Bridging the Digital and the Physical:

Recollections of Media Tourism on Reddit

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Introduction

Media tourism is the act of traveling far and wide in order to visit the real-world locations of a specific piece of fiction that people are really interested in. Fans find themselves traveling and scouring the exact locations that their loved media was filmed in, with an emphasis of being able to diminish that barrier between the fictional and the real world, establishing a stronger emotional connection with the media (Milazzo, 2023, p.8; Reijnders, 2011b, p. 242). The feelings that arise while performing media tourism can be enhanced on the occasion that they are experienced with other fans through a collective imaginary practice (Milazzo & Almeida Santos, 2022, p.6; Reijnders, 2011a, p.14). In this sense, media tourists who travel and visit shooting locations together partake in the establishment of a sense of community, bound by the practice and the media themselves (Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p.175). In doing so, this shared sense of community builds an atmosphere of trust, which allows fans to express themselves in a way that influences the form and shape of the fandom's values (p.175).

This social dimension of media tourism also came to the fore in online communities that are formed through the shared passion for a specific piece of media. Along with the increasing access to information online concerning popular media, both can play a relevant role in the divulging of knowledge and sharing of experiences to support other media tourists (Reijnders, 2011a, p. 57). These communities are forums where many fans across the world engage in discussions with each other. Of these forums, some of the most popular ones are on Reddit, a forum website whose environment fosters conversations and interactions among the users (Proferes et al., 2021, p.3). Platforms have also been found to be influencing fan collectives by incorporating fan activity in their inner workings (Morris, 2017, p.358), as the platform's affordances can alter the relationship between the fan and the media (p. 362).

As such, analyzing the representation of media tourism on Reddit can help improve our understanding of how fans reconstruct and share their experiences online, and if, or even how, it impacts the phenomenon of media tourism. In order to do this, three different popular TV shows were chosen and their subreddits investigated. The TV shows chosen were *Gilmore Girls*, *Breaking Bad,* and *The Walking Dead*. These were selected because of their large, active online subreddit, because of popular spin-offs of these shows that were released recently, and differences in the constitution of their audiences. Through a thematic analysis of the posts and interactions found in communities passionate about these shows, this project aims to answer the

research question: **How do media tourists represent and share their experiences of visiting the filming locations of Gilmore Girls, Breaking Bad and The Walking Dead on Reddit, and how do these discussions impact the phenomenon of media tourism?**

The intent of this research project is to help us understand how these people reconstruct their experiences of this phenomenon by analyzing their representation in online communities. This research project would also expand on the way online communities, in particular subreddits, recreate the experience of travel and media tourism, highlighting the interactions among community members, as mediated by a website (Hutchby, 2014, p.86). Websites have allowed for the formation of communities through platforms that facilitate the interactions among fans (Bury, 2017, p. 639; Hutchby, 2014, p. 88), particularly Reddit, where subreddits strictly focus on including fans of the same topic, often media related. Exploring the reconstructions of media tourists' experiences in these communities will allow researchers to understand what people value in sharing with one another, and ultimately what role online communities play in the larger phenomenon of media tourism.

Literature review

Media Tourism

Media tourism is the practice of fans of TV shows, movies, or other forms of media, traveling to locations connected to the media that they are fans of (Kork, 2018, p.70; Reichenberger, 2021, p.237; Reijnders, 2011b, p.233). This is often the result of fans establishing an emotional connection to a piece of media which makes them travel to these locations (Kork, 2018, p.74). This process has been studied extensively in different forms, such as a way to foster escapism (Hills 2017, p.244; Lovell & Thurgill, 2021; Macionis, 2004, p.87) or even media pilgrimage (Couldry, 2003 p. 78; Kork, 2018 p.70). For the purposes of this research, media tourism will be considered as a bridge that unites real and imaginary worlds, which can unite fans in communities (Hills 2017, p.245; Kork 2018, p.74; Lovell & Thurgill, 2021; Reijnders, 2011a, p. 17; 2011b, p. 371; 2016, p. 674; Robards, 2018, p.192). Through daydreaming and places of imagination (Beeton, 2016, p.34; & Reijnders, 2011a p.19; Reijnders et al., 2022), media tourism comprises the practice of tourists partaking in an active process of transforming the places that they're traveling to from a physical place into a connection to an imaginary world (Beeton, 2016, p.33; Hills 2017; Lovell & Thurgill, 2021, p.9; Reijnders 2011a, p. 18). In this sense, these

specific places are appropriated by fans, who collectively repurpose them as a point of connection to the imaginary world that they all collectively relate to (Reijnders 2011a, p. 17).

