top YouTube comment states that “the imagineering i[s] totally next level” on the Pirate attraction. Comments from a ride through of the Tron attraction call it “incredible” and “face melting.” Two of the three attractions are significantly upgraded versions of attractions found in other Disney parks. Tron most closely resembles Space Mountain, a classic Disney attraction, but is essentially a new attraction. In Shanghai there is no Space Mountain, with Tron taking its place. Chueng and McCarthy (2019) see the Tron attraction as neither distinctly American nor Chinese per se. Rather its prominent placement in Tomorrowland further reiterates the message that China is a place where futuristic technological marvels exemplify an already existing present. The aesthetic of the ride (and land) also matches the glowing, synchronized skyline of Shanghai. Shanghai’s Pirates takes the 1967 classic Disneyland attraction and upgrades it with a new trackless vehicle system, massive projection screens, and a storyline based on the popular film franchise.

The prominence of attractions in mediated travel videos is encapsulated by the code *disembodied video ride-through*. Here not only is the attraction presented fully, allowing viewers who have yet to visit the park to get a sense of the attraction layout, storyline, and new technology, but it is usually presented without any identification of who is doing the filming or their emotional reaction to the ride. Instead, the camera is directed only forward with no audible sound or words from the videographer. As mentioned earlier, three of the top YouTube videos feature a ride-through of the Tron attraction. Another 10 top videos were coded as disembodied video ride-through, with many coming from a channel called Attractions 360°. Their YouTube ride-throughs feature longer shots of the queue edited in before an uninterrupted 4K recording of the ride-through, all without narration. This is the kind of content that

Table 2: Summary of videos featuring two major attractions, as of April 1, 2022.

Attraction featured	Channels with a ride-through	Cumulative views (YouTube) and likes (TikTok)
Tron lightcycle power run	Attractions 360°, inside the magic, alanxel-mundo, themeparkexplorers, adultsindisney, livingwiththe_land	31.7 M (YouTube views), 809.6 K (TikTok likes)
Pirates of the Caribbean: battle for the Sunken treasure	Attractions 360°, inside the magic, alanxel-mundo, erikssc, Theme park Worldwide, adultsindisney, rendisney0619	11 M (YouTube views), 352.9 K (TikTok likes)

can only truly exist on YouTube – a long uninterrupted, unnarrated video ride through. Theme Park oriented channels like Attractions 360° and Inside the Magic have built sizable subscriber bases through content like this drawn from parks around the world. Table 2 summarizes this tendency.

However, in terms of representing cultural others, this online video sub-genre is ill-equipped. In one video with over 4 million views, Attractions 360° uses several long shots of the queue for Pirates of the Caribbean: Battle for the Sunken Treasure. A group ahead of the camera operator is filmed as they walk through the queue and enter their ride vehicles. As a function of this micro-genre of YouTube videos, the groups are not individualized or even heard from, minus indistinct sounds. The caption on this video also does not add much context to the experience, except that it is an amazing attraction with cutting edge technology. In other words, the mode of filming and representation for this type of video is disassociated from the actual embodied experiences for guests at Shanghai Disneyland and is repackaged for non-Chinese audiences. The guests filmed are presented as a kind of voyeuristic simulacrum and never heard from, spoken with, or even have their faces shown. This differs from official Disney park marketing, where they show guests enjoying the ride, allowing for identification with the guests. A screenshot of the disembodied ride along is presented to illustrate the difference in Figure 2.

On TikTok the *disembodied video ride along* is also present in several top videos, albeit in a shortened form to fit platform constraints. Due to the time limit of 60 s, videos contain only a short portion of the ride or edited highlights. And there is usually more textual narration to catch the viewers’ attention. For example, one video posted by @adultsindisney that has over 216K likes features the Davy Jones animatronic in the Pirates attraction. Text is layered on the video, saying “one of the best Disney rides in the world is Pirates in Shanghai Disneyland. This is our favorite part ...” before cutting to a screen-based portion of the ride. In both YouTube and



Figure 2: Screenshot of exemplar in *Disembodied Ride Along* code group.

TikTok videos of attraction ride-throughs, the overwhelming reaction in comments is awe and wonder at the rides' level of technological sophistication. However, there are also undertones of jealousy among the comments comparing the attractions to U.S.-based parks that have older attractions. For example, on a YouTube video ride-through of the Shanghai version of Peter Pan, top comments on the video reflect sentiments like, "this one makes the USA Disneyland version look so outdated" and that the one in Anaheim needed "updating." Similarly, on TikTok the top comment from the aforementioned video about the Pirates attraction states, "So Disney in the states rilly [sic] played us like that ..." which exemplifies the trend of technological envy evinced in many comments and in some videos. While comments in general on the web can be mean and negative (Reagle 2015) these kinds of comments which evince envy are also part of online Disney fandom (Tremaine 2021). This theme was also seen separately in the sarcastic #ThanksShanghai Twitter trend, where Disney fans felt slighted by the investment in the new park and felt it was coming at the expense of U.S. parks and cast members (Niles 2016).

