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Not only the beauty of scenery: How cultural landscape in movies forms an emotional bond with unvisited destinations

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Authors	Dang, Nam;Osti, Linda
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Introduction

Place attachment refers to the emotional bond people form with places (William and Waske 2003). The concept of place attachment has been studied by leisure and recreation researchers for decades, and more recently, tourism scholars have acknowledged its importance (Kyle, Bricker, Graefe and Wickham 2004; Ramkissoon, Smith, Weiler 2013). Place attachment can be categorized into pre-visit, on-site, and post-visit (Tynan and McKechnie 2009; Plunkett 2013) through direct and indirect experiences. Indirect experiences, such as exposure to a person, a book/magazine, a story, a song, a poem, a movie (Jiang and Xu, 2016), or mass media (Halpenny 2006), can lead to pre-visit attachment. On the other hand, direct experiences, such as visits to a place (Moore and Graefe 1994), can result in on-site and post-visit attachment. It is evident that on-site and post-visit attachments play a significant role in encouraging tourists to return to a destination, while the pre-visit attachment holds a key position in determining tourists' choices to visit new places.

With the advancements in digital media, tourists have easier access to travel information through various channels, which may reduce the significance of traditional media (i.e., books and movies) in tourism marketing. However, recent studies have shown that movie tourism continues to play a significant role in influencing tourists' destination choices (e.g., Robinson and Schanzel 2019). That motivates us to conduct this study to shed light on the continuing importance of movies in tourism marketing by investigating how it influences pre-trip attachment of visitors to unvisited destinations and their future intention to exposure to these destinations. This growing interest in pre-trip attachment highlights its significance for managers and marketers in understanding tourists' behavior and decision-making processes (e.g., Yan and Halpenny 2022; Liu Zhang, Zhang, Sun and Qiu 2019; Plunkett 2013).

The purpose of our study was multi-faceted. Firstly, we aimed to gain full accounts of the emotions elicited in audiences while watching movies. To accomplish this, we held focus group discussions on three different movie screenings, each belonging to a different genre, to assess variations in the audience's emotional reactions. Secondly, through these focus groups, we delved into the relationship between movie attributes and emotions and how this association influences the audience's connection to the destinations depicted in the movies by examining specific movie scenes that resonated with the audience. Thirdly, we wanted to comprehend the audience's future interest in exposure to destinations portrayed in the movies. Eventually, this study not only investigated and expanded upon concepts such as emotion, pre-trip attachment, movie attribute, and future exposure to a destination but also compared and reflected its findings with previous research and established a theoretical framework to enhance our understanding of how movies connect people to unvisited destinations.

Literature Review

Movie in Tourism Marketing

Studies have shown that movie tourism has numerous benefits for filmed destinations, attracting the attention of destination marketers (Yen and Croy 2016). Movies offer a preview of

destinations, giving audiences a sense of the location and fostering a desire to visit and explore it (Lee and Bai 2016). Initially, it was believed that the influence of movies on tourism was only restricted to natural spots, but research has shown that storylines, exciting scenes, and human interactions can also prompt people to visit locations that feature such attractions (Riley, Baker, and Van Doren 1998). As a result, many studies have focused on identifying the key factors influencing tourists' decisions to travel to movie destinations (Rittichainuwat and Rattanaphinanchai 2015).

Emotions

Emotions play a crucial role in establishing a meaningful connection with a destination (Morgan 2010). Emotions arise from appraisal processes where individuals evaluate events, objects, or the environment based on their goals (Lazarus 1991). To analyze emotions, Hipson and Mohammad (2021) suggest that the categorical approach might be beneficial when positing distinct emotion types. Accordingly, scholars frequently describe emotions by using the eight basic dimensions outlined in Plutchik's theory (e.g., Bader, Mokryn and Lanir 2017; Cohen-Kalaf, Lanir, Bak, and Mokryn 2022), including anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, anticipation, trust, and joy (Plutchik 1980).

Pre-trip attachment

The recent literature suggests that visitors can establish an emotional connection with a destination before physically visiting through the phenomenon known as pre-trip attachment. This connection can be created through imagination and fantasy (Griffiths 2005), and mass media can also foster such attachment to a place (Halpenny 2006). In need, tourist experiences can be facilitated through various digital tools like mobile tourist guides, virtual destinations, virtual travel agents, and social media (Tussyadiah and Fesenmaier 2009). Besides digital media, traditional interactions like books, stories, songs, poems, and movies can also impact people's emotional connection with a place (Jiang and Xu 2016). Hence, people can develop an attachment to a place through traditional and digital interactions.

