

A Study on the Path Mechanism of Para-social Interaction and Place Attachment on Film-Induced Tourists' Behavioral Intention

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Under the influence of celebrity effect and para-social interaction, film is increasingly able to induce viewers' willingness to travel. Based on the theory of para-social interaction and the factors of place attachment, this study constructs a model of the influence mechanism of film-induced tourists' behavioral intention and puts relevant hypotheses. Taking the film *A Little Red Flower* as an example, the empirical test is carried out by using structural equation model (SEM). The results show that: (1) Film-induced tourists' emotional involvement has a significant positive impact on tourism behavioral involvement, but has no direct and significant impact on place dependence and place identity. (2) Film-induced tourists' behavioral involvement has a significant positive impact on place dependence and place identity. (3) Both place dependence and place identity of film-induced tourists have significant positive impact on tourism behavioral intention. Therefore, film tourism destinations should show the unique local conditions and customs according to the preference of fans and audiences, with the help of the popularity of film, so as to improve their tourism behavior intention.

Keywords: para-social interaction, place attachment, film tourism, tourist behavioral intention

Introduction

It is increasingly common for a specific film to make a city become an overnight sensation. For example, miles of peach orchards in Puzhehei Town in Yunnan Province of China went viral because of *Life After Life, Blooms Over Blooms*. Besides, many other scenic sites in Yunnan Province also became popular after the film *Rattan Aired*. On the one hand, films would show shooting places' beautiful scenery and local custom and promote their publicity and attractiveness (An, Peng, & Xu, 2019). On the other hand, with a touch of the film's plot and emotion, the spectators may intend to approach the shooting place (Oh & Kim, 2020). Emotional involvement in the film's storytelling would cause empathy and impression over the film's shooting place, and trigger motivation to visit it (Hao, Zhang, & Mai, 2020). Meanwhile, under the effect of the bonding between celebrities and fans, the spectators' affection for the actor may pass on to the shooting place and make tourist behavior happen (Teng & Chen, 2020). Therefore, in media time, with the increasing number of film-induced tourists' behavior, it is important to conduct research about film tourism.

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It has been verified in a number of papers with the impact of film on tourism. The frames and stories unfolded by films could induce and stimulate the spectators' intention to travel, and foster a lot of fans. Thus, films have become a suitable medium for tourist destinations portrayed in them (Noelia, José, & Pablo, 2021). Many researchers have investigated the process model of film-induced tourism and its deciding factors (Ankinori et al., 2020; Bi, Yin, & Kim, 2021). However, studies of film-induced tourism in China are still insufficient. Chinese current studies in film-induced tourism and tourism behavior intention have mostly focused on film itself and the shooting place image. For example, the impact of the performers on spectators' travel intention and behavior (Yun, 2016; Yen & Teng, 2015), the effect of film plots on audiences' perceived destination image (Yi, 2020; S. Kim, S. Kim, & Han, 2019), the relationship between film literature and film-induced tourism participation (Zhu & Zhang, 2021; S. Kim & S. Kim, 2017), etc. However, the investigation about tourists' emotional factors is still insufficient.

Para-social interaction played a vital role in films' effects on tourism because films did one-way interact with the spectators through their characters, and the illusion of interaction between films and spectators could trigger positive emotions like attachment and identity, which further affects tourism behavior intention. However, there is relatively little research that has explored the influence path from para-social interaction to film-induced tourism behavioral intention, and mediating effect factors like place attachment between them. Other than that, the background of film-induced tourism in China could be different from other countries. Thus, the consistency of previous film-induced tourism research models and conclusions remain further examined in China. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the mediating effect of place attachment in the process of the way films induce tourism intention and build a theoretical model of the connection among tourists' involvement, place attachment, and behavioral intention based on para-social theory and place attachment theory.

Theoretical Foundation and Hypothesis

Para-social Interaction Theory

Horton and Wohl (1956) were the first to propose the term para-social interaction theory (PSI), which they defined as an illusion of face-to-face and one-sided interaction between new mass media celebrities and film spectators through characters in a story. This interaction gave some spectators an illusion of interaction and some level of intimacy with the personas, characters, scenes, and related information. Yuan and Gao (2020) reported that PSI explained the seeming interaction between media and spectators, which contribute to an understanding of the progress of how audiences attached to film-related information and formed relevant consumer behavior. In the context of films, para-social interaction showed the one-sided interaction between the audiences and the stories, characters, and scenes in films.

