

Imagination in Non-site-specific Contents Tourism: Meetings between Fans and Heroes at Ultraman events

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Abstract: Contents tourism research, as well as other research on fan tourism, has focused primarily on specific ‘sacred sites’ of fan tourism and the behaviours of fan tourists there. This article investigates the less-explored area of non-site-specific contents tourism using a theoretical approach centred on the concept of *lieux d’imagination* (Reijnders 2011), but extending the concept to include physical entities in addition to physical sites. This article focuses on the collaborative performances of meetings between fans and Ultraman heroes at temporary Ultraman events, paying particular attention to fan behaviours at such events. It finds that these performances of meetings make for deeply emotional, personalized, and satisfying contents tourism experiences for fans. By examining the meaningful imaginative experiences fans have even at sites with no relation to the narrative world, this article clarifies the role of imagination in non-site-specific contents tourism. The conclusions drawn also lead to an expanded perception of what sites can count as sacred sites of contents tourism, raising possibilities for further research in the field of contents tourism studies.

アブストラクト：コンテンツツーリズムをはじめ、ファンツーリズム研究においては、特定とした場所（「聖地」）が分析されている傾向が見られる。本論文では、Reijndersが着想した「*lieux d’imagination*」（「想像の場」）という概念を発見させ、そしてその概念に基づき、場所非特定型コンテンツツーリズムというコンテンツツーリズムのサブジャンルについて論じる。本論文では、ウルトラマンシリーズの短期間イベントで行うファンとウルトラヒーローの共同的な出会いに焦点を当てる。ファンの想像力を用いての行動に注目し、ファンとヒーローの出会いは非常に感慨深く、パーソナルな経験であり、そしてとても満足させるコンテンツツーリズム経験であることがわかった。したがって、本論文では、想像力は場所非特定型コンテンツツーリズムにどのような役割を果たしているのかについて主張する。本論文の結果から、コンテンツツーリズムにおける「聖地」の定義を拡大させる余地があることが明確になり、本論文はコンテンツツーリズム研究の発展につながると考えられる。

Keywords: contents tourism, imagination, Ultraman, special effects, meet-and-greet events

Introduction

There has been much research on tourism by fans of fictional narratives to real-world places (Yamamura and Seaton 2020; Lee 2012; Reijnders 2011; Waysdorf 2021; Okamoto 2015; Roesch 2009). Such tourism has tended to be named after the type of media that induced it, for example film tourism. However, the increasingly mediatized nature of fictional stories, which can be adapted and disseminated across multiple types of media, has led to terms like media tourism (Reijnders 2011) and contents tourism (Yamamura and Seaton 2020).

Prior research has found that tourism induced by fictional narrative worlds requires tourists to engage imaginatively with the site. Through examining cases of media tourism, Reijnders (2011) theorizes the concept of *lieux d'imagination* (places of the imagination), which he defines as 'material reference points like objects or places, which for certain groups within society serve as material-symbolic references to a common imaginary world' (p. 14). Media tourists, 'starting with their imagination, go in search of physical, material references', literally giving a 'place to their fantasies, dreams and feelings' (p. 114). This is particularly apparent in tourism induced by fantastical narrative worlds. Lovell and Bull (2017) state that 'fantasy superheats magical realism' and that the film tourist 'overlays the physical environment with the second dimension of filmed environment to form an imaginary space' while at the site of tourism (p. 147). Lee (2012) examines how at sites of Harry Potter tourism imaginary geographies of the narrative world and real-world geographies come to exist side-by-side in the minds of fans, and the sites become liminal, 'in-between' spaces where the categories of 'real' and 'fictional' are 'destabilized' (p. 59-60). Lovell (2019) discusses how tourists influenced by fantasy in media encounter the 'magi-heritage' – a blend of actual and magical worlds – in historic cities. The blurring of lines between the real and imaginary is thus an integral part of imaginatively engaging with a tourist site of a fantastical narrative world.

Existing research has mostly focused on tourist sites related in some way to the narrative world – from filming sites (Roesch 2009) to sites that may have been inspirations for iconic fictional places (Lovell and Thurgill 2021) – and how their characteristics aid the tourist in imaginatively engaging with the site. In contrast, the possibility of having meaningful tourism experiences at sites with no particular connection to the narrative world has been largely unexplored, although one notable exception is Sugawa-Shimada's (2020) research on non-site-specific theatre tourism. This article will further investigate non-site-specific contents tourism through examining the tourism of fans of the tokusatsu franchise Ultraman.

Tokusatsu, usually translated as 'special effects', is a genre of live-action media in Japan originating from the creation of giant monster (*kaijū*) movies in the 1950s and Ultraman television shows in the 1960s (Morishita 2015, p. 17). Tokusatsu as a genre is characterized by the use of practical special effects to portray fantastical elements (Morishita 2015, p. 17-18; Futaesaku 2015, p. 86-87). A representative example within the tokusatsu genre is the Ultraman franchise, produced by Tsuburaya Productions and consisting mainly of television shows aimed at children. Each show features a titular Ultraman hero, who, with the help of human allies, fights against hostile *kaijū* or other threats in order to protect the Earth. Practical effects in Ultraman works include the portrayal of the non-human Ultraman heroes by actors in suits (*kigurumi*), and the use of miniature sets in filming fights between the giant Ultraman heroes and similarly-sized enemies.¹ Imada (2023) describes the viewing of Ultraman works as a 'transcendental experience' in which the viewer is 'in a single moment transported into the unrealistic world of Ultraman' from the 'normal world of the living room' (p. 86). The Ultraman franchise thus exemplifies how tokusatsu inherently involves the blurring of lines between the real and the fictional, and the accessing of the fantastical through the

practical.² As such, in their consumption of tokusatsu works, viewers can be said to employ their imagination in a similar way to how fans of fantastical narrative worlds employ their imagination in tourism.

The use of imagination in tokusatsu tourism is, however, an under-explored area in existing research. Futaesaku's (2015) conceptualization of tokusatsu tourism – as consisting of 19 different types (further grouped into five categories) of activities, organized by or in collaboration with the production companies of tokusatsu works³ – approaches tokusatsu tourism primarily from the perspective of the production side, without taking into account fan perspectives or behaviours. This article will address this research gap by focusing on fan experiences at sites of tokusatsu tourism.