Methodology

Movies and study context

Three movies of different genres were chosen for screening: *Milking the Rhino* (2008), a ***Documentary*** exploring the relationship between African communities and wildlife in regards to conservation and community-based efforts, explicitly focusing on Kenya and Namibia (45-minute version only in Kenya reviewed and authorized by Kartemquin Films); *Out of Africa* (1985), a ***Commercial Movie*** based on Karen Blixen's memoirs depicting her life as a coffee plantation owner in Kenya from 1914 to 1931; and *Masai Mara - The Safari of a Lifetime*, a ***Travel Video*** showcasing the beauty and diversity of Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve and the relationship between traditional Masai culture and the wildlife. The common context of the destinations depicted in all these movies is Kenya, Africa.

Focus group methodology

The study applied focus group methodology as a commonly used qualitative research tool in the social sciences to understand people's experiences and perspectives on a given topic. The exploratory nature of focus groups allows for new ideas and hypotheses to emerge and a better understanding of the context and motivations behind experiences and thoughts reported by the target audience (Merton 1987). The study recruited students who voluntarily participated in one of three movie nights. To ensure consistency, all participants had never seen these movies used in this study before and were placed in the same movie-watching experience simultaneously. A group discussion was conducted right after the screenings to mitigate memory problems, lasting around 90 minutes. Each focus group discussion consisted of 6-10 individuals. The data collected from the group discussion was analyzed using Atlas.ti 23 software with a thematic coding method.

Results

Participation Profiles and Prior Experience

A total of 22 Italian and German students voluntarily participated in three focus groups to examine their emotional responses to different movie genres. Only two have visited Africa, some have been to other natural areas, but none have been to Kenya. Some participants had prior knowledge about Africa through indirect activities such as reading books and watching movies. Accordingly, the study determined two types of prior experience, ***direct experience***, which includes firsthand experience with the African landscape and culture or other natural areas, and ***indirect experience***, which refers to exposure to Africa through news, talks, books, movies, and cultural events. On the other hand, about half of the participants had limited experience with Africa and the wild world.

Movie-watching experience and emotions of audiences

The movie-watching experience of the audience was evaluated by asking “*What feeling did you experience while watching the movie?*” For the coding of emotions, we utilized Ross's (1938) list of 28 well-researched emotions as an initial reference and then employed in vivo coding (Manning 2017) to identify emotions not included on the list. The audiences' overall experience was informed by a list of up to 46 emotional items covering the three movies: Documentary, Commercial Movie, and Travel Video. These 46 emotional items were then reclassified into eight basic emotions proposed by Plutchik (1980).

