



Exploring the impact of the Thai television series on young Chinese viewers' perceptions of Phuket, Thailand as a holiday destination and their behavioral intentions

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Abstract

Film tourism research has gained prominence in recent years, yet there is a lack of studies focusing on viewers' perceptions and behavioral intentions toward unvisited destinations. This study aims to investigate the perceived destination image of a place depicted in a popular television series and its influence on pre-visit behavioral intentions. Specifically, the case study revolves around the Thai television series "*I Told Sunset About You*". Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 427 young Chinese viewers who had watched the series but had not visited Phuket, Thailand. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize respondents' characteristics, perceptions of Phuket as a destination, and behavioral intentions. Multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between destination image and behavioral intentions. The findings indicate that young Chinese viewers perceive Phuket as having a highly positive image, with attributes such as "beautiful scenery/natural attractions", "pleasant", "exciting", and "appealing local food" significantly influencing their behavioral intentions. These insights provide valuable guidance for destination marketing organizations and tourism practitioners, highlighting the importance of collaboration with film and television producers to promote destinations effectively.

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, the rapid expansion of popular culture, particularly through films and television (TV) programs, has profoundly influenced individuals' daily lives (Beeton, 2008; Kim et al., 2003). Films, in particular,

have the remarkable ability to captivate millions of viewers worldwide (Iwashita, 2008). Consequently, the depiction of local cultures, picturesque landscapes, and enticing lifestyles in certain films has the potential to shape viewers' perceptions of the filming location as an appealing tourist destination (Hudson et al., 2011). Notably, studies have consistently found that viewers perceive information presented in films and TV programs as more authentic and objective compared to traditional advertising (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Russell, 2002).

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Furthermore, the inclusion of tourism-related information in films can spark and sustain interest in specific destinations among potential visitors (Kim et al., 2003; Vila et al., 2021), leading to an influx of tourists following the release of popular films or TV series (Du et al., 2020; Wen et al., 2018).

The field of “film tourism” encompasses both film- and TV series-induced tourism, with academic interest in this phenomenon gaining significant momentum since the early 2000s. Scholars have recognized that films have the potential to significantly enhance a destination’s image, thereby generating positive effects on the local economy (Beeton, 2006; Connell, 2012; Du et al., 2020). Film tourism can be defined as “*the motivation of tourists to visit specific destinations or places through audio-visual stimuli, either directly or indirectly*” (Domínguez-Azcue et al., 2021, p. 10).

Thailand has firmly established itself as a highly popular international tourist destination in Southeast Asia, attracting over 30 million international tourists annually (Denis & Maria, 2018). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, China was the primary source market for Thailand’s international tourism industry, with approximately 11 million Chinese tourists visiting the country in 2019 (Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2020; Untong et al., 2015). However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted Thailand’s tourism industry, resulting in significant economic losses, particularly in tourism-dependent provinces like Phuket (Fuchs, 2021; Leelawat et al., 2022). With the Chinese government lifting travel restrictions on January 8, 2023, there is great anticipation among Thai tourism professionals for the revival of the Chinese tourist market, as it holds the potential to provide a significant boost to the country’s tourism industry and aid in its post-COVID-19 recovery (Ratcliffe, 2023; Xiong et al., 2022).

Previous research has demonstrated that the high level of engagement Chinese consumers have with films and TV series significantly influences their desire to visit the locations featured (Wen et al., 2018). In recent years, Thai TV series have played a crucial role in driving tourism growth in Thailand by providing Chinese viewers with valuable insights into Thai traditions, culture, and society (Jiang et al., 2018; Shi, 2020). Since 2003, Thai films and TV programs have been broadcast on Chinese television channels, showcasing melodramatic plot twists, exotic tropical scenery, and attractive actors of mixed race (Jiang et al., 2018). While these features initially attracted a large number of Chinese housewives, the popularity of online broadcasting platforms has

steadily increased the viewership of Thai TV series, particularly among young audiences (Jirattikorn, 2018; Shi, 2020). Among the various genres, the Boys’ Love (BL) series has gained immense popularity among young Chinese fans, with “*I Told Sunset About You*” being one of the most well-received Thai TV series in this genre (Global, 2020; Shi, 2020). This TV series has captivated the hearts of a significant number of young Chinese viewers, as evidenced by the high ratings it received on China’s popular media review platform, Douban (Douban, 2023). Given the overwhelming popularity of “*I Told Sunset About You*” among young Chinese viewers, this study aims to utilize this TV series as a case study to explore its impact on viewers’ perceptions of the depicted destination and their pre-visit behavioral intentions.