The appropriation process that is performed by fans is reliant on the social dimension of the practice of media tourism through a collective imaginary practice (Milazzo & Almeida Santos, 2022, p.6; Reijnders, 2011a, p.14). Fans who travel and visit shooting locations together enable the establishment of a sense of community, enhanced by the physical proximity and shared appreciation for the media (Milazzo & Almeida Santos, 2022, p.6; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p.175). This, along with the possibility of actively joining fictional practices in the same environment as a collective of fans, contributes to the realization of escapism (Hills, 2017, p.249; Lovell & Thurgill, 2021, p.14; Reichenberger, 2021, p.237; Reijnders 2011b, p.371). To be more specific, members of fandoms co-create experiences as they interact with each other in tourist spaces (Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p.172). This process relies on both the social interactions among members and the shared imaginative processes (Milazzo & Almeida Santos, 2022, p.6; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p.175; Reijnders 2011a, p. 17). As it establishes a sense of community, media fans showcase their belonging to the community through various practices, which could range from media tourism to the re-enactment of scenes (Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p. 175).

Online Media Communities

The way that the world has become imbued with technology (Brannon Barhorst et al, 2021, p. 423) has impacted the creation of communities, as members of fandoms have employed digital spaces (Sandvoss & Kearns, 2014, p. 91). To be precise, the advent of social media and the widespread use of the internet as a means of communication has contributed to the establishment of large online media communities (Bury, 2017, p.629, p.639). Different websites mediate communication among members (Hutchby, 2014, p.86), shaping the communication based on the website's affordances and the communities' values (Bury, 2017, p.639). Reddit allows users to create communities based on a common passion, such as specific hobbies or tv shows, with people joining these communities as they know that they can find specific content suited to their interests and interact with others (Moore & Chuang, 2017, p. 2318; Teblunthuis et al., 2022, p.4).

Members of these online communities often create a sense of virtual community (Prinster et al., 2024, p.14; Robards, 2018, p. 192). The establishment of this sense of community is

enhanced by the repeated interactions between regular members (Prinster et al., 2024, p.14). This contributes to the creation of cultural touchpoints for the community itself, as over time it can develop into inside jokes that they often refer to and serve as a mode of forming deeper connections with one another (Massanari, 2013, p. 6; Massanari, 2015, p. 2).

In web communities, the sharing of information is most likely to happen if users feel a sense of belonging with members, trust them, or think it's useful to share something (Wang et al., 2022, p.11-12). These feelings are influenced by the community's values, as certain communities may value engagement and solidarity among the members (Weld et al., 2021). In online media communities, fans' knowledge of the media can often reproduce hierarchical structures in digital spaces (Abd-Rahim, 2019, p. 77; Edlom & Karlsson, 2021, p. 130), which are often reinforced through rules that are contextualized through communities' values (Chandrasekharan, et al., 2018, p.19-20; Squirrell, 2019, p. 1923).

Online communities have been found to help in establishing tourist locations regardless of an actual connection to the media itself, simply based on similarity and popularity (Connell et al., 2021, p. 584). Similarly, online reviews of tourist attractions shape the likelihood of people visiting specifically when reviews cover relevant dimensions of the attraction itself (Bigné et al., 2020, p.699). For example, reviews of media tourists of real-life locations are helpful in furthering the escapism and connection to the fictional worlds (Lovell & Thurgill, 2021. p. 15; Zimmermann & Reijnders, exp.2024). These feelings of connection to the media and to the real-life locations often lead fans to try to continue to be media tourists and reproduce these emotions, to the extent of traveling across the world (Lee, 2020, p.75; Reijnders, 2016, p.686).

While online media communities have been studied in the instances that impact communities members' likelihood of sharing experiences (Wang et al., 2022, p.11-12; Weld et al., 2021), as well as the influences on offline behavior (Connell et al., 2021, p. 584; Bigné et al., 2020, p.699; Lee, 2020, p.75), they have not been analyzed in the scope of media tourism if not through online reviews (Lovell & Thurgill, 2021. p. 15; Zimmermann & Reijnders, exp.2024). This project will utilize Reichenberger & Smith's (2020) concept of value co-creation in tourism spaces by applying these processes to digital spaces and communities, as they reproduce non-virtual ones (Robards, 2018, p.192). This subscribes to the role of interactions within online media communities, and how participative and interactive experiences lead to the co-creation of shared emotional connections, shaping the form and values of online communities (Milazzo &

Almeida Santos, 2022, p.6; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020 p.175). In particular, when new members join the subreddit and decide to interact with others, they co-create experiences in the digital space that allows for a sense of community to be continued and reproduced, which can aid in the enhancement of the sense of belonging and trust (Moore & Chuang, 2017, p. 2318; Teblunthuis et al., 2022, p.4; Prinster et al., 2024, p.14; Wang et al., 2022, p.11-12)

The representation and sharing of media tourists' experiences in web communities are thus important to understand and analyze due to the increasing digitalization of communities and the reliance of media tourism on collective experiences (Brannon Barhorst et al, 2021; Hills, 2017; Lovell & Thurgill, 2021). The role of value co-creation (Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p. 175) will be integrated in understanding how online communities conduct social activities regarding media tourism representations. The findings of this project can impact the practice of media tourism, whose online representation and role within online communities has yet to be analyzed.