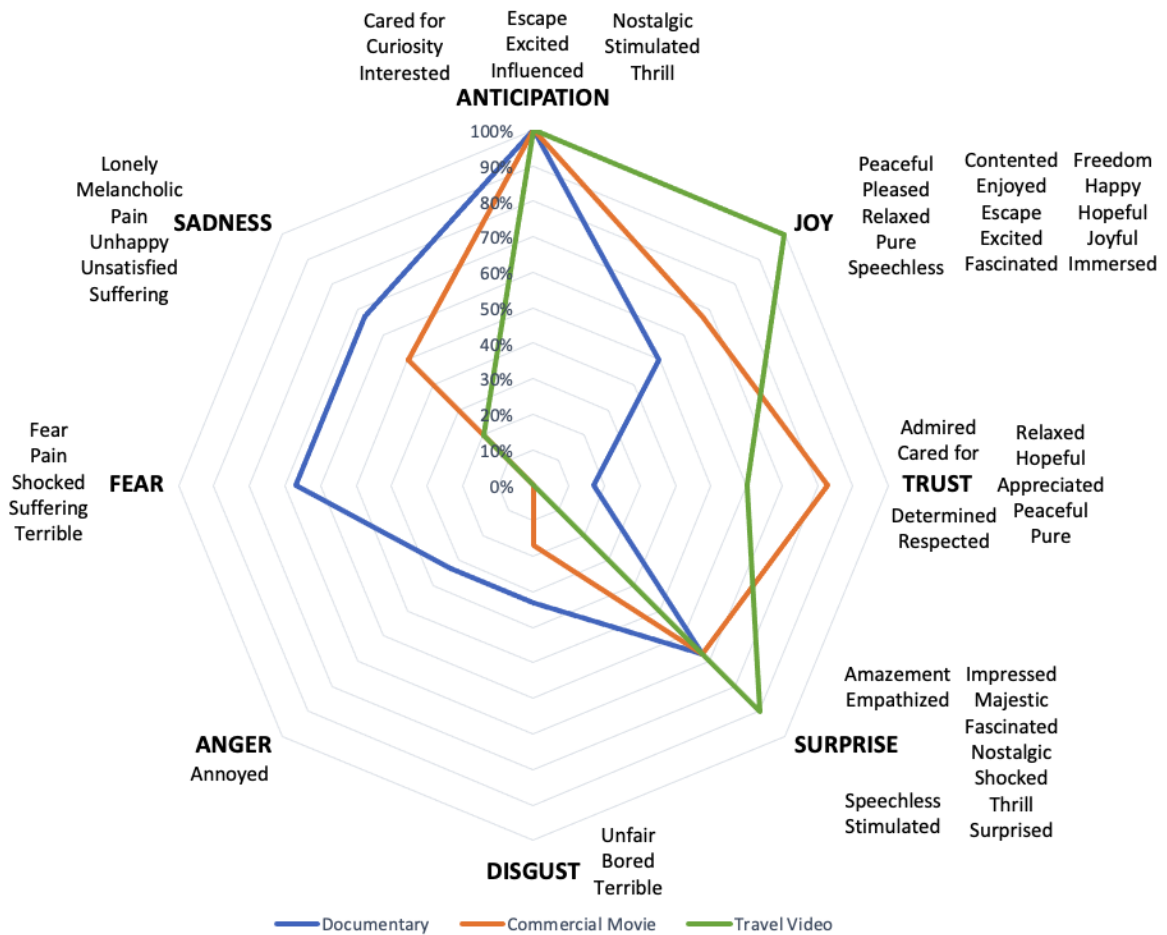
Figure 1 shows that most emotions recorded in all three movies were positive. The dynamic group of positive valence includes ***anticipation, joy, trust, and surprise***. ***Anticipation***, represented by *interested* and *excited*, was the most commonly reported emotion in all movies. ***Surprise*** was the second most frequently reported emotion, with at least 60% of moviegoers in each screening saying they felt *amazed* while watching the movie. ***Joy*** was also found in all audiences at the Travel Video screening but was noted by only about half of the audiences in the other movies. Representing this emotional dimension was *enjoyed* and *pleased*. Lastly, ***trust*** was a prevalent emotion among audiences of the Travel Video, reflected by the term *appreciated*. Nonetheless, it was only sometimes experienced by those who watched the Documentary or Commercial Movie. Examples of expressed emotions are reported below.

It was really interesting to see the differences and the cultures. (Interested, Female, Documentary)

I also said, amazed, because it was just, I was amazed by the landscapes, but also their culture and their union as they have said. (Amazed, Female, Documentary)

There was slow the film, however when they put a lot of effort in the landscapes, and I really enjoyed it. And also, I felt part of the story thanks to this slowness. (Enjoyed, Female, Commercial Movie)

Yes, I agree with all the, let's say, the family cut that has these footages. And it is, I appreciate a lot, also the emotional parts that footage stimulates in you. And yes, it also motivates the viewer to go and visit Kenya, Masai Mara. Yes, I think so. (Appreciated, Male, Travel Video)



Note: The percentage symbol signifies the proportion of audiences who expressed emotions.

Figure 1. Emotions by movie genres

On the other hand, negative emotions (i.e., *sadness, fear, disgust, anger*) were less found in movie screenings. Those emotions were most commonly reported in the Documentary while almost absent in the Travel Video screening. At least half of the audience felt *melancholic* when watching

the Documentary or expressed a sense of *loneliness* when watching the Commercial Movie, being described as a feeling of *sadness*. The second most reported negative emotion is *fear*, appearing in most audiences' feelings towards the Documentary, represented by *pain, shocked, suffering, or terrible*. *Disgust* (e.g., *bored*) was noted for a rare appearance in the Documentary and the Commercial Movie, while *Anger* (e.g., *annoyed*) only appeared in the Travel Video.

I personally wrote the one in the right, Loneliness. Because Karen, she was like oblige to travel to Africa to look after this farm. And she was actually alone because then she married, but she was alone since they married, her husband was always on hunting and so on. (Loneliness, Male, Commercial Movie)

That was the most touching part. I was a bit shocked, because nowadays we just buy meat, or we buy the foods without having to produce it. (Shocked, Female, Documentary)

I think it was really too long for me. And initially, it was a bit boring, to be honest. (Bored, Female, Commercial Movie)

I remember like what we see, in particular, the white lady that really annoyed me, because she thought she was better than the others. (Annoyed, Female, Documentary)

In brief, the participants of the three movie screenings generally had a positive movie-watching experience. Travel Videos mostly elicited positive emotions, while Commercial Videos had a dominant positive sentiment but still elicited some negative emotions. Conversely, Documentaries evoked a balance of positive and negative emotions from the participants.