Films possess the ability to convey powerful messages to millions of viewers, which can significantly alter existing destination images or establish new ones within a relatively short period of time (Hahm et al., 2008). Previous research has established that destination image plays a crucial role in shaping visitors’ behavioral intentions (Morais & Lin, 2010; Prayag, 2009; Wang & Hsu, 2010). While existing studies have primarily focused on the impact of destination image on post-visit behavioral intentions, the influence of destination image in the pre-visit stage remains relatively understudied (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Fu et al., 2016; Wang & Hsu, 2010). To further establish the notion that films and TV series have the potential to influence viewers’ perceptions of depicted destinations and serve as powerful marketing tools to attract potential tourists, this study aims to address this research gap.

Therefore, the objectives of this study are twofold: (1) to explore viewers’ perceived destination image of the place depicted in the TV series “*I Told Sunset About You*”, and (2) to examine the effect of destination image on viewers’ pre-visit behavioral intentions. By investigating these aspects, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the role of film-induced tourism and the influence of destination image on viewers’ intentions to visit the featured location.

Addressing these research objectives will contribute to a better understanding of the impact of films and TV series on destination image formation and the potential for film tourism to attract and engage potential visitors. Furthermore, the findings of this study can inform destination marketing strategies and assist tourism professionals in leveraging the power of audio-visual media to promote destinations effectively and foster sustainable tourism development.

Literature Review

Destination Image

Destination image is a fundamental concept in tourism research, encompassing the beliefs, ideas, and impressions individuals hold about a place or destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). It can be viewed as a multidimensional construct, incorporating both cognitive and affective dimensions (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Gartner, 1993). The cognitive dimension refers to individuals' perceptions of the objective characteristics of a destination, while the affective dimension reflects their emotional reactions and feelings towards the place (Kim & Richardson, 2003). The interplay between these dimensions plays a crucial role in influencing visitors' decisions to choose a particular destination (Gartner, 1993).

The formation of destination image is a complex and dynamic process influenced by various factors, including information sources, past experiences, and socio-demographic characteristics (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Iordanova, 2015). Gartner (1989) identified eight agents that contribute to the development of destination image, such as traditional advertising, tour agencies, unbiased reports, and personal experiences. Autonomous agents, including films and TV series, have been found to have a significant impact on destination image formation due to their credibility and ability to engage viewers (Hanefors & Mossberg, 2002; Kim & Richardson, 2003; Lee & Bai, 2016).

Films and TV series possess a unique ability to capture the attention of millions of viewers, making them powerful influencers in shaping destination images (Beeton, 2005; Hahm et al., 2008). The prolonged exposure to images portrayed in films and TV series allows viewers to form lasting impressions of the depicted places (Bolan & Williams, 2008). Previous studies have highlighted the positive impact of certain films or TV series on destination tourism, leading to an increase in tourist arrivals (Du et al., 2020; Riley & Van Doren, 1992; Tooke & Baker, 1996). For example, the film *“Lost in Thailand”* significantly contributed to the rise in Chinese tourists visiting Thailand after its release in 2013 (Mostafanezhad & Promburom, 2018). However, while research has examined the perceptions of visitors who have physically visited filming locations, there is a gap in understanding how viewers' perceptions of unvisited destinations are influenced by their portrayal in films or TV series, necessitating this study.

Travel Behavioral Intentions

Behavioral intentions in tourism research refer to the anticipated behaviors that tourists intend to engage in the future (Lee et al., 2007). They are considered as desirable actions that individuals anticipate performing based on their perceptions and attitudes towards a destination. Afshardoost and Eshaghi (2020) emphasized the multidimensional nature of behavioral intentions, dividing them into pre-visit and post-visit intentions. Pre-visit behavioral intentions encompass the intention to visit a destination featured in a film or TV series, as well as the likelihood of recommending it to others.