Different views were held by scholars on the dimensions of PSI. Some scholars considered it a single-dimension structure (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Chung & Cho, 2017), while others suggested that PSI can be divided into multiple dimensions. Sood and Rogers (2000) divided PSI into five dimensions: audiences' affective, cognitive and behavioral interactions, referential and critical involvement. Liu (2017) further stated that PSI could be identified as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement. Sood (2002) reported that PSI consists of affective and cognitive involvement. Moreover, Kim et al. (2019) also pointed out that emotional and behavioral involvement are two essential parts of PSI. In this study, emotional and behavioral involvement could well explain the para-social interaction between films and spectators. As such, this study takes emotional and behavioral involvement for the two dimensions to measure para-social interaction.

The emotional involvement of para-social interaction refers to audiences' positive affection towards media characters, even the whole film, through mass media. This positive affection would lead to empathy and impression and extend to a consumer's affection. The behavioral involvement of para-social interaction includes actions of following, retweeting, and communicating, inspired and directed by films (Yuksel & Labrecque, 2016). Moreover, the emotional involvement could lead to an apparent behavioral change in the audience (Sood, 2002). Kim et al. (2019) noted that the emotional involvement of film audiences has a direct and positive effect on their behavioral involvement. In the context of film-induced tourism, the more positive emotion appears after observing films, the more accessible behavioral involvement happens, like positive reviewing, retweeting, sharing, and so on. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that:

H1: Film-induced tourists' emotional involvement has a positive effect on their behavioral involvement.

Para-social Interaction and Place Attachment

Williams and Roggenbuck (1989) stated that place attachment is a unique emotional connection between people and places on a basement of cognition, emotion, and practice. Furthermore, from the perspective of functional and emotional value, their study also showed that place attachment consists of place identity and place dependence, widely regarded as a classic two-dimensional structure. Place identity is a sense of belonging to a specific place based on individuals' experiences and practices. Moreover, place dependence refers to individuals' functional attachment to a place. Place identity and place attachment are the two dimensions widely used to measure place attachment in academic studies, including tourism and leisure studies (Lu & Qu, 2021). Therefore, this study adopts place identity and place dependence for the measurement of place attachment.

The process of para-social interaction formation could develop consumers' sense of identity and further stimulate consumers' behavior (Ye, Fong, & Luo, 2021). Specifically, the para-social interaction between media and audiences could reduce risk perceptions and promote production identity and purchase intentions through audiences' vicarious experiences (M. Lee & H. Lee, 2022). Furthermore, para-social interaction has a direct (Yilmazdogan, Dogan, & Altintas, 2021) or indirect effect (Can, Sen, & Altintas, 2021) on tourism behavioral intention in different circumstances. In film-induced tourism, audiences' emotional and behavioral involvement is a leading factor in why audiences travel to films' shooting places. The more audiences were involved in film, the more possibilities they traveled to shooting places (Kim, 2012). The reason is that individuals' emotional bonding to a place could be significantly enhanced by adding familiar landscape elements to unknown places (Cheng & Kuo, 2015) and further increasing their behavioral intention to go to film-related destinations. Wong and Lai (2015) reported that audiences' involvement positively affects place attachment. Because fans may develop a certain level of attachment and affection to celebrities through constant exposure to films or TV dramas, this emotional and symbolic relationship may stimulate bonding and a sense of belonging to film-related places. Zhang, Xu, and Gursoy (2020) also verified the direct and indirect positive relationship between celebrities' endorsement and attachment and affection with destination brands through para-social interaction. Moreover, the formation process of place attachment is based on psychological elements—cognition, emotion and behavior—was fully justified by Casakin, Ruiz, and Hernández (2021). Sameer, Daniela, and Silvia (2020) showed that audiences' affections and symbolic meaning associated with media—places would evoke a sense of belonging and attachment and further lead to travel intention. As such, we suggest that audiences' emotional involvement and behavioral involvement in films would develop place attachment. This study hypothesizes that:

H2: Film-induced tourists' behavioral involvement positively affects related destinations' place dependence.