Movie scenes touched the heart

To identify these impactful movie scenes, the participants were asked "*which scenes are close to your heart most?*" Accordingly, we found image, narrative, and character as critical movie attributes related to movie scenes close to audiences' hearts.

Images in movies were analyzed, revealing two categories: natural landscape and cultural landscape. Natural landscape consists of scenes of nature, wildlife, and landscapes, while cultural landscape depicts human life and activities through communities, traditions, and cultural events. Nonetheless, the contexts of natural and cultural landscapes are not always separate in reality. In particular, in Kenya, the lives of indigenous people depend on natural resources, resulting in scenes that are both natural and cultural landscapes, such as animal hunts.

You're really there in this wildlife and see, and how the animal hunt is such an amazing experience. (Natural Landscape, Cultural Landscape, Female, Travel Video)

The movies' narratives were also studied, uncovering three different stories: Conservation in Documentary, Love in Commercial Movie, and Adventure in Travel Video, identified based on participants' discourses. In addition, characters also played a crucial role in eliciting emotions from audiences. They connect with characters through their emotions, relatable experiences, and strong performances. Understanding characters' motivations, desires, and struggles help audiences develop empathy and a sense of sharing experiences or living vicariously through them.

I think the love story helps me to feel such different connections through the film. Because people tend to humanize the destination through real feelings and connection, so, they get respect and, loneliness, love. (Love story, Female, Commercial Movie)

With impressive movie scenes that leave many emotions to the audience, we also find factors related to technical movie elements such as sound, pace, motion, and length. These elements can shape the audience's perception of the movie attributes and contribute to the emotions of the movie-watching experience.

Feel attached to the destination placed in movies

Our approach involves analyzing the audience's reactions to movie attributes to see whether emotions evoke a connection to movies and the destination placed in movies.

Table 1. Potential interrelationships among Emotions, Movie Attributes, and Attachment emerged in 3 movies

	Natural Landscape	Cultural Landscape	Narrative	Character
Joy (+)	Light Orange	Light Orange	Light Orange	Light Orange
Trust (+)	Light Orange	Light Orange	Light Orange	Light Orange
Surprise (+)	Light Orange	Dark Orange	Light Orange	Light Orange
Anticipation (+)	Light Orange	Dark Orange	Light Orange	Dark Orange
Anger (-)	Grey	Grey	Light Orange	Light Orange
Disgust (-)	Grey	Light Orange	Light Orange	Grey
Fear (-)	Light Orange	Light Orange	Light Orange	Grey
Sadness (-)	Grey	Grey	Dark Orange	Light Orange

No emotion evoked
 Evoke emotion, no attachment
 Evoke emotion, feel strongly attached
 (-) Negative valence
 (+) Positive valence

Results from Table 1 showed that all positive emotions were elicited by at least one of the four movie attributes. Only narrative was found to evoke all four negative emotions, becoming the only attribute that could evoke all eight basic emotions. Meanwhile, characters related to two negative emotions, anger and sadness, and cultural landscape determined two others, disgust and fear. Natural landscape only evoked sadness.

Furthermore, the study found that audiences only felt connected to the movies and destinations when emotions were aroused during exposure to a movie attribute. Positive emotions tended to result in a stronger emotional bond between audiences and movie attributes, except for Trust and Surprise, which were not associated with Landscapes and Characters, respectively. There is also a stronger attachment to the destination portrayed in the movie through cultural landscape rather than natural landscape.

I also feel somehow more connected to the place, rather than the landscapes, I would say the culture, and I would like to get to know more about it. (Female, Commercial Movie)

Reports from the Travel Video screening showed the same result that participants felt disconnected from the movie and depicted destinations when the cultural landscape was absent.

I thought they would go a little bit deeper and telling us something about the culture and history, especially because they mentioned only in one sentence that they used to hunt the lions and stuff. And I thought okay, now maybe they will tell us something about their history and stuff. But yeah, it was only really light info, what this man also does in humanitarian sectors. Yeah, it was too less information for me to be able to really remember this place like it feels it could have been any other places in Africa. (Female, Travel Video)

Future exposure to the destinations depicted in the movies

Two modes of experience recognized in analytical reports are **direct exposure** and **indirect exposure**. Direct exposure refers to the intention to physically visit the destinations in the movies, while indirect exposure is the desire to learn about these destinations through activities such as surfing the internet, reading books, watching related movies, or talking further with friends and families. The report found that future exposure to the place through both modes was strongly linked to positive emotions, while sadness was the only negative emotion that could promote direct exposure.