To do this, I will use a contents tourism approach. Contents tourism, as defined by Yamamura (2020), is 'a dynamic series of tourism practices/experiences motivated by contents', where tourists access and embody 'narrative worlds' that continually develop and expand through a process of 'mediatized adaptation and tourism practice' known as contentsization (p. 9). The focus on the travel behaviours of tourists at 'sacred sites' – 'real-world sites related to the narrative world' (p. 10) – in the contents tourism approach makes it suitable for this article.

Sacred sites of Ultraman contents tourism naturally include sites related to the narrative world; however, Ultraman fans are also motivated to travel to sites of Ultraman events, which tend to be held at unrelated sites – places with no connection at all to the narrative world.⁴ Through looking at the meetings between fans and heroes at Ultraman events, this article demonstrates the role the imagination plays in non-site-specific contents tourism.

Engaging with *lieux d'imagination* at unrelated sites

Physical entities as lieux d'imagination

Reijnders' concept of *lieux d'imagination* draws on Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, which is defined as 'any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community' (Nora 1996, p. xvii). Reijnders' research thus far has focused on analyzing sites as the *lieux d'imagination* (for example, Reijnders 2011). However, extrapolating from Nora's definition of *lieux de mémoire*, significant entities other than sites can act as *lieux d'imagination*. In this article, I analyze Ultraman contents tourism as a case where the *lieu d'imagination* that allows fans to renegotiate the boundaries of imagination and reality is not the physical site, but the physical presence of Ultraman heroes at the site.

Waysdorf (2021) includes in her explanation of imaginative experiences the concept of ironic imagination, 'in which fans treat an imaginary world "as if" it were real, while knowing it isn't' (p. 288). Ultraman fans engage their imagination in this way at sites of Ultraman events – even while knowing that the Ultraman heroes there are portrayed by suit actors, they interact with the heroes 'as if' they were real. The presence of the Ultraman heroes there facilitates fans in engaging with the site as a place of meeting with heroes.

In this, Ultraman heroes function as what Lovell and Bull (2017) refer to as 'tourist focal points', that '[augment] reality to incorporate elements of fantasy sites that are explicitly provided for performance' (p. 147). Lovell and Bull discuss such focal points – for example a statue of Sherlock Holmes in Baker Street – as acting to strengthen the connection of a site to the narrative world. In contrast, in the case of Ultraman events, it is the presence of the heroes – the focal point itself – that creates the connection to the narrative world.

The physical presence of Ultraman heroes is thus highly effective as a *lieu d'imagination*, that draws fans to event sites and enables their blending of reality and imagination there. In the events I visited, this effectiveness was not affected even when the physical site had no relation to the narrative world.

Contents tourism at unrelated sites

In understanding how unrelated sites can function as effective sacred sites for a narrative world, I draw on Sugawa-Shimada's (2020) research on non-site-specific theatre tourism. She finds that fans not only access the liminal 2.5-dimensional space through their behaviours inside and outside the theatre, but also that their participation in the space and interactions with other fans are part of the construction of the space itself (p. 137). Sugawa-Shimada concludes that no particular theatre is a sacred site, but any theatre can become a site where 'sacred spots' come temporarily into existence, as long as it is a space where the contents and the fans can come together (p. 136, 141). In other words, what makes the physical place of tourism into a sacred site is the ability to access a liminal space and participate in activities there as a fan, and with other fans.

The importance of the tourist in the creation of the site aligns with the 'performance turn' in tourism studies. Haldrup and Larsen state that:

Tourist places are produced places, and tourists are co-producers of such places. They are performances of place that partly produce and transform places and connect them to other places. Most tourist places are 'dead' until actors take the stage and enact them [...] Indeed it can be argued that places emerge as tourist places, stages of tourism, only when they are performed (Bærenholdt *et al.*, 2004).

(Haldrup and Larsen 2010, p. 5)

In short, the presence and performances of tourists at the site are integral to the site's existence as a site of tourism. I posit that this applies to Ultraman contents tourism, in that unrelated sites can exist as sacred sites due to the presence and behaviours of Ultraman tourists at the sites.

What allows tourists to have meaningful contents tourism experiences at sites of Ultraman events, therefore, is not the physical site itself. Instead, it is a combination of the presence of the Ultraman heroes there, and the active and imaginative engagement of fans with the site facilitated by this presence.

The case of Ultraman thus shows how non-site-specific contents tourism can occur as long as *lieux d'imagination* are present that enable fans to access the narrative world and engage with (even) unrelated sites as sacred sites.

Methodology

I participated in three different Ultraman events where fans can meet Ultraman heroes, through participation in photo-taking and/or theatre (stage show) experiences. The first was an 'Ultra Heroes Greeting' photography session (*satsueikai*) event held on 30 April 2023 at Ebina Housing Gallery in Ebina city, Kanagawa prefecture. The event consisted solely of taking photographs of and/or with the six Ultraman heroes featured. Participation required a free ticket that was distributed on a first-come-first-served basis at the site.⁵

The second event was the live show event ‘New Generation The Live: Chapter Stars’, held on 28 May 2023 at Sukagawa Culture Center in Sukagawa city, Fukushima prefecture. This live show was a touring production that held performances in other prefectures as well. The primary event was the live show, but a bonus ‘Ultra Shot’ photo-taking session was also held at the site before the show started. Participation required a ticket for each individual participant, which had to be booked and paid for in advance.

Unlike the other events analyzed in this article, this event site had a prior connection to the narrative world due to its location in Sukagawa city, the birthplace of one of the original creators of Ultraman. Sukagawa city’s status as a sacred site was acknowledged in official online posts regarding the event, and during the event itself by the performers. However, I found that the behaviours performed by fans there did not differ significantly from those of fans at events held at unrelated sites. This leads me to conclude that their imaginative participation at the event was primarily facilitated by the presence of the heroes at the event site, rather than the city as a sacred site.

The third event was the Ultra Heroes Expo 2023 Summer Festival (hereafter, ‘Ultra Summer’) event held at Ikebukuro Sunshine City. This event is held every year in the same location, for a period of about a month; I participated in the event on 24 July and 9 August. The Ultra Summer event is a large-scale Ultraman event, with the main event space comprising of four areas: the exhibition area, the Ultra Shot section within it, the stage area (in which a stage show is performed), and the goods area (Figure 6).

