

## Article

# From Screened Place to Lived Place: Cinematic-Place Negotiation Among Film Tourists

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## Abstract

Zhangjiajie National Forest Park, widely associated with the landscapes depicted in *Avatar*, attracts tourists from around the world and has become an important film tourism destination. Film tourism destinations are not only physical places but also mediated symbolic spaces shaped by cinematic imagery, media memories, and symbolic expectations formed before travel. This study investigates how film tourists transform cinematically mediated expectations into situated engagement during their visits to Zhangjiajie. It adopts a qualitative process design informed by grounded theory and draws on semi-structured interviews with 30 film-aware tourists who had visited Zhangjiajie. The findings show that engagement unfolds through pre-visit cinematic imagination, embodied encounters, cinematic–real-world comparisons, social interpretation, authenticity negotiation, emotional connection, and cultural place-making. The study develops the concept of cinematic-place negotiation to explain how a screen-mediated place is transformed into a lived place through tourists' comparison, verification, revision, and extension of media-shaped expectations.

**Keywords:** film tourism; tourist engagement; grounded theory; Zhangjiajie; cinematic imagination

## 1. Introduction

Film tourism has become an important form of contemporary cultural tourism because destinations are increasingly encountered through films, television, short videos, social media images, and other mediated representations before tourists arrive (Crespo-Almendros et al., 2025). In this context, a destination is not only a physical site but also a symbolic and affective space shaped by screen images, narrative memory, and circulating visual expectations. Earlier film-induced tourism studies have shown that screen exposure can enhance destination awareness, shape destination image, stimulate travel motivation, and increase visitor numbers (Northey et al., 2025). However, the transformation from mediated expectation to lived destination experience remains less fully explained.

Tourists do not simply consume cinematic images passively. They arrive with pre-visit expectations, search for recognizable views, compare screen memories with material landscapes, evaluate authenticity, take photographs, interact with guides and other visitors, and reinterpret the destination through local culture. Therefore, the central issue is not only whether cinema attracts tourists, but how cinematic imagination is compared, verified, revised, and extended during the visit.

Zhangjiajie, located in Hunan province, China, provides a theoretically strategic case for examining this process. It is a natural landscape destination whose sandstone pillar



Academic Editors: Sanja Kovačić and  
Aleksandra Tešin

Received: 9 June 2026

Revised: 27 July 2026

Accepted: 29 July 2026

Published: 1 August 2026

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scenery has been widely associated with *Avatar*-related visual imagination and cinematic fantasy (Hao et al., 2024). Unlike studio-based attractions or fully themed media destinations, Zhangjiajie is experienced simultaneously as a material landscape, a media-associated scenic icon, and a culturally meaningful place. This makes it suitable for investigating how tourists move from screened place to lived place through cinematic-place negotiation.

Film-induced tourism research has established that screen exposure can shape destination image (Northey et al., 2025). Film tourism scholarship has also shown that media exposure can support destination marketing and visitor movement (Beeton, 2016). Recent work further links film factors with destination image and travel intention (Northey et al., 2025). What remains insufficiently explained is how tourists transform pre-visit cinematic imagination into situated, embodied, and culturally meaningful engagement during the visit. To address this gap, this study aims to answer:

- (1) How do film tourists negotiate the relationship between cinematic representations and their embodied encounters with Zhangjiajie?
- (2) What process pathways and contextual conditions shape the reconstruction of place meaning and tourist engagement during cinematic-place negotiation?

By answering these questions, the study makes three contributions. Theoretically, it conceptualizes cinematic-place negotiation as a process through which screened destinations are transformed into lived places. Methodologically, it shows how a grounded theory-informed qualitative process design can capture tourists' evolving interpretations during film-related travel. Practically, it offers implications for designing interpretive routes, film-scene comparison experiences, and culturally grounded destination narratives in Zhangjiajie and comparable film-related destinations.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Film-Induced Tourism and Mediated Destination Image

Film-induced tourism refers to tourist travel to places associated with films, television programs, or other screen media (Beeton, 2016). Films can increase visitor numbers at screened locations (Tooke & Baker, 1996). Motion-picture exposure can also shape destination image before travel (H. Kim & Richardson, 2003). Film tourism requires supporting initiatives rather than screen exposure alone (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006). Film-induced tourism also works through destination-image narratives and story-based experience (Michopoulou et al., 2022). Movie images can influence destination choice when they become part of tourists' imagined travel options (Quintal & Phau, 2015). Connell (2012) further shows that film tourism has developed from a destination-promotion phenomenon into a broader research field concerned with tourist experience, destination meaning, and media-related travel practices.