Development of a theoretical framework

Our findings provoked the development of a theoretical framework to understand the movie-watching experience that includes pre-viewing elements such as prior experience, movie attributes and technical movie elements, and outputs during or after screenings such as emotions, pre-trip attachment, and future exposure (See details in Figure 2). During the screening, the participants utilized their past experiences and knowledge to "talk" about the movie. This interaction resulted in the formation of emotions, establishing a connection with the movies and the destinations depicted. These interrelationships then impacted their intentions to exposure to the destinations directly and indirectly. Moreover, our findings showed that participants with a pre-trip attachment to the destination portrayed in the movies had a higher likelihood of wanting direct exposure. In contrast, those without this attachment preferred indirect exposure.

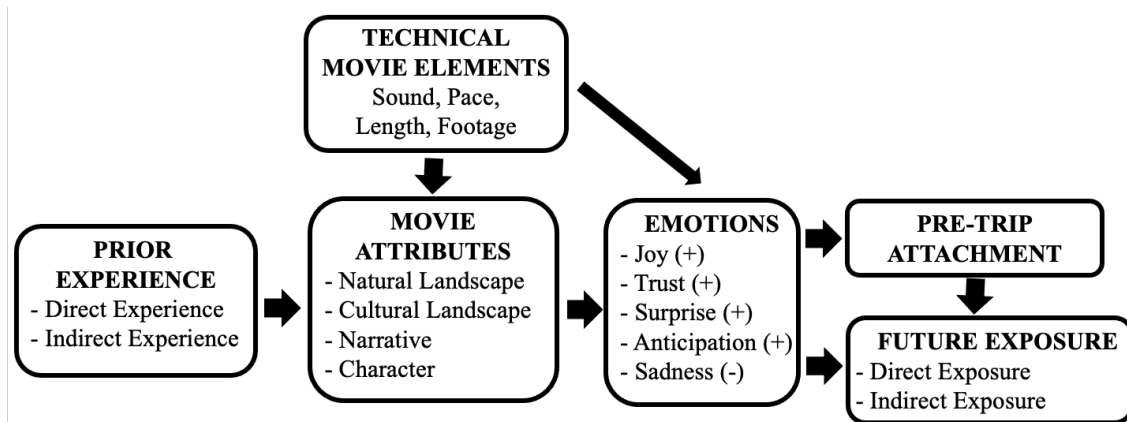


Figure 2. A developed theoretical framework for the movie-watching experience

Conclusion and Discussion

Our theoretical contribution is threefold. First, this study explores audiences' emotions based on Plutchik's (1980) theory, yielding a comprehensive understanding beyond basic emotional dimensions. The research encompasses a Commercial Movie, a Travel Video, and a Documentary, giving an extensive view of the complex relationship between emotions and movie attributes. Second, it was revealed that emotions evoked through movie attributes play a crucial role in forming an emotional bond with the destination depicted in movies. Therefore, it makes a unique theoretical contribution to the tripartite relationship between emotions, movie attributes, and pre-trip attachment. It then further supports the argument that indirect experiences through movies can connect individuals to destinations they have never physically visited. Also, the research results emphasize the continued significance of traditional media like movies, even in the era of digital media's dominance in tourism marketing. Third, the findings were then synthesized to construct a complete theoretical model of the movie-watching experience, its influence on the pre-trip attachment between individuals and destinations depicted in movies, and the exposure intention to interact with these destinations in the future. Accordingly, this model offers a critical advancement and opens up more puzzle boxes for future research.

The results from our research also lead to several valuable implications in practice. Foremost, audiences tend to have a stronger connection with movies that evoke positive experiences. Though a few audiences may strongly connect with sad movies, this is not recommended due to their rarity and risky. For the second implication, contrary to previous assumptions (e.g., Riley et al. 1992), audiences have a stronger connection with cultural landscapes in movies compared to natural landscapes. Results have shown that the absence of cultural landscapes in the Travel Video can bring a feeling of disappointment and reduce the connection between the audience and the destination in the movie. People might find it easier to relate to cultural landscapes and feel a stronger connection with them, while realistic natural landscapes can sometimes cause fear and apprehension. Finally, many audiences report feeling connected to characters in movies. Although this connection is less strong than cultural landscapes, it can still powerfully drive audiences to desire similar experiences. It highlights the significance of turning character experiences in movies into new travel services in movie destinations or indirectly promoting available travel services through character experiences.