Participation required a pre-booked, paid ticket for each individual participant for a specific date and time during the event. There were five sessions held each day of the event, corresponding to the timing of when the stage show would be performed. Entry into the exhibition area was allowed from one hour before a show started. In that time, participants could freely walk around the exhibition area and take photographs, and/or participate in the Ultra Shot section.⁶ In addition, a related ‘Meet the Hero’ event (hereafter ‘Mitohi’, as it is known to fans) was held at a separate site a few minutes’ walk away from the main event space. Participation required a pre-booked, paid ticket solely for the Mitohi session as well as a ticket to the Ultra Summer event on the same day.

I did participant observation at all three event sites. However, the semi-private nature of the meetings with Ultraman heroes (the Mitohi event in particular) required participating in the meetings myself. As such, my fieldwork has an aspect of autoethnography, an approach that ‘acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher’s influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don’t exist’ (Benjamin 2020, p. 194, quoting from Ellis *et al.* 2011, p. 274). Experiencing for myself the process of meeting with Ultraman heroes has enriched my observations by giving me a better understanding of the personal nature of the meetings and the deeply emotional responses it can evoke from fans.

When possible, I supplemented my participatory observations with short, informal interviews with other participants.⁷ The autoethnographical approach was also useful here. I found that positioning myself as a fellow fan (for example by mentioning my own experience of meeting the heroes) made my interlocutors more willing to share their own emotional experiences with me. In my interviews, I asked primarily about their motivations for attending as well as their thoughts regarding meetings with the Ultraman heroes. My interlocutors tended to be hesitant initially when approached; as such, I tried to keep the interview as conversational as possible, even if that meant veering away from my preprepared questions. The duration of the interviews varied depending on time constraints at the site as well as the interlocutor’s comfort, but all were at least three minutes, with the longest being about fifteen or twenty minutes. These interviews allowed me to gain

valuable insight into the thoughts and actions of Ultraman fans during the events. My findings will be analyzed in the following sections.

Characteristics of meetings between fans and heroes

Collaborative performances of meeting

Meetings between fans and heroes can be viewed through the lens of performance, using Haldrup and Larsen's (2010) conceptualization of performance as 'a form of playful, ritualized behaviour: partly constrained, partly innovative' (p. 12). Meetings with heroes are ritualized as fans perform established patterns of behaviour that comply with rules by event organizers; in this, they are similar to celebrity meet-and-greets, described by Reijnders *et al.* (2013) as 'ritualized meetings in which contradictions between celebrities and "normal people" are staged and temporarily bridged by the application of an established protocol' (p. 153). The ritualistic aspect serves to mitigate potential threats to the meaningful experience of meeting celebrities (p. 153), or in this case, Ultraman heroes. At the same time, there is a playful aspect to meetings with heroes, as fans have a degree of agency in what exactly they do in the meetings. This allows for creativity in interactions with the heroes, giving a personalized aspect to the meetings that contributes to the meaningfulness of the experience for fans.

The meetings observed in my fieldwork can be broadly categorized into photo-taking experiences and stage show experiences. Photo-taking experiences are centred around the action of taking photographs with, or of, the Ultraman heroes.⁸ Photo-taking experiences are varied, but there is typically an element of waiting for one's turn to enter a photo-taking area where one is up close to the hero(es). There the participant can either take a photo with the hero (referred to as an 'Ultra Shot'⁹), or of the hero ('Hero Shot'). Depending on the type of event, the photographer is either the participant using their own device, or the on-site staff photographer (in which case the photo will become available for sale to the participant). Participants' companions are usually allowed to take additional photos; for example, the parents of a child who is posing with the Ultraman hero can take pictures from the side. Photo-taking experiences are typically less than a minute long.¹⁰ The significance of photography in meetings with heroes will be discussed in further detail in the following section.

Stage show experiences are centred around the viewing of a live theatrical performance where Ultraman heroes are featured and play major roles.¹¹ These shows typically contain elements of audience interaction. In particular, during scenes when the heroes are struggling in battle, the audience is cued to send cheers of encouragement and/or other gestures of support to the heroes, thereby enabling them to defeat their opponents. As such, the actions of the audience in stage shows are constructed as being of importance to the narrative, to the point where the stage show would not be complete without the participation of the audience. Stage shows might also include scenes where the heroes leave the stage and walk around the audience seats, providing opportunities for direct interaction.

Ultraman heroes are fictional characters who, at the event site, are portrayed by suit actors. Thus, meetings between fans and heroes at Ultraman events are collaborative performances of fans and heroes – aided by other on-site event staff – which lead to meaningful contents tourism experiences at the event site. The following sections elaborate on aspects of these performances that contribute to the meaningfulness of the meeting experience.

Performing photography

Discussion of photography at sites of contents tourism has focused on tourists' re-enactments of the narrative world at such sites (Roesch 2009, p.159; Lovell and Bull 2017, p. 146). Tourists photograph sacred sites to 're-experience and reconstruct filmic signs or objects in the real world' (Roesch 2009, p. 130), and a common practice of contents tourists is comparing their photographs of the sites with the original shots from the contents (Roesch 2009, p. 136; Okamoto 2015, p. 24). The sites themselves are thus significant to the photographs.

Photography at Ultraman events differs in that it is not the site, but the Ultraman heroes, that are significant to the photographs. Analyzing the photographic practices of Ultraman fans through a performance approach shows how Ultraman fans experience the event site not as a place of visual connection to the narrative world, but as a place of meeting with characters from the narrative world.

Haldrup and Larsen's performance approach to tourist photography explores how 'competent, active, expressive and physical bodies picture places and each other in teams comprising photographers, posing models and present, displaced, or future audiences' (2010, p. 130). These elements are present in the photography of Ultraman fans. In photo-taking experiences, fans are able to customize the photographs they take through methods like choosing the composition of the photo, the angle from which to take the photograph, or through their poses.¹² Figures 1-3 provide some examples of photographs taken at photo-taking experiences.