H3: Film-induced tourists' behavioral involvement positively affects related destinations' place identity.

H4: Film-induced tourists' emotional involvement positively affects related destinations' place dependence.

H5: Film-induced tourists' emotional involvement positively affects related destinations' place identity.

Place Attachment and Tourism Behavioral Intention

Behavioral intention is a central factor in predicting individuals' behavior according to the theory of planned behavior (TPB). A precise measurement of behavioral intention could reasonably predict the happening of behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975). Tourism intention refers to a subjective judgment of individuals' tourism behavior. It reflects how much they want to proceed with travel behavior and express their travel tendency (Hu & Zhang, 2015). Many factors may affect behavioral intention. Attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control in TPB and individuals' characteristic differences' effects on behavioral intention have been widely verified (Hu, Wen, Lin, & Zheng, 2021; Xia, 2015; Watakakosol et al., 2021). In the context of tourism studies, objective factors like tourism destinations' attractiveness, unique features, marketing initiatives, advertisement, and so on, could also affect individuals' tourism behavioral intention (Sun, Shao, Shi, & Kang, 2020; Tavitiyaman, Qu, Tsang, & Lam, 2021; Micevski, Diamantopoulos, & Erdrbrugger, 2021; Chua, Amr, Lee, & Han, 2021).

Attachment is self-developed and associated with emotions (Schultz, Kleine, & Kernan, 1989). The attachment between consumers and enterprises (or products) contributed to strengthening consumers' purchase intention (Kaufmann, Petrovici, Filho, & Ayres, 2016). Emotional bond was crucial in forming individuals' tourism behavioral intention (Liu, 2017). The bond between people and places was relatively stable, which can directly cause tourists' behavioral reactions (Huang, Lu, & Song, 2021). Zhang, Chen, R. Z. Yu, and X. Y. Yu (2021) pointed out that places' affection reflected the communication between people and places and could reinforce tourists' travel behavioral intentions. Sammer et al. (2020) stated that attachment and a sense of belonging to related places could lead to tourists' travel intentions. F. Wang, Xue, T. Wang, and Wu (2020) studied the videos of epidemic prevention work and verified the improving effect of place identity and place dependence on potential tourists' behavioral intentions. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that:

H6: Film-induced tourists' place dependence positively affects related places' tourist behavioral intention.

H7: Film-induced tourists' place identity positively affects related places' tourist behavioral intention.

In summary, we developed the conceptual framework in Figure 1.

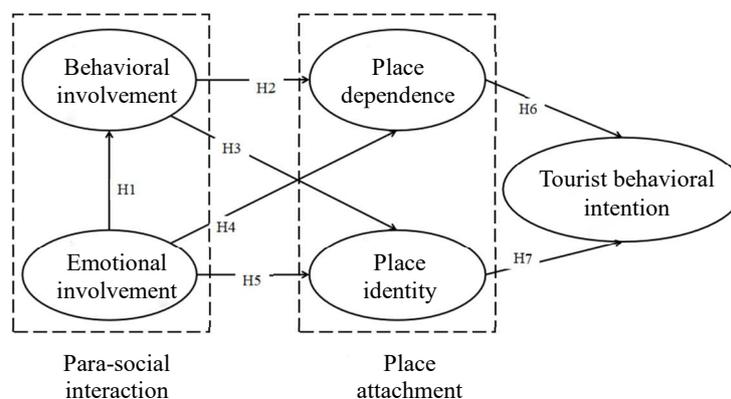


Figure 1. The concept model of this study.

Study Design

Questionnaire Design

Survey methods were used to collect data. This study's questionnaire design adopted mature scales demonstrating good validity and reliability. Besides, three tourism researchers were invited for a discussion to ensure the accuracy of the questionnaire's expression. Before the questionnaire was officially distributed, the researchers conducted a pilot survey in school, modified it according to the data feedback, and determined the final questionnaire. The questionnaire includes six parts: emotional involvement, behavioral involvement, place dependence, place identity, tourist behavioral intention, and basic information of tourists. Emotional involvement was measured with nine items from Sood's (2002) study. Behavioral involvement measurement scale was adopted from Sood and Rogers (2000) and included eight items. Place dependence and place identity both consisted of six items proposed by Williams and Roggenbuck (1989). Tourist behavioral intention included nine items, which were adopted from the study of Ajzen and Fishbein (1975) and Chua et al. (2021). The first three parts of questionnaire were measured with a five-point Likert scale.