International cases such as *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*, *Star Wars*, *James Bond* and *The Lord of the Rings* show that screen texts can create powerful destination associations. These examples are important because they demonstrate how films and serial narratives can turn ordinary locations into symbolic tourism spaces, sometimes supported by official promotion, guided routes, themed interpretation and fan-generated sharing. These cases represent different mechanisms of screen tourism. Zhangjiajie differs from these cases because it is not primarily a studio attraction or a complete narrative-universe destination; it is a natural landscape whose meaning has been rearticulated through *Avatar*-related visual symbolism (Hao et al., 2024).

However, much of this research explains how films attract tourists rather than how tourists reinterpret a destination after arrival. Destination image explains pre-visit perception and travel intention, but it does not fully account for on-site comparison, sensory encounter, authenticity assessment, and the reconstruction of place meaning during the

visit (Northey et al., 2025). For Zhangjiajie, this distinction is especially important. The destination is not merely promoted as scenery; it is encountered through *Avatar*-related imagery, social media images, destination branding, and tourist storytelling. The analytical focus must therefore move from destination image as a pre-visit influence to cinematic-place negotiation as an on-site interpretive process. Existing film-induced tourism studies explain awareness, motivation, destination image, and marketing effects, but they insufficiently explain tourists' on-site interpretive negotiation between cinematic representations and lived place experiences (Crespo-Almendros et al., 2025). This study therefore treats film tourism as a mediated destination experience in which cinematic associations are compared, verified, revised, and extended through embodied travel.

## 2.2. Tourist Gaze, Place, Placeness, and Sense of Place

Tourist Gaze theory argues that tourists do not view destinations neutrally; they see through media, social signs, visual culture, and prior imagination (Urry & Larsen, 2011). Zhangjiajie tourists therefore do not simply look at mountains. They arrive with *Avatar*-related imagery, short-video frames, destination promotion, and circulating media memories that organize what they notice and how they evaluate the landscape.

Tuan (1977) explains that place is produced through experience rather than physical setting alone. Relph (1976) shows why place meaning depends on attachment, familiarity, and the avoidance of placelessness. Cresswell (2014) further emphasizes that place is a meaningful location shaped through practice, memory, and interpretation. These perspectives help explain why Zhangjiajie becomes more than abstract scenic space during film-related travel.

Building on these place-based perspectives, recent tourism research shows that experience and involvement are among the strongest antecedents of tourist place attachment, through which on-site encounters acquire emotional and symbolic meaning (Cai et al., 2025). Rather than treating tourist-place bonds as static attitudes, contemporary research conceptualizes destination attachment as a dynamic process that unfolds before, during, and after travel through perceptual, bodily, emotional, and spatial mechanisms (Qu & Dong, 2026). Embodied sensory encounters can further generate emotional resonance and strengthen tourists' place identity, demonstrating how affective bonds emerge through situated and meaningful experience (Zhang et al., 2024). Recent tourism research also continues to conceptualize place attachment through place identity and place dependence, with the former capturing symbolic and affective identification with a destination and the latter reflecting its functional importance in supporting desired tourism activities (Saut & Ly, 2024), supporting desired tourism activities. Taken together, these perspectives explain how mediated expectations organize tourists' perceptions, while recent film tourism research indicates that the embodied and culturally grounded revision of cinematic expectations remains comparatively underdeveloped, thereby providing a direct conceptual bridge to tourist engagement, authenticity negotiation, and cultural place-making (Crespo-Almendros et al., 2025).