Figure 1: 'Hero shot' taken at the Ultra Heroes Greeting event. Participants could choose which heroes they wanted to be at the front.



Figure 2: Pictures of the Ultraman hero (posing according to my requests) taken at the Mitohi event.

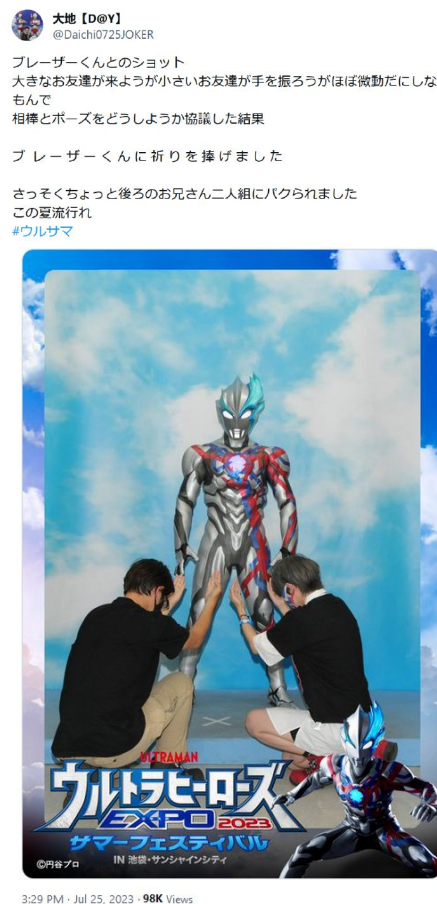


Figure 3: A fan's 'Ultra Shot' photograph at the Ultra Summer event. The caption states that they posed this way after taking into account the stillness of this particular Ultraman hero during photo-taking.
Source: <https://twitter.com/daichi0725joker/status/1683726180443373568?t=ptyEBgSGx8QVGQnGYnHQDw> (Accessed 27 December 2023)

Fans usually have no control over the poses Ultraman heroes do.¹³ The (suit actors for the) heroes decide their poses. The heroes can match their poses to fans, or vice versa as shown in Figure 3. This exemplifies the collaborative aspect of photo-taking experiences; the embodied performance of photography in itself functions as a form of communication between fans and heroes. The significance of photography as communication has been discussed by Kamioka (2021), who concludes from her research on ‘cheki’ (polaroid photo) events in idol culture that the collaborative act of taking chekis together not only strengthens the relationship between an individual fan and the idol, but also strengthens the idol’s ties to the fan community (p. 151-152).

This is also applicable to Ultraman photo-taking experiences. In collaboratively performing with the heroes while taking photos, fans are, through their actions, engaging with the Ultraman heroes in ways that establish as well as re-confirm the existence of the heroes at the site. Their doing so contributes to the merging of real and narrative worlds not only for themselves, but also for the other fans there. Hence, the performance of photography is a way of imaginatively participating in Ultraman events, which not only strengthens the connection between individual fans and heroes, but also helps facilitate the imaginative participation of other fans.

Significance of the photographs taken

In ‘Ultra Shot’ events, where the primary photographer is a staff member, participants are able to purchase a physical copy of the photograph taken. The significance of material photographs, according to Kamioka (2021), lies in how they contribute to the accumulative process of relationship-building between idol and fan - chekis are physical records of fans’ communication with their idol, and the viewing of the literal accumulation of chekis allows fans to reconfirm their liking for the idol (p. 153). Haldrup and Larsen (2010) raise a similar point in their description of souvenir photographs as able to ‘contain or trigger particular personal stories and sentiments for the owner’ (p. 159). Likewise, viewing physical photographs of their past meetings with Ultraman heroes can revive the memories of those personal experiences in fans’ minds. Upon viewing these records, fans are reminded of their feelings toward that particular Ultraman hero, and of that particular experience of meeting the Ultraman hero.

Digital photographs function similarly as a record of the meeting experience, but are also able to be shared online. This is done by many Ultraman fans, who post photos not only of recent, but also past meetings with heroes. The sharing of photos thus has an affordance similar to that of material photos in enabling fans to ‘look back’ on their previous meetings. Fans may also add (official or unofficial) hashtags to their posts, which signals a desire to share their photos with the wider fan community. People can be motivated to share their photos online for various reasons. For some it offers gratification ‘such as feedback, public approval, attention, recognition, and social rewards in the form of comments and consequent conversation on shared photos’, and for others it is a ‘fun and joyful activity, as photos shared with others provide entertainment value to the users’ (Malik *et al.* 2016, p. 130). In the fandom, sharing photos can be a way for people to ‘[establish] and [normalize] their presence as fans’; it enables fans to ‘[demonstrate] fan authenticity’ and ‘[connect] with other users by making them feel part of the moment across time and space’ (Toffoletti *et al.* 2021, p. 712). The sharing of digital photos is thus meaningful for fans both on a personal basis as well as in terms of connecting to, as well as establishing a place in, the wider fan community.



Figure 4: Candid photos of the Ultraman heroes at the Ultra Heroes Greeting event posted by a fan; the caption describes the heroes' actions.

Source: <https://twitter.com/777knka/status/1652597708941832192?s=46&t=ptyEBgSGx8QVGQnGYnHQDw> (Accessed 1 Sept 2023)

Sharing photos can also be meaningful in relation to the expansion of the Ultraman narrative world. When not posing, Ultraman heroes react to and interact with their surroundings; they actively exist in the event space. The photographs fans take and share are therefore not only posed shots, but also more candid snapshots of the Ultraman heroes and their expressive movements. Fans post these snapshots online as well, with captions describing the actions of the Ultraman hero (as shown in Figure 4), or expressing their (usually positive) thoughts on seeing those actions. Fans are thus viewing and engaging with the Ultraman heroes at the event site as part of, and contributing to, the narrative world. As such, fans' actions in sharing and spreading digital photos – essentially new content of Ultraman heroes, and the narratives arising from that – contributes to the process of contentsization of the narrative world.