Case Selection and Data Collection

A Little Red Flower was released across China in early 2021. It tells the positive story of cancer patients. The film had received much recognition by the time it was released, achieved the first box office in January 2021, and was nominated for best film at the 30th Huading Awards in 2021 (Yin, 2021). In an instant, this film became a sensation. Furthermore, the stunning scenery of Qinghai Salt Lake presented in the film drew much attention. Moreover, as a new star, the leading actor in this film, Jackson Yee, attracted many of his pursuing to check in Qinghai Salt Lake, where he once was. Many advertisers even launched tourism spots similar to Qinghai Slat Lake, and numerous tourists had expressed their willingness to attend and posted about it. Therefore, this study chose *A Little Red Flower* as a case study to ensure the effectiveness of the variables' measurement.

The questionnaire for this study was distributed online and offline in April 2021 to a group of people who just saw the film *A Little Red Flower*. We added the item "Have you seen the movie *A Little Red Flower*" in the online survey questionnaire. And for offline survey, questionnaires were distributed to those who had just finished the film at the gate of cinemas. Thus, most of the respondents had relatively straightforward and profound experiences. Three hundred fifty questionnaires (200 from cinemas and 150 online) were distributed. After eliminating the invalid questionnaires, such as incorrect and incomplete filling, 318 valid questionnaires (178 from cinemas and 140 online) were sorted out, resulting in a valid rate of 90.9%. The data showed that the respondents were mainly female, accounting for 71.4%, and male, accounting for 28.6%. The respondents' age was concentrated in 18-30 years old (92.5%), which is consistent with the film's viewing group, mainly young women.

Results

Measurement Model Test

According to the measurement model test (Table 1), Cronbach's α value and composite reliability (CR) values of all variables exceeded 0.7, indicating that the scale had good reliability. The convergent validity of the measurement scale can be tested by observing the factor loading of variables and their significant performance. Table 2 indicates that the standardized factor loading of all items was over 0.7, showing a good convergent validity. Moreover, the square roots of average variance extracted (AVE) of latent variables were compared to

each correlation value to assure discriminant validity (Table 3). As a result, the discriminant validity was confirmed, showing that all square roots of AVE were higher than each corresponding variable's correlations.

Table 1

Measurement Model Test

Variable	Item	Standardized factor loading	CR	AVE	Cronbach's α
Behavioral involvement	<i>A Little Red Flower</i> makes me pay more attention to the actors.	0.758	0.944	0.682	0.943
	I will watch other films (variety shows) of my favorite actors.	0.766			
	I will follow the related reports of <i>A Little Red Flower</i> .	0.783			
	I will follow the related reports of characters I like in the film.	0.849			
	If sequels with the same actors aired, I would watch them.	0.794			
	I will follow the blogs of my favorite actors.	0.864			
	I will join online interactions related to this film.	0.865			
	I will post and share <i>A Little Red Flower</i> .	0.885			
Emotional involvement	I feel the story of <i>A Little Red Flower</i> accompany me.	0.838	0.946	0.663	0.927
	I feel the characters of <i>A Little Red Flower</i> accompany me.	0.871			
	I feel the actors of <i>A Little Red Flower</i> accompany me.	0.87			
	I feel like the characters (actors) in the film were my friends.	0.82			
	When watching the film, I felt I was a part of the story.	0.85			
	After watching this film, I will often think about it.	0.72			
	I miss the characters (actors) in <i>A Little Red Flower</i> .	0.791			
	I was happy to hear the voice of the characters (actors) I liked in the film.	0.86			
Place dependence	I have positive feelings about Qinghai due to this film.	0.666	0.948	0.751	0.942
	I will not change the destination of Qinghai to other places.	0.880			
	Qinghai-related destinations are my top favorite destinations.	0.808			
	Other places are not quite like the Qinghai-related destinations in the movie.	0.898			
	Qinghai-related destinations give me more satisfaction.	0.893			
	Going to Qinghai is more important than any other destination.	0.880			
	The Qinghai-related destinations in the film make me forget my worries.	0.830			
	I like the Qinghai-related destinations in this film.	0.762			
Place identity	I strongly identified with the Qinghai destinations in the film.	0.851	0.932	0.701	0.932
	I have a strong sense of belonging to the Qinghai-related destinations in the film.	0.878			
	The Qinghai destinations in the film are very special to me.	0.897			
	I have a good impression of the film's Qinghai-related destinations.	0.896			
	The Qinghai destinations in the film are significant to me.	0.638			
	When I travel, I will first consider the Qinghai-related destinations in the film.	0.866			
	I will recommend destinations related to Qinghai in the film to others.	0.898			
	I will go to Qinghai-related destinations in the film without promotion.	0.86			
Tourist behavioral intention	If someone asks me, I will recommend destinations related to movies in Qinghai.	0.878	0.967	0.766	0.967
	I will complement the Qinghai-related destinations in the film to others.	0.891			
	I will tell others about the great attractions of Qinghai.	0.871			
	I will actively promote the Qinghai-related destinations in this film.	0.908			
	I want to be a frequent visitor to the destinations in this film.	0.855			
	Destinations related to Qinghai in the film are my first choice for travel.	0.853			