The Relationship between Destination Image and Travel Behavioral Intentions

Existing literature consistently suggests a positive relationship between destination image and intention to visit (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Tan & Wu, 2016). Studies have indicated that a positive portrayal of a destination in films or TV series can increase viewers' willingness to visit (Fu et al., 2016). However, limited research has explored the influence of destination image on tourists' behavioral intentions during the pre-visit stage, specifically in the context of film tourism. As a result, this study aims to investigate the impact of viewers' perceived destination image on their behavioral intentions after watching a particular film or TV series.

By addressing this research gap, the study seeks to contribute to the understanding of how destination image, as shaped by films or TV series, influences individuals' pre-visit behavioral intentions. The conceptual framework of the study, illustrated in Figure 1, draws from the discussions presented in the literature review.

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrates the relationships and key elements investigated in this study regarding the influence of destination image on pre-visit behavioral intentions in the context of film tourism. The central construct of the framework is the viewers' perceived destination image, which is shaped by exposure to a particular film or TV series. The perceived destination image encompasses both cognitive and affective dimensions, including beliefs, impressions, expectations, and emotional reactions toward the portrayed destination.

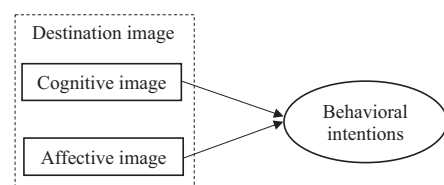


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

The framework suggests that the viewers' perceived destination image directly influences their pre-visit behavioral intentions. Pre-visit behavioral intentions include the intention to visit the destination featured in the film or TV series and the likelihood of recommending it to others.

Methodology

Population and Sampling

This quantitative study intends to investigate how young Chinese viewers between the ages of 18 and 30 perceive a destination they have never been to after watching a certain film or TV series, and how this perception influences their behavioral intentions toward that destination. The study focuses specifically on the Thai TV series *"I Told Sunset About You"* and its depiction of Phuket as a tourist destination. To compute the sample size, Cochran's (1977) method for an unknown population was utilized because it was unable to determine the actual number of individuals who had watched this TV series. The final sample size was 384 participants, all of whom were Chinese, met the age requirement, and had watched *"I Told Sunset About You"* but had never visited Phuket. To recruit respondents, the non-probability convenience sampling method was employed.

Research Instrument Development

In order to obtain prerequisite data, a self-administered questionnaire was rigorously designed with two sections that were informed by relevant scholarly literatures. The first section of the questionnaire was dedicated to obtaining demographic information from the participants. The second section, which constituted the core of the research instrument, was comprised of two parts: destination image and behavioral intentions. The destination image was measured through cognitive and affective images, with 12 items selected from previous studies, particularly the works by Baloglu and McCleary (1999), Chen (2018), and Fu et al. (2016). Behavioral intentions were measured using three items, which were derived from prior investigations by Afshardoost and Eshaghi (2020) and Fu et al. (2016), indicating the intention to visit, recommend, and express positive things about the destination. All the items featured in the second section were rated using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 represented "strongly disagree" and 5 represented "strongly agree".

To ensure face validity, all questions were reviewed by three qualified tourism experts with Ph.D. degrees through the use of the Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC). The values of all items were ranged between 0.67 and 1.00, which exceeded the acceptable score threshold of 0.50 (Rovinelli & Hambleton, 1977). In addition, the questionnaire's reliability was determined. A Cronbach's alpha coefficient was performed, which showed a value ranging between 0.914 to 0.949 for each variable, indicating that the questionnaire was highly reliable (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Data Collection and Data Analysis

This study was conducted through online survey in January 2023 among Chinese viewers. In total, 427 valid questionnaires were analyzed using the computer software. Descriptive statistics, including frequency and percentage, were conducted to summarize the demographic profiles of the respondents. Then, destination perceptions and behavioral intentions were analyzed using the mean and standard deviation. Finally, a multiple regression analysis was conducted to verify the relationship between the destination image and the respondents' behavioral intentions.

Results

Demographic Profiles

Respondents' demographic profiles are presented in Table 1.