During my fieldwork, I observed many fans who brought professional-grade cameras to take photos of the heroes. There are also fans who have dedicated social media accounts for posting their photos. In the taking and sharing of photos, fans may pay attention to artistic aspects of photography such as composition and colour grading; this indicates yet again the meaningfulness to fans of the practice of photography. This can be further seen from their negative attitudes towards unauthorized reproduction and/or use of their photographs.¹⁴

Hence, photography is deeply meaningful in meetings between fans and Ultraman heroes. The performance of photography in itself is a way of imaginative engagement with the Ultraman heroes at the event, and the affordances of the photographs taken contribute to the meaningful experience

of meeting the heroes. Furthermore, photography and the photographs taken at events are significant not only on the level of an individual fan's experience, but also in relation to the wider fan community both at the site and online.

Interacting with the heroes

Verbal interaction is usually one-way, from fans to heroes, as Ultraman heroes cannot speak spontaneously. A possible reason is because the voices of the suit actors differ from those of the original heroes; to remain believably as their characters, they do not speak aloud. In photo-taking experiences, fans verbally greet the heroes and thank the heroes after photo-taking. In stage show experiences, verbal interaction is critical to the narrative as the cheers of encouragement from the audience support the heroes in their battles. In the Mitohi event, fans are able to talk to the Ultraman hero, and are prompted by the on-site staff there to do so. These actions all cement the Ultraman heroes as beings one can communicate with, strengthening the experience as one of meeting the Ultraman hero as opposed to just seeing them.

Only in stage shows do Ultraman heroes verbally 'speak' to the audience; this is done by playing pre-recorded voice lines to which the suit actors sync their movements. In speaking to the audience, the heroes acknowledge the existence of the audience in the narrative world of Ultraman. The heroes also usually thank the audience for their support, acknowledging a personal connection to and relationship with the audience.

Physical interaction is usually two-way, consisting of physical contact with the Ultraman heroes, as well as physical gestures used in the communication between fans and heroes. The level of physical contact allowed can vary depending on the event and the circumstances¹⁵; in general, brief physical contact like fist-bumping is allowed, but hugging is not. Fans are provided with opportunities to make physical contact with the heroes. When observing an Ultra Shot session in the Ultra Summer event, I noticed that the Ultraman hero made sure to offer every participant a fist-bump after the photograph was taken. In stage shows of the same event, an Ultraman hero would be stationed at the exit to give each audience member a fist-bump (or similar gesture) when they left the theatre space. In all stage shows I watched, the Ultraman heroes would, when going around the audience seats, make physical contact (e.g. fist-bumps, touching hands) with the audience.

Reijnders *et al.* (2013) state that physical contact with the celebrity Marco Borsato is important to his fans as 'their experience is only "real" and fulfilled if physical contact has been made – if they have encountered Marco Borsato beyond the world of words and images' (p. 163). Physical contact with Ultraman heroes similarly confirms the physical existence of the both fans and heroes at the site, and that they are together in the same space. This significantly strengthens the 'realness' of the meeting experience.

Physical gestures also function as an important form of communication between fans and heroes, especially as the heroes cannot speak spontaneously. In my fieldwork, I observed fans showing the heroes plush toys or action figures of them, and the Ultraman heroes responding through body language and gestures of acknowledgement (e.g. waving, pointing). Ultraman heroes can also use gestures to initiate non-verbal conversation with fans. As can be seen in Figure 5, such communication is welcomed by fans, and these personal memories of interaction are part of the meaningfulness of the meeting experience.



Figure 5: A fan's post about the Ultra Shot experience, with photos of the Ultraman hero noticing the accessories based on him the fan was wearing.

Source: <https://twitter.com/chika5150/status/1662778453723340800> (Accessed 1 Sept 2023)

Thus, fans engage with Ultraman heroes at the site as real and communicative beings. Their behaviours interacting with the heroes contribute to personal and embodied experiences of meeting for fans.

Customizing experiences of meeting

Roesch (2009) states that 'film location tourists engage in the actual location encounter with different, underlying expectations and motivations' (p. 209). Similarly, fans have different, underlying expectations and motivations in their engagement with Ultraman heroes at events. This leads to fans customizing their experiences of Ultraman events to be most meaningful to themselves, through choosing what meetings to participate in, as well as how they participate in those meetings. This is most evident at large-scale events like the Ultra Summer event, that have multiple 'sacred spots' within the event site with which fans can engage (Figure 6).

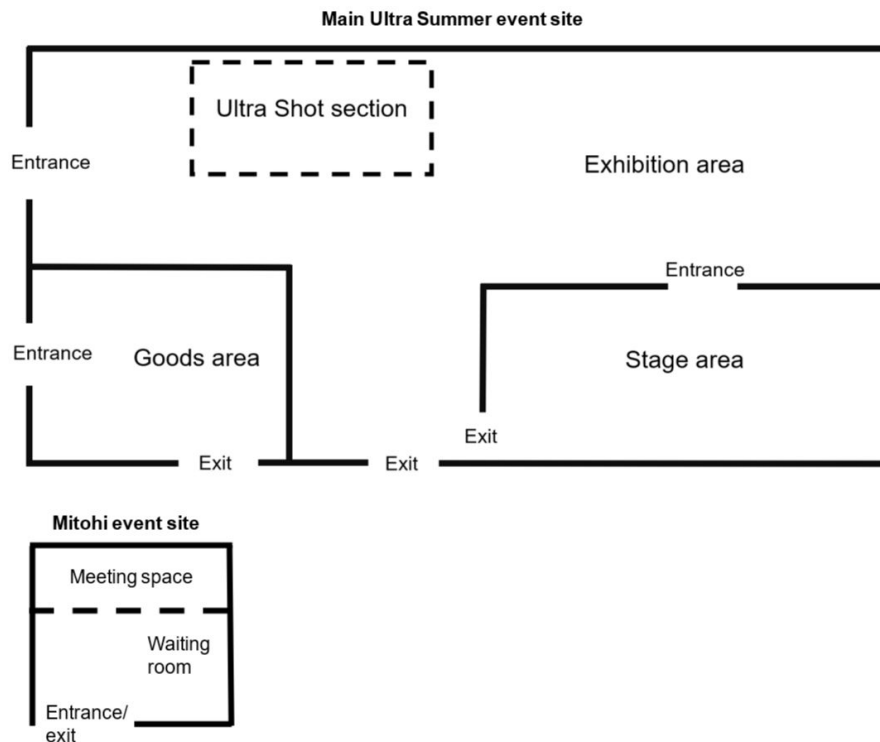


Figure 6: Diagram of the main event site and Mitohi event site.