Methods

This project aimed, through a focused and extensive analysis, to uncover various aspects of media tourism. Understanding the online dimension of media tourism is at the core of this project, particularly the role that the representation of media tourists' experiences plays within online communities and how this may impact the practice itself. The more suitable methodology is a qualitative one, which aims at unveiling some of the more in-depth aspects of a phenomenon (Mills & Birks, 2014, p.9). This project analyzed the representations of media tourists' experiences and the interactions among members of the website Reddit. As previously mentioned, Reddit is a forum website, where users can register and create their own groups, called subreddits, formed by people who share a common interest (Proferes et al., 2021, p.1). This forum website has been increasingly the subject of academic research, due to the vast amount of data that can be collected from the website, as well as the website's platform, which foster conversations and interactions amongst the users (Proferes et al., 2021, p.3). Reddit also houses many online communities and for this reason, choosing to analyze it allows us to understand their role in the establishment of fandoms, where safe spaces were created for fans to engage with like-minded people (Bury, 2017, p.629; Teblunthuis, et al., 2022, p.4). The subreddits chosen were considered the digital case studies for this research project, to emphasize

the importance of the provision of a deep understanding of the representation of media tourists' experiences (Mills & Birks, 2014, p.14). The value of digital case studies relies on the observation of the phenomena occurring in these case studies, as they can be interpreted as the reproduction of a version of reality that allows its analysis to be crucial to answering the Research Question (Gallagher, 2024, p.20).

The sampling focused on including three different TV shows to explore possible differences in practices and online communities between fandoms with differing audiences. The three shows had recently been the target of a recent increase in popularity due to the release of popular spin-offs as well as being connected to shooting locations that are often visited by many media tourists. These communities also offer rich data that easily allowed its collection, as these communities are fairly active, with a large portion of their members engaging in conversations on a daily basis. The communities chosen are from the TV shows *Breaking Bad, Gilmore Girls,* and *The Walking Dead*. The first recently gained popularity again with the successful release of the show *Better Call Saul*, while the second received a sequel show called *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life*, attracting all of the fans from the original show once again. Lastly, *The Walking Dead* franchise has created many spin-offs in recent years, which have continued to satisfy fans after the show ended a few years back. The subreddits chosen were "r/breakingbad", which is the subreddit for the TV show *Breaking Bad*, "r/gilmoregirls", the subreddit for the Warner Brothers TV show *Gilmore Girls* and "r/thewalkingdead", for the TV show and franchise *The Walking Dead*.

Posts and comments were collected only if the user included a clear mention of having visited a location that any of the TV shows were shot in. Other and even more subtle comments that implied that the member of the subreddit had visited shooting locations for the three shows were also included.

The posts were collected by going into the subreddits and searching for the words 'tour' and 'visit'. This yielded search results that included people who went on guided 'tours' in those locations, or that 'visited' them. Each post that was shown as a result of these searches was thoroughly looked through, and copied and pasted into an Excel file, to be later analyzed. These posts were kept separate for each of the case studies and exported to Atlas.ti in order to be analyzed. This resulted in at least 100 posts and comments per case study being collected, following the aforementioned criteria, which led to 362 quotes overall being selected.

The posts collected were analyzed through latent thematic analysis. While thematic analysis is an adequate method at identifying patterns, as well as interpreting them (Audrey & Longxuan, 2023, p. 4; Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80) the identification and examination of the underlying assumptions and ideologies that are embedded in the posts provided by the latent thematic analysis tends to result in more comprehensive results (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.81). The flexibility of thematic analysis, particularly for online communities and social media data (Shaheer & Carr, 2022, p.692), allowed for an application of this method with an inductive approach, incorporating themes that originated from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006 p. 83; Alhojailan, 2012, p.11). An inductive approach to thematic analysis was chosen because of the lack of previous themes for the role of online communities in the sharing dimension of media tourism, which aided in uncovering new aspects in the recollection of media tourism (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.84).

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 87) step-by-step guide on how to perform a thematic analysis, the analysis of the posts started through an initial coding found through an inductive approach. The intent behind this approach was to not overlook any significant information about media tourists' representation and experiences (Shaheer & Carr, 2022, p.693). As each case study was analyzed for initial codes, these codes were later grouped into different themes as they emerged from the dataset. The dataset was then explored once more against the background of the newly found themes, to confirm their validity and ensure no outliers were present (Shaheer & Carr, 2022, p.693). A general and initial understanding of similarities and differences among the themes was achieved. Following this, the themes found were analyzed together in light of relevant literature and the aim of this research project, including a discursive analysis of many quotes to further understand the interactions among community members (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87; Shaheer & Carr, 2022, p.693).