4.2 Distinctly Tourists, Authentically Others

Soon after Shanghai Disneyland opened in 2016, videos documenting and discussing Chinese guest behavior in the parks began to appear online. While these are a minority of videos, they attract a higher number of comments and

controversy. As of 2022, some of these remain among the most viewed YouTube videos and have influenced other travel vlogs since then. For example, an early video was posted by the channel Disney Dwayne and has over 1.5 million views. The video outlines several *non-normative guest behaviors*, with the video creators imposing normative expectations of guest behavior on Chinese guests. For example, Disney Dwayne begins his video walking through the park entry, with the camera pointed toward him. He narrates that “one thing you got to get used to, is being pushed and shoved around here in Shanghai.” Shortly afterward, he says this behavior is “not like Japan,” the country that he finds “as the most polite.” Here the normative expectation for guest behavior is politeness, which according to the video creator seems to mean waiting in queues without cutting, maintaining personal space, and respecting property. The video goes on to document his annoyance with several other things, including view blocking and public smoking and urination. In an illustrative example, he films towards his feet to show how close the others guest in the queue are to him. In another, he shows an area that should be off limits to guests being used as a playground.

Another highly viewed video, in this case from the channel The CheNews, discusses non-normative guest behavior with a bit more cultural context. One of the vloggers behind the channel is Mike Chen, a Chinese American food and travel vlogger whose main channel, Strictly Dumpling, has close to 4 million subscribers and often documents visits to Disney parks (Blaskovich 2021). Chen and his co-host discuss how as Chinese tourists started traveling abroad in the 2010s, they were “uneducated on how to behave” in different cultures. In one case, they show pictures of gardens at the park trampled by guests. Regardless of their presentation of background information they still argue that there are normative ways for guests to behave in a park, like Disney Dwayne. At one point they narrate “picture this ... doors open, floods of people running in. You talk about the Magic Kingdom man; it’s going to be unmagical within twenty ... like ... two hours” over a picture of a large crowd of Chinese tourists.

Many instances of *punctuated cultural differences* fill the two-part vlog from alanxelmundo, the Mexican vlogger previously discussed. To list a few, Alan and his co-host, Regina, discuss the lack of Disney music as they enter, squat toilets, muted reactions to shows and music, picture posing, and the previously mentioned non-normative guest behavior. The videos are essentially framed through two things: the technological sophistication of the park and providing a view into an “other” culture. Early in the video they discuss their feeling of culture shock, acknowledging that they are the outsiders. Their outsider status is further exemplified when they use a common language, English, to communicate with cast members, and struggle. Regardless, the host still highlights non-normative guest behavior and even states at one point that “it’s a shame I don’t speak

Chinese, or else I would have scolded him so bad” after witnessing public urination in a queue for Seven Dwarfs Mine Train. In another example, while the two vloggers are having lunch, they discuss seeing a young boy urinating in public.

The sentiments articulated in the three previously discussed videos align with the concern that “the actions of the few have been magnified into a well-recognised and negative nationality-based image,” to which the Chinese government was forced to respond to save collective face (Zhang et al. 2019, p. 71). Zhang et al. (2019) find that educated Chinese tourists have similar concerns, while recognizing that other tourists, like U.S. Americans, have bad reputations abroad as well. In addition, the participants in their study discuss how they are constantly conscious of their own behavior and how it might be interpreted when traveling—something the travel videos studied here do not reflect. For example, despite several opportunities, the Mexican vloggers never reflect on how their own behavior in the park, primarily being loud while filming and commenting on others, might also be considered impolite. Returning to Smith (2018) and Bruner (2005), the YouTube videos which discuss guest behavior fall into the general category of cultural commentary, where an “other” is needed to define oneself in opposition. In all three cases discussed here as examples, there is a normative model of Disney park behavior that is being defined in opposition, primarily for Disney park audiences online. In addition, the YouTube personality acts here as a cultural guide, trying to educate others on their experience in the parks. This exemplifies an outward facing gaze, where the audience is explicitly communicated with about the supposed on the ground realities of traveling to Shanghai Disneyland.

In the comments of these three videos – there is some concurrence with the comments on guest behavior videos, but also disagreement. In one case, a commenter argues that “honestly, the crowd culture truly isnt [sic] much different in Shanghai than in other major cities” and another says that “It is not racist or bad to note cultural differences and how they will be perceived by people of a different culture.” It should also be noted that more comments on a YouTube video also heighten the chance it will be recommended, so a controversial video with divisive comments is not necessarily a bad thing. And in one case, a top viewed video about Shanghai Disney crowd culture went semi-viral and the creator eventually created a response video walking back some of the comments on crowd culture.