The former is based on the map available from the official event website.

Source: <https://www.ultra-expo.com/summer/2023/about/> (Accessed 12 August 2023)

Meetings with Ultraman heroes take place at the Ultra Shot section, the stage show, and the Mitohi event. These sacred spots all offer different experiences of meeting the heroes. Photo-taking experiences provide chances for one-on-one interaction, while the stage show experience is geared towards collective experiences of meeting. Of particular note is the Mitohi event, which is a photo-taking experience like the Ultra Heroes Greeting and Ultra shot events, but differs in the length and relative privacy of the meeting, leading to the perception of an exceptionally close distance between fan and hero.

The Mitohi event takes place in a room divided into a waiting room area and a meeting space screened off from other participants.¹⁶ Upon entering the meeting space, participants have three minutes to interact with the Ultraman hero there. They can take as many photos (using their own devices) as they like, and request for the hero to do specific poses or actions. The structure of the event gives participants the sense of having the Ultraman hero all to themselves for the duration of the meeting, and of the photographs they take there as being uniquely theirs. As such, the Mitohi event enables participants to have a very personal experience of meeting the Ultraman hero. When talking about the Mitohi event, many of my interlocutors used the phrase ‘close distance’ (*kyori ga chikai*) in describing how it differed from other meeting experiences.¹⁷ Two interlocutors described the event as ‘special’ due to this close proximity to the hero.¹⁸

The close proximity can evoke particularly strong emotions in participants. An interlocutor I spoke to before participating in the event advised me to write down beforehand what poses I wanted to request, as one would be too overwhelmed during the meeting to remember them, and jokingly described her friend as having been ‘ended’ (*oshimai ni natta*) by the experience.¹⁹ Posts about Mitohi experiences online (such as Figure 7) also reflect the deeply emotional reactions of participants when interacting with the Ultraman hero.²⁰ The popularity of the Mitohi event is

evident from how tickets for each session sold out within a few minutes of becoming available on the ticketing website.



Figure 7: A fan's post about the Mitohi experience.

The caption and illustrations (by the fan) record the emotional experience of meeting.

Source: <https://twitter.com/Misanga4800/status/1686739672179851264> (Accessed 1 Sept 2023)

However, it is not the case that the Mitohi event is the most meaningful or desirable meeting experience for all fans. The event did not appeal to one of my interlocutors. He explained that Ultraman heroes to him are heroes he looks up to. As such, he feels that the distance between fan and hero at a Mitohi event is too close.²¹ Another interlocutor said that the brief interaction with the Ultraman hero at an Ultra Shot session was enough for her, and so she did not particularly feel the need to attend a Mitohi event.²² Other interlocutors expressed interest in participating, but it seemed that to them the Mitohi event was just one type of enjoyable meeting experience, and the close distance did not make it preferable over other events.

Thus, Ultraman fans are not homogeneous in their preferences, and those preferences affect what meetings they choose to participate in. Their preferences also influence how they participate in the meetings. For example, photo-taking events offer participants the choice between taking photos with, or of, the hero. This choice allows fans to negotiate different distances between themselves and the hero.

Even if fans take photos with the hero, their constructions of themselves in relation to the hero can differ. Two of my interlocutors preferred to perform the same pose as the hero in photo-taking experiences, with one giving the reason that doing so gave him a 'sense of unity' ('*ittaikan*') with the hero, as though he himself was turning into the hero.²³ Another of my interlocutors preferred to

hold up plush toys of the heroes while posing with them instead.²⁴ Here, the difference in their preferred poses expresses a difference in the ways they construct their connections with the hero – one seeks to transform into the hero, and the other seeks to be with the hero in the same space.

In addition, I observed in my fieldwork participants who posed with toy versions of devices and weapons used by the heroes in Ultraman works, as well as participants who wore outfits and accessories based on the heroes, such as in Figure 5. Figure 3 also shows an example of participants' creative poses with the hero. In these ways, participants actively choose how to present themselves and perform such that they can connect to the Ultraman heroes according to their preferences.

The freedom of choice regarding whether and how to participate in meeting experiences thus allows fans to negotiate the distance at which they meet the Ultraman heroes, and the connections they construct to the heroes. Fans actively customize their experiences according to their preferences, enabling them to have personally satisfying experiences of meetings.

Roesch (2009) mentions that 'some tourists are more interested in technical aspects than in the imaginary component of the [filming] locations' (p. 209). Two of my interlocutors at the Ultra Summer event displayed a similar attitude when they mentioned the suit actors for the Ultraman heroes as their reason for participation. One of them was motivated to buy multiple tickets for the event so that she could watch the variations in the acting of a suit actor in the stage show.²⁵ Another enjoyed studying the Ultraman heroes' movements to see if she could recognize the suit actors playing them.²⁶ However, their recognition of the suit actors did not weaken the imaginary component of the meetings. Rather, these two interlocutors were enhancing their imaginative experience of the event by engaging in the 'production mode' (Waysdorf 2021, p. 287) of imagining. This further highlights the complexity and variety in how fans participate in meetings with heroes.

Role of the production side

The meetings in this article occurred at official events organized by and/or in collaboration with the production company, making it necessary to consider the role the production side – here defined as event staff, event organizers, and site owners – plays in the meetings.

Event staff

Directly interacting with fans at the site are the event staff, comprising the suit actors for the Ultraman heroes and other on-site staff. Event staff are integral in encouraging and facilitating fans to engage imaginatively with the heroes at the event.

Suit actors are professionals who have received training on how to portray their characters as well as interact with participants. They perform gestures and poses unique to the character, and react when shown plushies of their characters (or related characters). As seen in Figure 5, they also recognize and acknowledge when participants wear accessories based on their characters. In front of the participants, they are constantly performing their characters (Figure 4). The actions of the suit actors in existing at the site as their characters help fans to engage their ironic imagination at the site as fans can easily believe the Ultraman heroes are there. Suit actors, in enabling fans to access the *lieux d'imagination* of the Ultraman heroes' presence at the site, thus have a critical role in meetings between fans and Ultraman heroes.