Analysis

The analysis produced significant findings. The focus of the analysis consisted of exploring how film tourists recollected their experiences in online communities, but also extended to understanding how their shared emotional connections to the media and the locations themselves are reproduced in subreddits. These online communities have already been extensively researched, with much literature explaining the various motivators as to why people share, trust

and interact with each other in such places (Massanari, 2013, p. 6; Moore & Chuang, 2017, p. 2318; Prinster et al., 2024, p.14; Robards, 2018, p. 192; Wang et al., 2022, p.1; Weld et al., 2021). In an attempt to answer the research question, the discussion will showcase the data gathered through the established framework, highlighting how media tourists' experiences are collectively influenced and shaped (Milazzo & Almeida Santos, 2022, p.6; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p.175) by the sense of belonging to online communities (Prinster et al., 2024, p.14;) and their affordances (Bury, 2017, p.639; Morris, 2017, p.362). After having collected and analyzed the posts focusing on media tourism from the various subreddits previously discussed through thematic analysis, this section focuses on explaining the themes found. These themes are present across all three communities analyzed, with no discernible differences in the reconstruction of media tourists' experiences. The analysis will then discuss the findings as if they were part of a singular online media community. The main theme found is *Co-creating*, with a couple of subthemes, *fan culture* and *experience reconstruction.* This theme is followed by the themes of *Knowledge sharing* and *Disciplining.* These themes are discussed in order based on their relevance to the discussion and prevalence in the text, especially as each theme is reliant on the one that precedes in order to be relevant within online communities.

Co-Creating

The co-creation of value that results from shared experiences such as media tourism (Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p. 175) leads to community-building processes, and is reconstructed in the representation of these experiences in online communities. Specifically, this theme refers to the sense of the community that is built around the media and experiences shared, as it seeps through all the interactions and posts that are made within that subreddit. The members of the analyzed communities on Reddit interact with friendliness, supporting the idea that the socialization aspect is crucial in these communities (Moore & Chang, 2017, p.2318). Particularly, members use friendly and social tones to communicate with each other, which happens despite anonymity, as users do not need to verify their identity in order to participate. On many occasions, they include details that one would expect to be present in face-to-face conversations, such as:

"We were on our honeymoon, driving up the coast to Maine, and he told me we were making a detour. It's a cute little town, though there really isn't much to it. There's a little market, one or two other shops, some houses, and that's about it!" (corasmommy)

This is supported by previous research, which found that members of online communities share posts with each other if they feel a sense of belonging with each other, or if they feel like what they share will be useful to others (Prinster et al., 2024, p.14; Wang et al., 2022, p.11; Weld et al., 2021) This overarching theme is prevalent in many different ways, taking different forms through the aspects of community and of the TV show becoming inseparable. In the subreddits analyzed, members of communities are always treating each other as friends and very rarely as strangers. These conversations include personal details that are not relevant to the main message, but that are relevant to the user's personal life and experiences. These are details that can be as long and detailed as the ones above, or as simple as:

"I went last week when I was visiting my sister in California and it was actually the coolest!". (srd1017)

These could be examples that support the existence of a sense of virtual community (Prinster et al., 2024, p.14), where similar experiences and values are at the core of the establishment of these tightly-knit connections (p.14). The inclusion of these details in conversations within online communities aids in the co-creation of emotional connections with the members of the community (Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p.172), as the representation of their experiences is shared among all other members in the digital space.

Users interacted with each other to share and collectively enjoy their passion they all have for a specific media, something also reflected in the practice of media tourism. The online community that formed around the different TV shows turned into an opportunity for many of the media tourists to relive their previous experiences, re-establishing their emotional connection to the show and to other fans (Milazzo & Almeida Santos, 2022, p.6; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020 p.175), reaffirming the tie between the real and imaginary world (Hills 2017, p.245; Kork 2018, p.74; Lovell & Thurgill, 2021; Reijnders, 2011a, p. 17; 2011b, p. 371; 2016, p. 674). For

example, a user posted about their experience as media tourist within a collective that share the same passion:

> "It was awesome. Taking a tour with a bunch of people who also love the show as much as you do can really enhance the experience. Our guide was great and really helped keep it interesting." (crustydogtaint)

This quote signifies how the practice of performing media tourism with other fans can enhance the activity, strengthening the emotional connection that people might have for the media and for each other (Hills 2017, p. 249; Lovell & Thurgill, 2021, p.14; Reichenberger, 2021, p.237). It seems that many people, while sharing their experiences and the positive aspects that derive from it, might try to recreate the collective enjoyment of engaging in media tourism with others by adopting online communities as proxy (Prinster et al., 2024, p.14; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p. 175; Robards, 2018, p.192). The role of being a fan of the media goes hand in hand with the sense of community that is built through the co-creation of experiences (Milazzo & Almeida Santos, 2022, p.6; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p. 175), and they are represented together in online communities to enhance both at the same time. This contributes to the idea that the creation of value within online communities is attributable to the co-constructions of shared experiences and emotional connections, which not only enhances the sense of community in tourist spaces but is also reconstructed in digital spaces (p.175).