## 2.3. Tourist Engagement, Authenticity, and Cultural Place-Making

Tourist engagement can be understood as multidimensional cognitive, emotional, and behavioral involvement through which tourists direct attention, develop affective connections, and participate in destination-related activities (Rather et al., 2023). In digitally mediated tourism, destination images can attract attention, stimulate involvement, and encourage tourists to participate actively through sharing and electronic word-of-mouth behaviors (Abbasi et al., 2023). In film tourism contexts, tourist engagement has also been shown to contribute to memorable tourism experiences and tourists' post-visit emotional well-being (Yen et al., 2025). However, recent tourism research still commonly models

engagement through predefined antecedents and outcomes rather than examining how it develops as an unfolding interpretive process during the visit (Rasul et al., 2025).

This study therefore treats engagement as a process generated through cinematic expectation, embodied encounter, film–reality comparison, social interaction, authenticity assessment, and cultural meaning-making. In film-related destinations, tourists become engaged not simply because they have watched a film but because they actively connect cinematic signs and narratives with their practices in the material destination (Hao et al., 2024). Embodied sensory encounters can further transform cultural interpretation into emotional resonance and place identity, thereby providing an experiential basis for cultural place-making (Zhang et al., 2024).

Authenticity in film tourism should likewise be understood as experiential and contextually constructed because staged representations and existentially meaningful experiences can coexist at film-related tourism sites (Cui & Song, 2024). Natural, cultural, social, sensory, and functional aspects of the tourism experience-scape can shape perceived authenticity, while visitors' co-creation practices strengthen this relationship (Chen et al., 2024). For Zhangjiajie, authenticity is therefore relational: it emerges through tourists' negotiation between *Avatar*-related visual signs, the material landscape, and their embodied tourism practices rather than through exact visual correspondence between the screen and reality (Hao et al., 2024). Accordingly, engagement is conceptualized here as a cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and cultural process, while authenticity is interpreted through the evolving relationship between cinematic representation and lived place experience.

#### 2.4. Fandom, Media Pilgrimage, and Film Tourism Practices

Fandom in popular-culture tourism is not simply a matter of liking a film; it is expressed through interpretive, performative, and participatory practices that connect media texts, fan identities, and travel behavior (Lexhagen et al., 2023). At destinations, these practices become visible through photographing recognizable locations, staging or reenacting narrative moments, and circulating these performances through social media (Tan, 2024). Through such embodied and shared practices, media-associated locations can become fan-pilgrimage sites whose meanings are produced not only by destination managers but also through the participation of fans, residents, and other local stakeholders (Thelen et al., 2025).

Popular culture and fandom can shape destination image and tourism experience through cross-media narratives and sustained interactions among tourists, local communities, tourism organizations, and media producers (S. Kim et al., 2026). Empirical research on *Game of Thrones* fans identifies affective identification with characters, perceived connections between fiction and history, and the desire for collective identity as important motivations for traveling to screen-related locations (Gómez-Morales et al., 2024). Guides and visitors collaboratively weave fictional narratives, personal biographies, places, and local histories into situated tourism experiences (Garrison & Wallace, 2025). Taken together, these findings indicate that screen tourism does not operate through a single universal mechanism but through different combinations of fan attachment, storytelling, destination interpretation, and stakeholder participation.

Recent popular-culture tourism research emphasizes that fan practices and destination placemaking vary across media genres, visitor communities, and local contexts (Lexhagen et al., 2023). Zhangjiajie therefore should not be treated as equivalent to strongly themed attractions or destinations organized primarily around a complete fictional universe. It is a natural landscape whose tourism meaning has been co-produced through *Avatar*-related signs, destination discourse, material scenery, and tourists' on-site practices (Hao et al., 2024). Zhangjiajie is consequently better understood as a media-aware natural

landscape destination, where cinematic recognition coexists with scenery, photography, leisure, and cultural interpretation rather than depending on strong fan identity alone.