The on-site staff are also important in facilitating meetings between the fans and heroes. On-site staff encourage the blending of reality and fiction that allows a site to exist as a place of meeting with Ultraman heroes. They model behaviour for fans through their interactions with the Ultraman heroes. By treating the Ultraman heroes at the site as 'real', they contribute to establishing the site as a place of meeting with the heroes.

Furthermore, on-site staff can establish how participants themselves are constructed at the site. In the Ultra Heroes Greeting event, a staff member referred to both adult and child participants as 'friends who wish to meet the Ultraman heroes' (*'urutora hīrō ni aitai otomodachi'*), with children being referred to as 'small friends' (*'chiisana otomodachi'*). This constructed all participants as being on the same social level and belonging to the same group, without dividing them into categories like adult and child. Categories that may hold weight in reality became meaningless at the event site, contributing to a sense of disconnection from the 'usual', 'real' world. In stage show experiences, some of the on-site staff, functioning as emcees, have similar roles in constructing the audience as existing in the narrative world of Ultraman. They establish both the setting of the stage show, and the audience as existing in that setting. In this way, the on-site staff encourage the blending of reality and imagination at the site.

Another way on-site staff enable fans' meaningful meetings with heroes is through their facilitation of interaction between the fans and heroes. In the Ultra Heroes Greeting event, on-site staff communicated participants' requests to the heroes by asking the participant's favourite hero to move to the front. In Ultra Shot events, they prompted fans to fist-bump the heroes. In the Mitohi event, they suggested poses for the Ultraman hero to do, as well as different angles from which to take photos. They also interpreted the actions of the Ultraman hero, and prompted participants to speak to the hero. In stage shows, the on-site staff directed the audience in sending cheers of encouragement. These are some of the ways on-site staff encouraged the imaginative participation of fans, thereby contributing to fans' meaningful experiences of meeting the heroes.

However, on-site staff are also the representatives of event organizers at the site, and their job includes making sure participants abide by the rules of the event. As such, they have the authority to limit what fans can do in their meetings with heroes. This reflects a tension between the 'ritual' and 'play' aspects of meetings, which will be discussed further in the next section.

Event organizers and site owners

Fans having meaningful experiences at Ultraman events is viewed positively by event organizers and site owners, who benefit, financially or otherwise, from fan attendance at events. For instance, an email to the company that owns Ebina Housing Gallery asking about its motivation in organizing an Ultraman event there received a reply in which it was stated that they 'want families to have an enjoyable time at the event, and afterwards take their time in looking at the model houses at the site'.²⁷ This indicates that the company recognizes the effectiveness of Ultraman events in both attracting families – i.e. potential future buyers of their products – to the site and enabling them to have enjoyable experiences there. As such, the production side usually cooperates with the fan side in making the meetings with Ultraman heroes meaningful experiences for fans.²⁸ However, it is possible for the fan side and production side to clash.

During the Ultra Summer event, notices were posted on the official website and social media of the event stating that for hygiene reasons the Ultraman heroes would refrain from doing 'poses where their hands touch the ground' in Mitohi and Ultra Shot events.²⁹ This update to the rules was

allegedly in response to an Ultra Shot the previous day, in which the participant posed sitting on the ground and the Ultraman hero followed suit.³⁰

This case shows the possible competing interests of the various actors involved in a meeting between fan and Ultraman hero. During the meeting, the fan posed in their preferred way, and the suit actor for the hero also tried to ensure a positive experience for the fan by doing the same pose. However, from the event organizer's point of view, such poses could lead to negative effects on other fans due to the possible spreading of germs, and so the rules were updated to prevent further instances of similar poses. This new limitation of what actions could be performed during a meeting experience naturally affected other fans as complying with the rules could lead to them being unable to perform the meetings exactly to their preferences. As such, despite how meetings with heroes allow for personalized, meaningful experiences for fans, these meetings cannot be fully divorced from a wider context that includes both the production side and other fans.

However, that possible threats to the meaningful experiences of meetings are actively and continually mitigated by the production side and fans could be seen as another indicator of the collaborative nature of the performances of meeting. For meetings with heroes to be successful and positive experiences, the various actors involved have to negotiate the inherent tensions within these ritualized and playful performances in conjunction with one another.

Conclusion

This article has sought to investigate the role of imagination in non-site-specific contents tourism through examining the meetings between fans and heroes at Ultraman events. Fans at events imaginatively participate in collaborative performances of meetings with the heroes, and various characteristics of the meetings lead to them being personalized and emotional experiences for fans. These meetings are simultaneously ritualized and playful, and the inherent tension between – and possible clashes arising from – the two contrasting aspects are continually negotiated by the various actors involved. However, fans generally have satisfying imaginative experiences of meeting Ultraman heroes at events, and this is not affected by whether the event site has a connection to the narrative world of Ultraman.

Fans of narrative worlds seek connections with those worlds through traveling to real-world sites (Reijnders 2011, p. 100; Roesch 2009, p. 209). The embodied nature of such tourism, that 'the fan is having the experience in their own body' (Weisdorf 2021, p. 288), is the 'heart' of the imaginative experience (p. 290). In this, Ultraman fans are the same as other contents tourists. The difference is that Ultraman contents tourists at Ultraman events connect with the narrative world through engaging with the Ultraman heroes there, rather than with the event site. The presence of the heroes, rather than the site itself, is the *lieu d'imagination* that allows fans to renegotiate the boundaries of real and imagined worlds, leading to their meaningful contents tourism experiences there.

Hence, this article shows how imagination can function in non-site-specific contents tourism. Focusing on tourists' imaginative experiencing of the sites they go to, rather than the site itself, shows that the *lieux d'imagination* for contents tourists can be physical entities at the site that facilitate the tourists' connection to the narrative world. This expansion of the concept of *lieux d'imagination* enlarges our perception of what sites can be considered as sacred sites of contents tourism. While I did not address it here, what kind of sites and what characteristics make them suited (or unsuited) to 'hosting' such *lieux d'imagination* is also worth further consideration.

In addition, it should be noted that the Ultraman franchise is not the only one that organizes such events where fans can meet with characters from the works. Other tokusatsu franchises (such as the

Kamen Rider franchise), as well as the Precure anime franchise, also hold similar events. This raises possibilities for further research about non-site-specific contents tourism for both other live-action media and other types of media.