Fan culture

Members of these online communities employed their attachment to the media and their role in the co-creation process of community values through their experiences with media travels (Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p.175). Subsequently, these experiences have been represented and discussed through constant references to the media, as many users recall scenes of shows specifically connected to their experience of media tourism and the related locations. Members of these communities interact with each other and through these interactions extend their attachment to the community (Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p.175) and the media (Milazzo, 2023, p.8; Reijnders, 2011b, p. 242). Most interactions that take place within these communities

are thus mediated by the shared attachment to the media and the affordances of the online platform (Bury, 2017, p.629; Hutchby, 2014, p.86). For example:

"Village festivals, gazebos, fall decorations everywhere, antique store like Kim's , a diner like Luke's, and a restaurant like Al's that serves breakfast, sushi, burgers, and international food all in one. Ivy covered chilton schools, corn mazes, Apple orchards, town meetings, town selectmen, I could go on and on.." (Plain_Janeeee)

This user posted their experience in visiting the location that inspired the city that *Gilmore Girls* is set in, mentioning all the real places that reminded them of the show, although not having necessarily been to shooting locations. These locations, as much as the ones where the show was actually shot in, have become the subject of the passion for the media that many fans harbor (Kork, 2018, p.70; Reichenberger, 2021, p.237; Reijnders, 2011b, p.233). It is not merely a coincidence that people travel there to experience the same feelings that the show offered them, it is intentional (Macionis, 2004, p.95). This quote exemplifies how locations that have direct connection to the scenes seen on screen serve the purpose of helping media tourists situate the fictional world within the real one (Reijnders 2011a, p. 17). These places lose their original identity and assume the one invested upon them by the media itself, as most users directly reference the show's name: "Took a visit to Alexandria today!". When people are discussing these locations, they may generally use the actual names of these places, but when it comes to the detailed location, it often turns into the name given by the show. Media fans no longer recognize that as something outside of the show and in the real world, but rather as an extension of the show into our world, a place that helps them escape the real world (Beeton, 2016, p.33; Hills 2017; Lovell & Thurgill, 2021, p.9; Reijnders 2011a, p. 18).

This is even enhanced by the role of the online community, where users share these images, experiences and memories due to their high values, co-created by the community itself (Massanari, 2015, p. 2; Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p.173). The online aspect of the recollection of the media tourist experience contributes to the collective enjoyment of the practice, while also furthering the escapism that some media fans cherish (Hills 2017, p. 249; Lovell & Thurgill, 2021, p.14; Reichenberger, 2021, p.237). Importantly, the reaching into the imaginary worlds that attract these fans is also reproduced through the community, through the

sharing of experiences, and interactions with others ((Beeton, 2016; Hills, 2017; Lovell & Thurgill, 2017; Reijnders 2011a; 2011b; 2016).

Experience representation

People share their experiences, engage with each other, have conversations about the media and represent their past practices of media tourism. This is done prevalently through the sharing of their memories in picture form:

"Self-guided Breaking Bad tour My wife and I decided to spend our holiday vacation visiting shooting locations for Breaking Bad. Here's a few of the locations we visited, along with comparisons shots from the show." (quailford)

The post originally included a link to a folder where pictures of the members' vacations were shared to the subreddit. This is quite common, as many of the posts analyzed contain pictures of the media location they visited, often without the users. At times, such as this example, it becomes clear that the intent of people visiting those locations was not only to see the real-life counterpart of famous scenes from the show they liked, but also to recreate them. This could impose an additional layer of significance, which involves a personal and direct connection to the scene itself, by introducing themselves as fans as part of the show. This is common among media tourists, who often recreate certain scenes that they enjoy a lot to further enhance their connection (Reijnders, 2010, p.370). The recreation of these shots is then represented and shared, where the interactions between users that ensue co-create new emotional connections within the online communities' affordances.

The Warner Brothers Tour, in LA, takes fans through the general studio set of Warner Brothers, which, among many famous movies and TV shows, includes many locations from the show *Gilmore Girls*. Because of this, many *Gilmore Girls* fans go on the tour and share their experiences, especially if the community has been helpful in creating that experience:

"PS - I just want thank all you lovely Stars Hollow residents for advising me to speak up and let my tour guide know I was a fan. I had the whole tram waiting for me while I took this picture. So happy!" (unwantedsyllables)

Similarly to the previous quote, this poster explains their experience while visiting the tour, and how the community has helped them in speaking up and improving their experience, which is finalized by taking and sharing a picture of themselves on set. What is important in the act of sharing is the impact that the experience has on the community as members represent their experiences in environments that are constructed through these same actions, and the interactions that ensue (Reichenberger & Smith, 2020 p.175). Many of them shared the passion and excitement that this experience has brought them, highlighting the positive aspects of the experience. A high percentage of the people who posted about having partaken in media tourism also share the positive aspects of it, such as:

"Yes, I have! Though the RV broke down, so we had to take a tour bus. We got photo time with the RV though, and the tour was spectacular! Highlight of my Albuquerque trip!! :)" (KorrinTheRogue)

This example focuses on the 'RV Tour', which is the name for the official tour for the show *Breaking Bad* in the city of Albuquerque in New Mexico, United States. The reporting of their travels as media tourists seems to be simply about showing their experiences to others, but the interactions that follow them, in the environment that they are being shared in, point to the idea that they also serve the purpose of reliving those experiences, something that has been observed in real life (Reijnders, 2016, p.686). Media tourists, through the online community, enhance their attachment to the media and extend the escapist function of media tourism through the co-creation and representation of their experiences (Hills, 2017; Lovell & Thurgill, 2021, p.14; Reijnders 2011b).

Knowledge Sharing

Members of online communities tend to share posts because they value the quality of the content that they post (Weld et al., 2021). Others do so because they feel like they belong, or because they want to share useful information (Wang et al., 2022, p.12). This project found plenty of data that supports the latter reason, as in the subreddits analyzed, many people help each other perform the practice of media tourism. At times, this means that users share how to

access specific locations that are connected to the show, or even information regarding the coordinates of specific places. A prime example is this quote:

"Here are the coordinates for the cook spot: 35.101965, -107.137223

If you enter these into your phone map, it'll drop a pin right on the location. Make sure you take some screenshots of scenes for reference before you go out there, as there is no cell service. If you ever have any more questions, just message me and I'll be happy to help!"

This was posted in response to someone asking for specific coordinates of 'the cook spot', a reference to the initial episode of *Breaking Bad*, where the two main characters drive to the desert to cook meth. Here, it becomes clear that the intent of the user is to provide useful information for other members of the community, even ensuring that they know possible difficulties they may encounter ("as there is no cell service") and providing solutions ("Make sure you take some screenshots of scenes for reference"). The teamwork that is created through the sense of virtual community is an appeal for others to join the community, who often do so to ask specific questions about the logistics of visiting these places or of the guided tours. For example:

"I just arrived in Albuquerque. Any Breaking Bad fans who can recommend sites from the show to see that the normal tour would miss?" (blink5694)

Taken from the same subreddit, plenty of users have helped this member in trying to figure out the best course of action. Calling out for "Breaking Bad fans" to help the user in finding spots that a guided tour would miss may not simply be a way to interact with the members of the subreddit, but rather a way to distinguish the most knowledgeable ones (Abd-Rahim, 2019, p. 77; Edlom & Karlsson, 2021, p. 130). In this sense, those who would be able to answer this question are those who have been on tour, or are aware of the tour and its stops, but that are also aware of what it does not cover and can swiftly answer a difficult question (Abd-Rahim, 2019, p. 77; Edlom & Karlsson, 2021, p. 130). While the user may not necessarily have differentiated themselves to establish a hierarchy among the fans of the show, it does help in acknowledging the value that members of these subreddits impose on knowledge of the media

itself (Abd-Rahim, 2019, p. 77; Edlom & Karlsson, 2021, p. 130), something that may differ from other online communities (Moore & Chang, 2017).

Similarly, this understanding of the knowledge of the media is also represented through inside jokes that many of the users have with each other in relation to the media (Massanari, 2013, p. 6). An example is:

"Ha ha ha .. CORAL my hubby and I always say it with that accent. I'm jealous".
(Mandylynnwarrior)

This is a comment posted in response to someone mentioning that they had visited Carl's house, a character in the show The Walking Dead. In a particular scene of the show, Rick, Carl's dad, calls out for him in a weird accent, which was noticed by many fans, who turned it into an inside joke: "Coral". As mentioned here, the user mentions directly the inside joke that is well known amongst the members of the community and uses it to also share their opinion about the original user's experiences, referencing their jealousy of the user's travels. These jokes happened across all the subreddits analyzed and it could also be interpreted as a way for fans to establish themselves as true fans.

Many fans use these inside jokes as a way to distinguish themselves as true fans of the show, while others do so by expressing the knowledge that they have learned while partaking in media tourism (Abd-Rahim, 2019, p. 77; Edlom & Karlsson, 2021, p. 130). Many fans who have gone on guided tours, or have studied the show long enough, share the information they have learned from guides, particularly in relation to behind-the-scenes accounts. While the Warner Brothers tour for *Gilmore Girls* allows technical insights into many different movies and shows as well, the *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* guided tours are specific to these two shows. A user posted this regarding *The Walking Dead*:

"Most of the filming since season 3 has been done in and around there. Downtown was the setting for Woodbury and about a block away is the Alexandria set. There's also spots around town where they filmed little passing shots. Norman Reedus and Greg Nicotero own a coffee shop downtown and there's also a Walking Dead shop. A few miles away is the Production Company lot, which is where the prison set is and I think a couple other sets, but you can't get in

there. Herschel's farm and Hilltop are just down the road too but I don't think you can get to them either." (fireguy837)