Table 2

Discriminant Validity and the Correlations of Variables

Variable	Emotional involvement	Behavioral involvement	Place dependence	Place identity	Tourist behavioral intention
Emotional involvement	0.814				
Behavioral involvement	0.810	0.826			
Place dependence	0.718	0.667	0.837		
Place identity	0.693	0.685	0.796	0.867	
Tourist behavioral intention	0.712	0.695	0.814	0.862	0.875

Notes. Numbers on the diagonal line represent the square root of the AVE value; other numbers represent the correlation coefficient.

Structural Equation Model Test

The maximum likelihood method was used to do parameter estimation of the structural model. And all the fit indices indicated a good model fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.064$, RMSEA = 0.058, CFI = 0.969, NFI = 0.942). Table 3 revealed the parameter estimation results of emotional involvement, behavioral involvement, place dependence, place identity, and tourist behavioral intention. As a result, the positive effect of film-induced tourists' emotional involvement on behavioral involvement is strongly significant ($\beta = 0.839$, $t = 14.530$, $p < 0.001$), confirming H1. In addition, film-induced tourists' behavioral involvement exerts a significant and positive effect on place dependence and place identity ($\beta = 0.669$, $t = 5.955$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.646$, $t = 5.664$, $p < 0.001$), providing support to H2 and H3. The effects of place dependence and place identity on tourist behavioral intention are positive and significant ($\beta = 0.632$, $t = 9.391$, $p < 0.001$; $\beta = 0.344$, $t = 5.288$, $p < 0.001$); thus, our findings offer support to hypotheses H6 and H6. However, the effect of tourist emotional involvement on place dependence and place identity is non-significant ($\beta = 0.144$, $t = 1.377$, $p > 0.05$; $\beta = 0.185$, $t = 1.764$, $p > 0.05$), which means H4 and H5 are rejected.

Table 3

Hypothesis Test Results

Variable	Path	Variable	Path coefficient	Standard error	t-value	p
Behavioral involvement	←	Emotional involvement	0.839***	0.065	14.530	0.000
Place dependence	←	Behavioral involvement	0.669***	0.110	5.955	0.000
Place identity	←	Behavioral involvement	0.646***	0.083	5.664	0.000
Place dependence	←	Emotional involvement	0.144	0.116	1.377	0.168
Place identity	←	Emotional involvement	0.185	0.086	1.764	0.078
Tourist behavioral intention	←	Place dependence	0.632***	0.069	9.391	0.000
Tourist behavioral intention	←	Place identity	0.344***	0.089	5.288	0.000

Note. *** indicates $p < 0.001$.

Conclusion and Discussion**Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to establish a framework that could reflect the influence path of films on tourist behavioral intention based on the theory of para-social interaction and place attachment. The conclusion of this study explained the effect of audiences' para-social interaction with films on related destinations' place attachment and tourist behavioral intention. We found that para-social interaction positively affects place attachment and spectators' tourism behavioral intention. The main findings of this study are discussed below.