Interestingly, the highlighting of cultural differences was not as present in the top TikTok videos. This may be a function of platform and time constraints. In the TikTok videos with a conspicuous presence of the self, experiences with Shanghai Disney are primarily presented as *diverse consumer experiences*, where a non-Chinese user can sample different foods and purchase new Disney products. For example, one top liked video by @magistreatsbyivann catalogs “how Disney food looks all over the world” and then shows different cultural adaptations of food,

including a noodle soup with a carrot in the shape of Mickey Mouse. Another video shows a Disney fan unboxing a backpack ordered from Shanghai Disneyland. Another TikTok notes “it’s so amazing seeing Mulan sing in her native language!” while another video was posted by a traveling performer, who documents his life abroad saying he “loved seeing all the shows and attractions that are so specific” to Shanghai Disneyland. Finally, one more TikTok from @adultsindisney is quick 6 second clip of a salad with a Mickey Mouse egg yolk, where they remark how “insane” it is. The next section will discuss Disney fandom cultures in more detail, but the relative absence of non-normative guest behavior documentation in top TikTok videos is interesting. Dinhopl and Gretzel (2016) write that “handheld tourist photography traditionally extends the tourist gaze outward” while videography naturally “puts the tourists themselves at the centre of the recording” and avoids the tourist gaze (pp. 399–400). In this case, the focus is on the person experiencing the goods and services of Shanghai Disneyland, with little or no focus on the Chinese guests in the parks. The focus is turned inward, as they consume a different culture and experience, even though it is highly commodified by Disney.

Here it seems that genre, platform, and different styles of internet celebrity also matter beyond medium. While YouTube and TikTok are both video platforms, YouTube allows for long-form travel vlogs, which often end up reiterating tropes of neo-colonial travel writing (Smith 2018). TikTok videos focus more on the individual’s experience of the park, with little focus on other guests. Thus, the genre of internet celebrity shapes different kinds of representation. On YouTube there is a legacy of documentary, cultural criticism, and alternative media that leads influencers on the platform to create ideological video essays and reactionary content (Lewis 2020). TikTok content leans more toward the multi-cultural travel influencer model of internet celebrity, where different sampling of different cultural and branded products is a good in and of itself.

4.3 Fandom Ecologies: Promotion & Critique

Vlogger Mike Chen has visited Disney parks around the world and sampled their unique food items. Alan Estrada provides travel tips for Latin Americans visiting the U.S. parks. Disney Dwayne has the company name literally in his profile. On TikTok the two most prominent accounts among the top liked videos are @themepark_explorers and @adultsindisney, who state in their profiles that they have “been to all 12 Disney parks.” Even Attractions 360°, while not a traditional personality-based vlog, has built a channel with over 1.5 million subscribers in the narrow niche of high-quality, 4K video ride-throughs. The internet personalities studied in this paper situate visiting Disney parks and engaging with their fandom

as part of their brands. However, as Soto-Vásquez (2021) argues, “brands as a form of identity are very flexible; one could be a Disney fan one day and a foodie the next. Brand as identity is the purest distillation of the political, economic, and cultural forces of late capitalism” (p. 604). The association with Disney fandom also implicates an audience that has been reported on as toxic and resistant to change (Tremaine 2021). The resistance to change among fans ranges from criticism that the company is updating classic attractions like the Jungle Cruise to be politically correct all the way to economic critiques that middle class families are being priced out of Disney experiences.

The videos studied here exemplify some of the toxic online behavior. One top comment on a video focusing on crowd culture in Shanghai Disney with 2.2k likes states:

I feel guilty for thinking it, but I really feel that this was a gorgeous park wasted on a terrible location. I'd love to see something so incredible be treated much better in a place where it would be infinitely more appreciated.

A similar sentiment appears in another top comment that states, “maybe they made shanghai disneyland [sic] so they don't have to go abroad and ruin other disneylands [sic] for all of us,” with the second “they” being Chinese tourists. This by no means is the perspective of all Disney fans, but it does show how the integration of a brand into one's identity in late capitalism can lead to an exclusionary protectiveness over the brand. Disney parks occupy an emotional space for Disney fans because they are associated with nostalgic memories, family, and perhaps even national identity for U.S. Americans. This combination lends important context to the view of an “other” culture when it is portrayed in online travel videos about a popular brand.