Posts like these are maybe not as common, as people might mention behind-the-scenes knowledge here and there, but they still serve the same purpose, to solidify themselves as experts of the show (Abd-Rahim, 2019, p. 77; Edlom & Karlsson, 2021, p. 130). It is important to note that the names of the locations mentioned are all from the show and not from the actual city of Senoia. This quote exemplifies not only how the media fans use these locations as focal points to appropriate the real locations through the fictional world (Reijnders 2011a, p. 17), but also how the online community gives them a platform to relive their escapist experiences, strengthening their emotional connection once again (Beeton, 2016, p.33; Hills 2017; Lovell & Thurgill, 2021, p.9; Reijnders 2011a, p. 18). Through all the posts analyzed, it became clear that members of the community value the connection to the show, they value the role of expertise on the matter, and they value that it is shared among them (Moore & Chuang, 2017, p. 2318). Looking for advice in these communities is quite common, especially if there is a level of connection and sociality among the members, which helps in establishing a sense of trust (Wang et al., 2022, p.12). Lastly, people often accomplish the act of knowledge sharing in the form of recommendations. Members of the communities examined shared this commonality of explaining their experiences by recommending them to others, and their reasoning. This is connected to the socialization and sharing aspect found in previous research (Wang et al., 2022, p.12; Weld et al., 2021), where members of these communities engaged with others for those reasons in particular. An example, from the subreddit r/thewalkingdead reads:

"I highly recommend an official tour, either a walking one in Senoia or a 4 hour bus tour, because it's much more efficient then to map everything out yourself, unless you only want to see a few things." (Class_Act7)

This quote refers to the difference between engaging in a 'solo tour', where fans of the media decide to visit shooting locations on their own, putting in the effort of mapping everything out by themselves. This is opposed to partaking in the official tour, where after paying a fee,

media tourists are guided through the shooting locations by a guide, who tend to be very knowledgeable about the media itself. This is a typical post found across the subreddits analyzed, where media tourists who already took part in the practice, either solo or on a guided tour, share their experiences and recommend it to others for various reasons. The act of recommending a specific practice of media tourism reflects the community values, and supports, along with the previous themes, the findings on the motivations behind people's posting in online communities (Bigné et al., 2020; Moore & Chuang, 2017; Prinster et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2022; Weld et al., 2021).

Disciplining

Embedded in the affordances of the platform, online media communities' members also engage in the disciplining of each other's behavior at the shooting locations of the shows. This mostly happens through comments on what media tourists should do when visiting these places, for example:

"during filming (which goes from May to Oct/Nov), photography on the tour will be even more restricted than it is now. We went on the tour last weekend and were allowed to take pics at Walker Pond, The Clearing, The Heaps, and some parts of Alexandria. I would assume that during filming, Alexandria pics will be off limits. We also got to see Hilltop, The Sanctuary, and Oceanside, but pics were not allowed at those locations. Photos are also not allowed of most of the main lot where the studio building is." (MarshaWithAnS_H_A)

As these acts of discipline take the form of recommendations to other media tourists, like visiting during specific periods of the year or how to behave when visiting, these also discipline other members of the community to establish an acceptable code of conduct. The establishment of acceptable behavior as members of the same fandom, and thus of the same digital space, relies on the sense of community that is co-created through the sharing of one's experience and recommendations. The understanding that certain behavior is suggested implies that deviated behavior is rejected by the community, reinstating the community's values and rules. The majority of the disciplining that happens within online communities' reconstruction of media

tourism experiences is focused on the practice of media tourism itself. Members relive their experiences and use them as teaching moments for other possible media tourists that are looking for information.

This is then contextualized within each fandom (Squirrell, 2019, p.1923) and based on the location visited, but it also extends to the behavior within the community. Users often highlight in their interactions how much they appreciate other members' help and knowledge sharing, while others explicitly discipline behavior within the community, as this user commented:

"Hope you have an amazing time and post photos!!! We love that shit." (mahjongwithmamet)

This was the concluding sentence of a longer text where the user suggested specific behavior while on site. This exemplifies how implied discipline takes place for acceptable practices within online communities, referring to others that members of the community highly value the sharing of experiences and pictures. This reinforces the social dimension of the creative process of values, as the user is reinforcing the values of the community through the replication of their understanding of community values. The user's use of 'we' implies that they are speaking for the community as a whole, highlighting the practice of sharing experiences and photos as a form of positive behavior. This could be connected to possible hierarchical structure within online fandoms (Abd-Rahim, 2019, p. 77; Edlom & Karlsson, 2021, p. 130), as those who have participated in media tourism are welcome to share pictures of their endeavors, further establishing themselves as media tourists in the locations themselves and in online communities.