In this study, fandom is treated as a continuum rather than a fixed identity category. Some visitors were strongly attached to *Avatar*-related imagery, some were casual viewers who recognized iconic symbols, and others were broader media-aware tourists whose cinematic awareness came mainly from destination promotion, short videos, or travel platforms. The sample includes strong fans, casual viewers, and broader media-aware tourists. This distinction is used analytically to avoid reducing all Zhangjiajie visitors to organized fan communities while still recognizing that fan-like practices, media memory, and *Avatar*-related symbolic recognition shaped many participants' experiences.

### 2.5. Conceptualizing Cinematic-Place Negotiation

Recent film tourism research increasingly emphasizes the interdependence of audiovisual representation, audience reception, and tourism-related effects rather than treating screen exposure as an isolated stimulus (Nieto-Ferrando et al., 2024). Building on this foundation, this study defines cinematic-place negotiation as the interpretive process through which film-aware tourists compare, verify, revise, and extend cinematic representations through embodied encounters, social interaction, authenticity assessment, emotional connection, and cultural meaning-making. Whereas destination-image research has largely concentrated on how screen exposure shapes destination perceptions, motivations, and travel intentions, cinematic-place negotiation focuses on how these representations are actively reworked after tourists arrive (Crespo-Almendros et al., 2025). It also moves beyond gaze-centered explanations by tracing how media-shaped ways of seeing operate within concrete interactions and situated tourism experiences (Apchain, 2025). In film-related tourism, staged and existential authenticity may coexist, supporting a relational understanding based on the meaning of the encounter rather than exact visual correspondence between screen representation and material reality (Cui & Song, 2024). cinematic-place negotiation further explains how film-related signs acquire place meaning through the interaction of tourists, media representations, material landscapes, and situated practices (Hao et al., 2024). Finally, although popular-culture tourism is frequently organized around fandom-related travel and expressive practices, cinematic-place negotiation also includes casual viewers and media-aware tourists whose interpretations are informed by cinematic associations without necessarily being structured around a strong fan identity (Lexhagen et al., 2023). Detailed distinctions between cinematic-place negotiation and adjacent concepts are summarized in Appendix A. These related perspectives provide important foundations but do not fully explain how tourists actively revise cinematic expectations through embodied encounters at the destination. Their conceptual distinctions from cinematic-place negotiation are summarized in Table A1.

## 3. Method

### 3.1. Research Design and Participant Recruitment

This study adopted a grounded theory-informed qualitative process design. It used grounded theory coding procedures to construct an explanatory process model, but it does not claim to follow strict classical grounded theory because formal theoretical sampling was not employed.

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling from tourists who had already visited Zhangjiajie and who were aware of its film- or media-related identity. Recruitment sources included scenic-area contacts, social media, travel communities, friend referrals, and travel-platform networks. Recruitment was conducted during the fieldwork period after participants had completed their visits.

Screening questions confirmed whether participants had visited Zhangjiajie, whether they knew of its cinematic or media associations before or during the visit, and whether they could reflect on travel motivation, expectation, on-site experience, and destination meaning. No participant was invited to visit Zhangjiajie solely for this study; all participants had completed their visit before being interviewed. The final sample included 30 participants: eight first-time visitors and 22 repeat visitors.

Participants were classified as film tourists because each had visited Zhangjiajie and reported awareness of film, media, promotional, or visual associations connecting the destination with cinematic landscapes. Their cinematic involvement ranged from strong *Avatar*-related attachment to casual viewing and broader media-aware destination recognition.

### 3.2. Participant Profile

The sample included 30 participants, with eight first-time visitors and 22 repeat visitors. The main participant overview is reported in Table 1, while expanded variables requested by reviewers are provided in Appendix B to keep Section 4 readable. The expanded profile variables in Appendix B were used as qualitative contextual descriptors rather than standardized survey variables. Residence, trip type, main motivation, media-awareness source, and cinematic involvement were summarized from screening information, interview narratives, and coding records. These categories were used to support transferability and subgroup interpretation rather than statistical comparison.