Analysis of Destination Image

Table 2 shows how Chinese viewers perceived the image of Phuket as a tourist destination after watching the Thai TV series *"I Told Sunset About You"*. The top three perceptions that respondents had about Phuket were that it has "beautiful scenery/natural attractions" (mean = 4.92, $SD = 0.296$), that it is "relaxing" (mean = 4.91, $SD = 0.322$), and that it is "pleasant" (mean = 4.89, $SD = 0.361$). The three items with the lowest scores were that Phuket can guarantee "personal safety" (mean = 4.20, $SD = 0.828$), that it has an "unpolluted/unspoiled environment" (mean = 4.57, $SD = 0.655$), and that it has "interesting and friendly local people" (mean = 4.63, $SD = 0.600$). Overall, the respondents' perceived image of Phuket was rated most favorably, with a mean of 4.71 and a standard deviation of 0.521.

Table 1 Demographic profiles of respondents

(n = 427)		
Demographic Profile	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	100	23.4
Female	327	76.6
Age		
18	41	9.6
19	48	11.2
20	49	11.5
21	42	9.8
22	40	9.4
23	40	9.4
24	35	8.2
25	31	7.3
26	30	7.0
27	18	4.2
28	16	3.7
29	20	4.7
30	17	4.0
Marital Status		
Single	397	93.0
Married	29	6.8
Separated	1	0.2
Education Level		
High school or below	80	18.7
Bachelor's degree	293	68.6
Master's degree	51	11.9
Doctoral degree	3	0.7
Monthly Income (RMB)		
≤ 2,000	164	38.4
2,001–4,000	77	18.0
4,001–6,000	81	19.0
6,001–8,000	49	11.5
8,001–10,000	28	6.6
> 10,000	28	6.6

Analysis of Travel Behavioral Intentions

Table 3 shows Chinese viewers' behavioral intentions toward Phuket after watching the Thai TV series "*I Told Sunset About You*". Among them, the respondents strongly agreed with the following items: "I will visit Phuket in the next 3 years", with a mean value of 4.82 and a standard deviation of 0.422; "I will say positive things about Phuket to others" with a mean value of 4.80 and a standard deviation of 0.434; and "I will recommend Phuket to others" with a mean value of 4.78 and a standard deviation of 0.459, respectively.

The Relationship between Destination Image and Travel Behavioral Intentions

Table 4 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis of variables belonging to the destination image as predictors of behavioral intentions. The model shows that the strongest significant predictors were "beautiful scenery/natural attractions" ($\beta = 0.287$, $t = 6.084$, $p = .000$), followed by "pleasant" ($\beta = 0.173$, $t = 2.420$, $p = .016$), "exciting" ($\beta = 0.146$, $t = 2.392$, $p = .017$), and "appealing local food" ($\beta = 0.104$, $t = 2.012$, $p = .045$). However, it also indicates that "interesting cultural/historical attractions", "unpolluted/unspoiled environment", "good climate", "good value for money", "interesting and friendly local people", "personal safety", "relaxing", and "arousing" did not contribute in a significant way to the behavioral intentions towards young Chinese viewers.

Table 2 Results of descriptive analysis of destination image

Constructs	Mean	SD	Rank	Level of Agreement
Cognitive image				
Beautiful scenery/natural attractions	4.92	0.296	1	Strongly agree
Interesting cultural/historical attractions	4.71	0.564	6	Strongly agree
Unpolluted/unspoiled environment	4.57	0.655	11	Strongly agree
Good climate	4.66	0.598	9	Strongly agree
Appealing local food	4.70	0.519	7	Strongly agree
Good value for money	4.69	0.561	8	Strongly agree
Interesting and friendly local people	4.63	0.600	10	Strongly agree
Personal safety	4.20	0.828	12	Agree
Affective image				
Pleasant	4.89	0.361	3	Strongly agree
Exciting	4.83	0.426	4	Strongly agree
Relaxing	4.91	0.322	2	Strongly agree
Arousing	4.75	0.523	5	Strongly agree
Total	4.71	0.521		Strongly agree