First, the results of this study verified a significant and positive effect of spectators' emotional involvement on their behavioral involvement, which is consistent with the study of Kim (2012). Touched by characters and scenes during the film or identity with its values, an emotional bond with the film arose in spectators. Moreover, this emotional bond moved on to specific people or places in real life. Spectators with a high level of emotional involvement exerted more vivid film-watching experiences and intended to conduct practical activities related to films. For example, joining and following film-related reports, going to film actors' meet and greet, watching other films or shows by the same actors, and so on.

Second, the findings of this study provide empirical evidence for the significant positive effect of spectators' behavioral involvement on related destinations' place dependence and place identity. This is consistent with the findings of Can et al. (2021) and Yilmazdogan et al. (2021). Individuals may have an emotional attachment to the places they have never been to, because the relevant places in films usually have symbolic meaning and carry the emotions and stories of the characters. The perception and understanding of this symbolic meaning could stimulate the spectators' imagination and identification of the relevant places and generate an emotional bond with them. Qinghai in *A Little Red Flower* is the destination the leading characters pursue throughout the film. The audiences immersed in the film will also give Qinghai unique emotional value, which brings stronger emotional resonance than physical contact. Moreover, spectators' behavioral involvement, like constant attention to films' and actors' relevant reports, would strengthen relevant destinations' place dependence and place identity.

Third, the study showed that emotional involvement did not directly affect place dependence and place identity. Even though the spectators' emotional involvement directly affected their behavioral involvement, and behavioral involvement positively affected place dependence and place identity, their emotional involvement did not affect place dependence and place identity. This may be explained by the fact that without practical behavioral involvement, the impression inspired by films' characters and stories could not stimulate spectators' attachment and behavioral intention. As a result, only when spectators' emotional involvement comes to behavioral involvement can their emotional bond and functional value, like a sense of belonging and identity with destinations, be found.

Fourth, the study highlighted that relevant destinations' place dependence and place identity affected tourist behavioral intention positively and significantly, which is consistent with the study of Huang et al. (2021) and Sammer et al. (2020). Place identity and place dependence refer to an emotional bond between individuals and relevant places. This emotional bond had a crucial impact on tourist behavioral intention. Spectators' image perceptions, specific memories, and image constructions based on films could drive a sense of belonging and identity. The emotional resonance generated from films was transformed into functional emotion dependence on relevant destinations through the repeated depiction by spectators, which further stimulated the audiences' willingness to approach and explore the related destinations.

Management Implication

The results showed that an excellent film would increase the popularity of relevant tourism destinations, stimulate tourist behavioral intention of spectators, and create tourism development opportunities. As such, management suggestions are presented below.

Firstly, it is necessary to develop film-induced tourism programs that could generate tourists' emotional and behavioral involvement. Spectators with a high level of emotional and behavioral involvement in films exert stronger tourist behavioral intention. Managers in tourism destinations may cooperate with film producers and

develop film-induced tourism programs that could turn film's symbolic meaning into real life. For example, it helps spectators transform their affections toward films into destinations and deepen emotional involvement by initiating travel routes based on the film plots. However, the popularity of a film has a time limit. Thus an instant marketing campaign and advertising based on the film could successfully promote destinations' popularity.

Secondly, finding the right emotional target and reinforcing place dependence and identity would be beneficial. A spiritual touch could have a much stronger emotional resonance than physical contact. Thus, tourism destinations should match tourism themes with the film's core values and reflect their unique features when promoting and cooperating with film producers. Taking *A Little Red Flower* as an example, the Dachaidan Emerald Lake in Qinghai carries the concern and redemption of the leading characters' life throughout the story. No matter the clear and peaceful lake or the sheep drawn with little red flowers, it is a reward to people who love and cherish their life. Therefore, in the promotion and marketing of Qinghai, it is necessary to highlight its stillness and vastness to provide a redemptive place for tourists who need to escape and relax their minds.

Further Study

This empirical study took *A Little Red Flower* as a case. Future studies could consider other films and expand the sample to verify the conclusions' applicability. Besides, an examination of the mediating effect of place attachment between emotional and behavioral involvement and tourist behavioral intention might complete the existing model and fulfill an explanation of the drive effect of emotional and behavioral involvement. Moreover, variables related to films' features like plot, characters, and shooting places could also be taken into consideration and improve the theoretical framework of spectators' involvement and their tourism behavioral intention.

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