Conclusion

This project looked at different subreddits representing the online communities of *Breaking Bad*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *The Walking Dead* and the posts and comments of those who took part in media tourism and reported their experiences to the online community. The first main finding, *Co-creating*, encapsulates the reinforcement of the sense of community that is found in fandoms, in digital spaces, highlighting its reliance on the social dimension of the practice of media tourism. Collective emotional connections that are constructed in media tourists' endeavors on shooting locations are reconstructed in subreddits, where the sharing of

their experiences strengthens fans' sense of belonging to the community and their passion for the media.

Members of online communities engaged in *Knowledge sharing*, where along with their previous adventures, they divulged information about the media and the practice of media tourism. In this sense, fans seem to establish an implied hierarchy that relies on their knowledge of the media, showcased through inside jokes and behind-the-scenes knowledge. Media tourism tends to be performed by die-hard fans, which are likely to be in the minority of the fandom, already establishing themselves at the top of the hierarchy. This is a possible reason as to why it does not seem to be strongly reinforced in the communities analyzed.

Ultimately, the theme of *Disciplining* relies on the sense of community and values established both in offline and digital spaces. This then serves the idea of maintaining the structure of communities as they currently stand, ensuring the reproduction of the same processes that lead to the establishment of a sense of community in the first place. This is then applied to both the practice of media tourism itself, and the reconstruction of media tourists' experiences in subreddits.

The sense of community that is co-created in tourist spaces between members of the same fandom is reproduced in online communities, where users reconstruct their experiences. Digital spaces can replace tourist spaces (Robards, 2018, p.193) to give media tourists an opportunity to relive their experiences, re-establishing an emotional connection to both other members and the experience itself (Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p. 173). The sense of community is then reinforced when members gather information regarding the practice of media tourism, inspiring them to participate. This extends the line blurring of fictional and real worlds that fans seek in media tourism (Hills 2017, p.245; Kork 2018, p.74; Lovell & Thurgill, 2021; Reijnders, 2011a, p. 17; 2011b, p. 371; 2016, p. 674) to its reconstruction in online communities. Similarly, feelings of escapism (Hills 2017, p.244; Lovell & Thurgill, 2021; Macionis, 2004, p.87) are also reconstructed within online communities and the repeated interactions between members of the fandom.

Online communities (Connell et al., 2021, p. 584) and reviews of shooting locations (Zimmermann & Reijnders, exp.2024) have been found to impact offline behavior (Bigné et al., 2020, p.699; Connell et al., 2021, p. 584; Lee, 2020, p.75), specifically media tourism (Connell et al., 2021, p. 584; Zimmermann & Reijnders, exp.2024). Analyzing the reconstruction of media

tourists' experiences allows for an understanding of the impact that these reconstructions have on the fandoms and on the practice itself. This could be resourceful in further understanding online media communities, and how the increased use of digital spaces is affecting cultural media phenomena, with a focus on non-virtual behavior like media tourism.

This project's findings can be employed to better understand the impact that online communities' reconstruction of media tourists' experiences have on the practice of media tourism itself, emphasizing the increasing importance of digital spaces. As online communities have evolved over time (Bury, 2017, p.629), they could be expected to continue to change and become increasingly relevant, as new generations are born into a more technological world. This project could then aid in understanding the possible ways that online fandoms' practices may evolve and influence offline behavior. Secondly, production companies and creators of media are becoming aware of the role of digital spaces in media tourism and fandoms and their increasing relevance. This could lead to their possible direct participation in online communities, directly influencing fandoms and their community behavior, both online and offline. This could also be an opportunity for smaller media to receive attention and partake in online communities, as they could benefit from the digitalization of fandoms.

Media tourism remains a non-virtual practice, where fans actively travel and visit the shooting locations of a media that they are passionate about. Thus, analyzing its reconstruction in online communities may not necessarily reflect the intentions and feelings of the media tourists, possibly leading to a mismatch in results. When users engage with each other in these online communities they may take on some performative roles, thus analyzing conversations through their textual form instead of directly interacting with them could constitute similar limitations. For these reasons, future research could integrate ethnographies, which could be conducted both digitally, in online communities, and on-site, directly observing media tourists' behavior. The implementation of these methodologies could lead to extensive results that unite both the usefulness of fans' experiences in tourism and digital spaces.

This project asked and aimed at understanding how online communities of *Breaking Bad*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *The Walking Dead*, represent and share their experiences of media tourism. The answer is that the members of these fandoms, and their respective subreddit, share their experiences in digital spaces and mirror how they co-construct a sense of community in tourist spaces (Reichenberger & Smith, 2020, p.175), but in digital ones. The act of sharing becomes a

mean for users to interact with each other, and relive their own experiences, re-establishing an emotional connection both to the media and to the online community. Members increase their sense of belonging also through the sharing of knowledge, both of the media and of media tourism. This impacts the larger phenomenon as members of fandoms join digital spaces to gain knowledge on the best practical information as well as connect with other fans. Online communities and digital spaces greatly help the continuation of media tourism as the reconstruction of fans' experiences enhances their emotional connection to the media.

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