This tension between celebrating the technical achievements of the park and criticizing guest behavior simultaneously is reflected in the sample of videos collected for this project and larger conflicts in Disney fandom online. Between YouTube and TikTok, most videos focus on attractions, the theming of the park and its expansiveness. A smaller number, primarily on YouTube, focus on the guest behavior. This may be a function of platform incentives where controversy and longer form cultural criticism are part of YouTube and Disney “fantagonism” (Johnson 2007), as seen in fans who display vicious and vitriolic reactions to any new offerings or changes that differ from their idea of Disney parks. McCarthy (2019) rightly argues the Instagram and YouTube influencers of the original Disneyland Park rarely criticize the park due to the implicit control that Disney has over them by granting or denying special access. But for those outside the Disney influence sphere, arguing about Disney parks, attacking others online for not being

a “true fan,” and seeing the company as an encapsulation of all things wrong with political correction exemplify some of the worst aspects of online Disney fandom (Tremaine 2021).

In this way, the cultural adaptations the Walt Disney Company made for its theme park in Shanghai invariably get absorbed and understood as part of broader international politics just as they have become more intertwined with politics in the United States. Thus, the videos studied here are a window into geopolitical tensions (Henry 2019). Fan concerns about “wasting” a park on an undeserving audience and envy over technologically advanced attractions echo concerns about the West’s diminished global power and influence. Criticisms about the park catering to Chinese visitors echo anxieties around conglomerate corporate interests that have no allegiance to any one nation, only to market demands and opportunities for growth. In fact, Disney pursued internationalization in China post-2008 specifically because domestic returns were diminishing (Gigliotti et al. 2016). From blame over the spread of COVID-19 to political controversies with Disney and the NBA, the political and economic tensions between the governments of China and the United States spills into culture and fandom. As Jacobson (2020) writes about the controversies around the live action *Mulan* film, brands have to “balance significant business interests in the world’s second-largest economy with corporate image and reputational risk both at home and abroad (i.e. non-Chinese countries).” This is similar in some ways to the tension in Disney fandom online: between promotion of the parks and the company for their positive associations and critique of what the company does to grow and profit. And as participatory democracy has grown less responsive to actual citizen demands, it appears that political demands are being directed toward culture industry behemoths like Disney.

5 Conclusion

Can online travel videos enable more positive portrayals of cultural others, or even humanize them? Yes and no. In this case of positive portrayals, it seems that the channel or profile on YouTube and/or TikTok needs to be adopt the mission of representing other people fully and humanely, as Motahar et al. (2021) showed. However, when travel videos are presented in the context of a culturally specific online fandom like Disney parks, the cultural baggage weighs heavily of representations of the other. The other become mere rhetorical tools to advance other agendas, whether they be investment in the U.S. parks, maintaining a sense of fan superiority or simply generating comments and views. Travel videos from non-Chinese visitors to Shanghai Disneyland studied in this article exhibit the

technologically advanced attractions of the park, inspiring awe and envy. The behavior of Chinese guests is documented and often marked as non-normative and different. Both categories are structured by Disney fan culture, which has a possessive protectiveness over the brand due to its close association with identity. While most videos promote the park, showing the power the company has through fan-generated content in providing advertisement, they also anonymize the Chinese guests into the background, only voyeuristically featuring faceless and soundless figures. When Chinese guests are presented, it is usually to criticize non-normative guest behavior.

These elements play out slightly differently on the platforms of YouTube and TikTok. Top YouTube videos tend to feature outward-focusing gazes, whether they are disembodied ride-throughs or cultural “education” – an artifact of how micro-celebrity is accumulated on the platform (Lewis 2020). Top TikToks turn the gaze inward and focus on experience, more like Instagram, and pushes the non-Chinese visitor to the forefront as a sampler of diverse experiences. By virtue of not overtly featuring critical portrayals of Chinese guest behavior, the TikTok videos avoid the othering tropes present in top YouTube videos. This is similar to what Peralta (2019) found when the gaze is shifted elsewhere in travel videos. This study has some limitations. The choice to study top videos means that some of the features identified here, like marking cultural differences and focusing on technologically advanced attractions, might be decisions made to gain more viewers and internet fame. Of course, in contemporary online spaces it is difficult to separate the two. In addition, by focusing on non-Chinese travel videos, the Chinese perspective is also completely ignored. Finally, most videos seem to be taken before the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only has severely restricted foreign travel into China but also heightened the tensions between China and the West.

This study highlighted how differences in platform can also affect representation of others in the context of a strong brand. Future studies, both qualitative and quantitative, can use this multi-media approach to better explain the diverse forms in which contemporary audiences and creators encounter media about others. One open question from this study is how the creators themselves understand and imagine their audiences online. Here is where production focused methods can also fill in gaps, specifically through interviews, as other studies cited here have done (Du et al. 2020; He et al. 2021). More specifically, cross cultural interviews stand out as a promising opportunity, when more often qualitative interview based studies have some measure of cultural similarity between interviewer and participant. Global travel will eventually recover post-pandemic world and people will continue to document their travel experiences on social media. As such, this topic remains a relevant one for scholars to continue to focus on.

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