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Notes

- ¹ Scenes of fights can be viewed at Tsuburaya Productions' official YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/@ULTRAMAN_OFFICIAL (Accessed 23 December 2023).
- ² Tsuburaya Productions places emphasis on the use of imagination in the production and consumption of its content, as can be seen from this New Year's greeting post from the official account: 'Tsuburaya Productions values the "Power of Imagination" as the source of our creativity. We will continue to take on various projects in the New Year so that everyone can enjoy the world of imagination through our productions and services. We look forward to your continued support'. <https://twitter.com/tsuburayaprod/status/1738364044506284224> (Accessed 23 December 2023)
- ³ His categorization is as follows:
Interaction category (*sesshokukei*) – 1. Exhibition tourism type (*tenjigata tsūrizumu keitai*), 2. (Live) show tourism type (*shōgata tsūrizumu keitai*), 3. Interactive tourism type (*kōryūgata tsūrizumu keitai*), 4. Educational tourism type (*kyōikugata tsūrizumu keitai*), 5. Accommodation type (*shukuhakugata keitai*)
Commercial category (*hanbaikei*) – 6. Food and drink tourism type (*inshokutengata tsūrizumu keitai*), 7. Merchandise-centred tourism type (*shōhingata kankō keitai*), 8. Transformation (through costume-wearing) tourism type (*narikirigata tsūrizumu keitai*), 9. Crafting tourism type (*kōsakugata tsūrizumu keitai*)
Entertainment-focused category (*gorakuchūshinkei*) – 10. Game-centred tourism type (*amyūzumentogata kankō keitai*), 11. Sports spectating type (*supōtsukansengata keitai*), 12. Transportation-related and themed rides type (*norimonogata keitai*), 13. Theme park type (*tēmapākugata keitai*)
Media promotion category (*eizōsaku hin PR kei*) – 14. Character appearance type (*kyarakutāshūraichigata keitai*), 15. Video-screening-related tourism type (*eizōgata tsūrizumu keitai*)
Regional collaboration category (*chikiteikeikei*) – 16. Specific-site visitation type (*desutinēshonbunsangata keitai*), 17. Regional revitalization type (*chikifukkōgata keitai*), 18. Tourism ambassador type (*kankōtaishi keitai*), 19. Character-induced tourism type (*kyarakutāsaigyōgata tsūrizumu keitai*)
- ⁴ Futaesaku (2015, p. 86) lists various events held in locations ranging from department stores to exhibition halls.
- ⁵ Fifty tickets were available for each of the three sessions of the event. One ticket could admit an individual as well as a group.
- ⁶ Participants could enter the goods area before entering or after exiting the exhibition area.
- ⁷ The primary target audience for Ultraman works is children. However, the age range of participants at Ultraman events is wide, including families with children as well as adults by themselves or in groups. I approached some family groups at Sukagawa Cultural Center, but at the Ultra Summer event I elected to interview adult fans who were not occupied with taking care of their children. At the events I attended, there was no discernible majority of participants of a particular gender.
- ⁸ Some events also allow taking videos, but for all events, sharing videos (or audio recordings) of the meetings is against the rules, as stated in Tsuburaya Productions official website: <https://m-78.jp/event/attention/> (Accessed 26 Jan 2024)

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- ⁹ The term ‘Ultra Shot’ can be confusing as it is also used to refer to a type of photo-taking event. In general, ‘Ultra Shot’ refers to pictures with the heroes, and ‘Hero Shot’ refers to pictures of the heroes.
- ¹⁰ An exception is the Mitohi event in which each participant’s turn lasts three minutes.
- ¹¹ Some stage shows also allow the audience to take photos of the Ultraman heroes during or at the end of the show.
- ¹² The extent of customization varies depending on the event.
- ¹³ An exception is the Mitohi event.
- ¹⁴ Many fans on social media website X state in their account profiles that they do not allow unauthorized reproduction (*mudan tensai*) and/or unauthorized use (*mudan shiyō*) of their photos.
- ¹⁵ For instance, measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 prohibited, and later heavily limited, physical contact with the heroes. Fans were also prohibited from initiating verbal interaction. This led to the production side creating and encouraging the use of a particular physical gesture (‘Ultra Charge’) to help fans and heroes communicate.
- ¹⁶ Those in the waiting room cannot see into the meeting space, but can sometimes overhear what those in the meeting space are saying.
- ¹⁷ Informants 2, 3, 4, 5 (interviewed 24 July 2023) and Informants 6, 7, 9, 10 (interviewed 9 August 2023) all mentioned this phrase.
- ¹⁸ Interview with Informants 6 and 7.
- ¹⁹ Interview with Informant 4, who also told me that she had bought tickets for multiple days of the Ultra Summer event for the main purpose of attending Mitohi sessions afterwards, and was deeply enthusiastic about being able to meet her favourite Ultraman hero every day at those sessions.
- ²⁰ It is against the rules to post photos taken at Mitohi events on social media. This can accentuate the personal, private aspect of the meeting experience.
- ²¹ Interview with Informant 2.
- ²² Interview with Informant 8, conducted 9 August 2023.
- ²³ Interview with Informant 2.
- ²⁴ Interview with Informant 8.
- ²⁵ Interview with Informant 1, conducted 24 July 2023.
- ²⁶ Interview with Informant 8.
- ²⁷ ‘*Iezukuri wa, kazoku minna de tanoshinde shite itadakitai mono desu no de, ibento de otanoshimi itadaita ato, yukkuri to moderu hausu wo mite itadakitai*’ (email from Riders Publicity Inc., received 3 July 2023).
- ²⁸ Footnote 7 provides an example of this.
- ²⁹ ‘*Eiseikanri no kanten kara, urutora hīrō no te ga jimen ni fureru pōzu wo hikaesasete itadaite orimasu.*’ Ultra Summer event official website, available from: <https://www.ultra-expo.com/summer/2023/news/5218/> (Accessed 6 Jan 2024)
- ³⁰ According to this post from a fan: <https://twitter.com/ultramanjiyoug/status/1686313260939902976> (Accessed 6 Jan 2024)

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