

9th Annual International Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Conference :
Religion or Fandom? Secular ritual in pop-culture pilgrimage

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Biographies

Kyungjae Jang is a postdoctoral researcher in the Research Faculty of Media and Communication, Hokkaido University. Dr. Jang has conducted participatory research on transnational Japanese contents tourism, focusing on popular culture-related tourism and events. His recent publication is *Contents Tourism in Japan Pilgrimages to “Sacred Sites” of Popular Culture* (2017).

Abstract

This paper aims to consider the meaning of secular ritual in pop-culture tourism, and to clarify the role of social media as a tool for making and transmitting secular ritual, focuses on Asian fans’ pilgrimage of Japanese mixed media *Love Live! School Idol Project*.

The paper first introduces contemporary sacred meaning-making as a theoretical framework. Then, based on anthropological research, the paper analyses how secular ritual is made and transmitted, focuses on Asian fans’ popular-culture pilgrimages. The specific popular culture work chosen, after five years of participatory research in Japanese popular culture-related pilgrimage, was an event related to the Japanese media franchised work *Love Live! School Idol Project (Love Live!)*.

In this paper, it has clarified that social media plays a significant role in making the secular ritual. Nevertheless, the social media makes difficult to determine whether some fan performances are a sacred activity or attempts to follow current trends.

Introduction

This paper aims to consider the meaning of secular ritual in pop-culture tourism, and to clarify the role of social media as a tool for making and transmitting secular ritual, focuses on Asian fans’ pilgrimage of Japanese mixed media project *Love Live! School Idol Project*.

The paper first introduces contemporary sacred meaning-making as a theoretical framework. Then, based on anthropological research, the paper analyses Korean fans’ sacred meaning-making and popular-culture pilgrimages. The specific popular culture work chosen, after five years of participatory research in Japanese popular culture-related events and festivals, was an event related to the Japanese media franchised work *Love Live! School Idol Project (Love Live!)*.

Love Live! comics, TV animation, games, and movies have a great many fans in Asia, and some of these fans perform ritual pilgrimages.

Literature Review

Previous studies have claimed that pop culture fandom relates to religious aspects (Bickerdike, 2016; Crome, 2014; Cusack, 2010; McCloud, 2003; Davidsen, 2013). As McCloud (2003, p. 189) argued, in religious studies, religion is defined in various approaches according to different descriptive, phenomenological, and social and psychological functions. Thus, it is difficult to decide whether a specific performance or ritual is religious simply because it is similar to that in present religions. To McCloud, pop culture fans may perform a religion-like action not because they consider their fandom as a religion but because such performance is the most efficient way to express their emotion.

Nevertheless, it cannot be said that there is no religiosity in pop culture-related rituals. Fundamentally, people pursue those on which they rely. With the spread of the spirituality that substitutes institutional religion, pop culture plays a role in the worship of people. Thus, research needs to avoid both overestimating and underestimating the meaning of pop culture. Pop culture does not only act like a religion as an effective means of self-expression, as McCloud argued, but pop culture-based rituals also play a role as an invented new type of religion (Bickerdike, 2016; Davidsen, 2013).

Meanwhile, social media have such roles as providing information on “must-visit” places (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010), marketing tourism sites (Hays, Page and Buhalis, 2013), and sharing tourism experiences (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). Japanese sociologist Satoshi Hamano (2012) analyzed the faith objectification of the Japanese idol and argued that recent Japanese idols have two bodies, namely, the physical body and the internet body. Hamano insisted that, to bury an insufficient part of communication on the internet between idol and fans, idol producers hold events, such as handshake festivals, through which fans can contact their idol in person or “physically.” This physical proximity creates a sense of reality to fans, and ease and reliance are born from such reality. Such a process raises the popular cultural idol to a transcendent existence (Hamano, 2012).

Methodology

In this paper, the research conducted was an anthropological study of an event held in Korea for Japanese popular culture contents: a *Love Live!* fan event, called “Fan Advertisement of Nico Yazawa Birthday Anniversary (Nico AD),” held at the Seoul Station in July 2015.

Love Live! contents are famous in Asia, not only because of their own popularity but also because of the radical behavior of *Love Live!* fans, the so-called *Raburaibā* (LoveLivers). For example, LoveLivers wear *Love Live!* goods, including badges and cloth wrapped around their entire bodies (called *busō*, which means armament) when they go to Akihabara, or comic events. In addition, some fans perform embodiment behaviors, including getting tattoos of the characters (Hiro, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Interestingly, some fans have even performed secular rituals, such as Kowtow (*Jeol* in Korean and *Dogeza* in Japanese) in front of the *Love Live!* advertising signs.

Nico AD was a fan event celebrating the fictional birthday (22 July) of the famous *Love Live!* character Nico Yazawa. In July 2015, Korean fans raised funds on the Internet to create a *Love Live!* advertising sign at the Seoul Station. The present research analyzed Internet communications on the Social Network Service (SNS) and in the Internet fan community and conducted participatory research consisting of semi-structured interviews with 54 of the 111 participants at the 22 July 2015 event. The interviews asked about participants’ motivations for attending the event, their reasons for liking *Love Live!*, and amusing anecdotes.

Results

The role of the Internet in the event

According to Zen (nickname), an event organizer, the five organizers met on the Internet and planned the event entirely by means of the Internet, including fundraising, designing the advertising sign, and promoting the event. The organizers created an event webpage to raise funds to create the sign, which netted donations worth 1,500 USD from 50 fans. Information about the event was spread through the SNS and the Korean *Love live!* fan communities.

Fans’ reasons for attending the event

Love live! fans’ reasons for attending the event included to visit, to make contacts and to make a

pilgrimage. Visiting was the most common reason given, with nearly 60% of the participants interviewed saying that they had come to visit with other fans of the *Love live!* songs, characters, and voice actresses.

The second most common reason for attending was to make contacts. To that end, 29 interviewees indicated that 12 groups had developed friendships or at least Internet relationships at the “real world” event. Two of these groups mentioned that they planned to have parties after the event.

The third reason given for attending the event was to make a pilgrimage. However, at the event, no one was observed performing Kowtow or any other secular ritual. The organizer Zen had noted in advance that because the event space was a public place, rituals and costumes would be prohibited.

Some fans noted that they were visiting for the purpose of secular worship. Interviewee N-47 said that it was his second visit to the site, his first having been on 5 July, when he visited to absorb the energy and spirit of Nico before his Japanese-language proficiency test that day. Likewise, N-74, who had lingered in front of the advertising sign for three hours, said he could not bring himself to take a selfie in front of the sign because Niko is perfect, but he is full of shortcomings.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study examined the meaning of secular ritual in pop-culture tourism, focusing on sacred meaning-making and pilgrimages to an event in Korea featuring the Japanese contents *Love Live!*.

Fan behaviors, including dressing in costumes and performing secular rituals or taboos and secular worship, show how popular culture contents become a foundation for sacred meaning. However, the fundamental reasons for the rituals and worship are still unclear. Nevertheless, it seems clear that Internet communication plays a significant role in making sacred meaning.

The study identified sustainability as an issue that needs to be addressed. In other words, how long can contents-related places serve as pilgrimage destinations? This depends on several factors, including how long the contents last, fans’ continued loyalty to the contents, and the attitude of residents at the destination.

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