Table 3 Results of descriptive analysis of behavioral intentions

Constructs	Mean	SD	Level of Agreement
I will visit Phuket in the next 3 years.	4.82	0.422	Strongly agree
I will recommend Phuket to others.	4.78	0.459	Strongly agree
I will say positive things about Phuket to others.	4.80	0.434	Strongly agree
Total	4.80	0.438	Strongly agree

Table 4 Results of Multiple Regression Analysis of the relationship between destination image towards travel behavioral intentions

Variable	Standardized Coefficients	SE	t-Statistic	p
Beautiful scenery/natural attractions	0.287	0.062	6.084	.000*
Interesting cultural/historical attractions	0.021	0.030	0.482	.630
Unpolluted/unspoiled environment	0.052	0.028	1.113	.266
Good climate	0.040	0.032	0.797	.426
Appealing local food	0.104	0.039	2.012	.045*
Good value for money	0.093	0.040	1.637	.102
Interesting and friendly local people	-0.077	0.038	-1.314	.189
Personal safety	0.017	0.023	0.349	.728
Pleasant	0.173	0.077	2.420	.016*
Exciting	0.146	0.056	2.392	.017*
Relaxing	0.030	0.083	0.429	.668
Arousing	0.006	0.041	0.119	.906
R ²	0.474	Durbin-Watson stat		2.063
p (F-statistic)	.000			

Note: * $p < .05$.

The R -squared value of 0.474 indicates that the model can explain 47.4 percent of the variance in the behavioral intentions of young Chinese toward Phuket. Although this value is not particularly high, it indicates that the selected predictors have a significant impact on the behavioral intentions of this target group. Furthermore, the Durbin-Watson statistic of 2.063 indicates that there is no significant autocorrelation in the residuals of the regression model, which means that the assumptions of the model are met.

Conclusion and Discussion

The field of film tourism has seen significant growth in recent years; however, most studies have focused on the perceptions of tourists who have visited the actual filming locations (e.g., Chen, 2018; Lee et al., 2008; Zeng et al., 2015). This study fills a research gap by examining the perceived image of a destination and its impact on the behavioral intentions of young Chinese tourists considering Phuket, Thailand, even without having visited the destination. The findings confirm that a film or TV series has a substantial influence on viewers' perceptions of the depicted destination, with certain attributes of the destination image emerging as significant predictors of behavioral intentions.

The study reveals that young Chinese viewers developed a highly positive image of Phuket after watching the Thai TV series, despite not having visited the location. This aligns with previous research by Fu et al. (2016) and supports the notion that TV programs have the power to shape perceptions and generate behavioral intentions in viewers. Both cognitive and affective images, as emphasized by Kim and Richardson

(2003), play a role in influencing tourists' perceptions of a destination. This finding is consistent with existing literature on film tourism, which demonstrates the impact of specific content on viewers' perceptions of a film location (Chen, 2018; Kim & Richardson, 2003; Zeng et al., 2015). Moreover, it supports the claim by Hosany et al. (2020) that media experiences can evoke affective responses and influence viewers' perceptions of portrayed destinations. Hence, this study provides empirical evidence that frequent visual exposure to content in a film or TV series can directly influence viewers' perceptions and behavioral intentions toward depicted destinations.

Consistent with previous studies, the present study confirms that destination image positively influences behavioral intentions (Afshardoost & Eshaghi, 2020; Fu et al., 2016; Wang & Hsu, 2010). The multiple regression analysis reveals that the destination image of Phuket, as perceived by young Chinese viewers, strongly correlates with their behavioral intentions. Significant predictors of behavioral intentions include attributes such as "beautiful scenery/natural attractions," "pleasant," "exciting," and "appealing local food." These findings align with the research by Thongkudam and Promsivapallop (2013), indicating that beautiful scenery and beaches positively influence intentions to revisit and recommend Phuket. The inclusion of prominent attractions in the series scenes, such as *Phuket Old Town* and *Laem Phromthep*, likely contributes to this outcome (Techasriamornrat, 2020). Additionally, these findings are consistent with Kim et al.'s (2017) study, which highlights the positive influence of pleasant affective images on visitation and recommendation intentions. Destination marketing organizations (DMOs) in Phuket should leverage rich and captivating content to enhance the affective image of the destination when using films and TV series as marketing

tools to attract young Chinese tourists. Notably, the study reveals that “appealing local food” emerges as a significant predictor of behavioral intentions among young Chinese viewers. This finding aligns with Choe and Kim’s (2018) research, indicating that the image of food influences visit intentions and recommendations. The inclusion of featured local dishes, such as *Hokkien mee* (a local stir-fried noodle dish) and the typical dessert *O-aew* (jelly made from plant seeds served with ice and syrup) in the series scenes likely contribute to this finding. Interestingly, factors such as “interesting cultural/historical attractions,” “unpolluted/unspoiled environment,” “good climate,” “good value for money,” “interesting and friendly local people,” “personal safety,” “relaxing,” and “arousing” do not significantly contribute to the prediction of behavioral intentions toward Phuket among young Chinese viewers.

The findings of this study suggest that natural beauty, amenities, excitement, and local food are the key factors that hold greater importance for young Chinese tourists when choosing a vacation destination. Understanding and leveraging these factors can be crucial for DMOs in effectively targeting and attracting young Chinese tourists to Phuket. DMOs should focus on showcasing the destination’s picturesque landscapes, beaches, and natural attractions through various marketing channels. Additionally, creating engaging and unique experiences, such as adventure sports or cultural activities, can further appeal to this target audience. Moreover, establishing partnerships with local restaurants and catering businesses can enhance the gastronomic experiences of visitors and contribute to a positive perception of Phuket. DMOs should leverage social media platforms, online channels, and targeted promotional campaigns to showcase the variety of mouth-watering dishes and culinary experiences available in the destination. Engaging food influencers, organizing food festivals, or offering food-related experiences can further amplify the appeal and generate interest among young Chinese tourists. However, while emphasizing natural beauty and local cuisine, other important aspects such as personal safety and value for money should not be overlooked. DMOs should ensure that Phuket maintains its reputation as a safe and affordable destination, addressing concerns and providing value-added experiences to cater to different tourists’ preferences.

By recognizing the influential power of film and television series in shaping perceptions and generating behavioral intentions, DMOs can actively engage with producers of such content to promote their destinations. Collaborating with filmmakers and incorporating attractive locations, captivating scenery, and authentic

local experiences into films and TV series can create a positive destination image and influence viewers’ intentions to visit. This strategy can serve as a powerful marketing tool to attract tourists who have not yet visited the destination. To maximize the impact of film and TV series on behavioral intentions, DMOs should ensure a consistent and cohesive marketing approach. Integrating the destination’s key attributes and unique selling points across various promotional channels will reinforce the positive image created by films and TV series. This approach will enhance Phuket’s visibility, increase brand recognition, and ultimately influence the decision-making process of potential travelers. Furthermore, it is crucial for Phuket’s DMOs and tourism officials to ensure that the content of films or TV series accurately reflects the attributes of the destination. This authenticity is vital in projecting a positive image and managing visitors’ expectations. To enhance collaboration with film or TV production companies, DMOs can offer incentives such as suitable filming locations, logistical support, and tax breaks. This proactive approach can attract more productions to feature Phuket, increasing the destination’s visibility and further influencing viewers’ perceptions and behavioral intentions.

In summary, this study contributes to the field of film tourism by examining the perceptions and behavioral intentions of young Chinese viewers toward Phuket, Thailand, after watching the Thai TV series “*I Told Sunset About You*”. The findings demonstrate the significant influence of film and TV content on viewers’ destination image and their intention to visit. DMOs can leverage these insights to effectively market their destinations to young Chinese tourists by showcasing the destination’s natural beauty, exciting experiences, and appealing local cuisine. Ultimately, by harnessing the power of film tourism, destinations like Phuket can attract a greater number of visitors and enhance their tourism industry.

Limitation and Recommendation

While this study provides valuable insights into the influence of film and TV series on perceptions and behavioral intentions, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The study focused on young Chinese viewers who had not visited Phuket, and the findings may not be generalizable to other demographic groups or different destinations. Future research could explore the effects of film tourism on a broader range of viewers and destinations to gain a more comprehensive understanding of its impact.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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