**Table 1.** Participant overview.

| ID  | Gender | Age Group | Education   | Visit Frequency |
|-----|--------|-----------|-------------|-----------------|
| P1  | Male   | 26–35     | Bachelor    | Repeat          |
| P2  | Female | 36–45     | Bachelor    | Repeat          |
| P3  | Male   | 18–25     | Bachelor    | First Time      |
| P4  | Male   | 26–35     | Master      | Repeat          |
| P5  | Female | 46–55     | High School | Repeat          |
| P6  | Male   | 36–45     | Bachelor    | Repeat          |
| P7  | Female | 26–35     | Bachelor    | First Time      |
| P8  | Male   | 26–35     | Master      | Repeat          |
| P9  | Male   | 36–45     | High School | Repeat          |
| P10 | Female | 18–25     | Bachelor    | First Time      |
| P11 | Male   | 26–35     | Bachelor    | Repeat          |
| P12 | Female | 26–35     | Bachelor    | Repeat          |
| P13 | Male   | 36–45     | Bachelor    | Repeat          |
| P14 | Male   | 46–55     | PhD         | First Time      |
| P15 | Female | 26–35     | Bachelor    | Repeat          |
| P16 | Male   | 26–35     | High School | First Time      |
| P17 | Female | 36–45     | PhD         | Repeat          |
| P18 | Male   | 18–25     | High School | Repeat          |
| P19 | Female | 26–35     | Bachelor    | Repeat          |
| P20 | Male   | 46–55     | Bachelor    | First Time      |
| P21 | Female | 26–35     | High School | Repeat          |
| P22 | Male   | 36–45     | Bachelor    | Repeat          |
| P23 | Female | 26–35     | PhD         | Repeat          |
| P24 | Male   | 26–35     | Bachelor    | Repeat          |
| P25 | Male   | 36–45     | High School | Repeat          |
| P26 | Female | 18–25     | Bachelor    | First Time      |
| P27 | Male   | 26–35     | Bachelor    | Repeat          |
| P28 | Female | 36–45     | Master      | Repeat          |
| P29 | Male   | 46–55     | Bachelor    | Repeat          |
| P30 | Female | 26–35     | Bachelor    | First Time      |

### 3.3. Data Collection

The interview guide covered film and media awareness, travel motivation, cinematic expectation, authenticity judgment, film–reality comparison, photography and film-related activities, emotional connection, cultural meaning and place interpretation (Appendix C). Follow-up questions were used to clarify vague statements and obtain concrete examples. Data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews. Interviews were conducted in the participants' preferred language, and quotations used in the manuscript were translated into English for presentation. Most interviews were conducted online, while a small number were conducted face-to-face when participants were available. Each interview lasted approximately 35–50 min. Recordings were transcribed, anonymized, and organized for coding. Participants were encouraged to recall concrete situations, comparisons, actions, and turning points rather than provide only general evaluations.

### 3.4. Data Analysis

NVivo 12 was used to organize transcripts and coding records, not to generate analysis automatically. The analysis was conducted by the researchers through iterative open coding, axial coding, selective coding, constant comparison, negative case examination, and analytical memoing. The analysis progressed from initial codes to focused categories, higher-order themes, process stages, and the core category of cinematic-place negotiation. The complete coding chain is presented in Table A2.

Open coding generated first-order codes close to participants' language, including media-shaped expectation, iconic landscape recognition, film–reality comparison, photography/check-in practices, guided cinematic interpretation, emotional cinematic connection, and cultural deepening. Axial coding grouped these first-order codes into five linked categories: pre-visit mediated frame, embodied encounter, interpretive negotiation, integrative mechanisms, and outcomes. These categories were used to explain how cinematic imagination moved from expectation into lived experience. Selective coding identified cinematic-place negotiation as the central category because it connected pre-visit cinematic imagination, embodied viewing, authenticity negotiation, emotional response, social interpretation and cultural place-making.

Constant comparison compared statements within and across interviews, including first-time and repeat visitors and participants with different degrees of cinematic involvement. Negative cases were examined, including participants for whom film was not the primary motivation or whose lived experience exceeded or changed screen-based expectations. Analytical memos were maintained throughout the coding process to document emerging ideas, category relationships, and decisions made during theoretical integration. Because strict classical theoretical sampling was not used, conceptual adequacy was judged by recurrence, variation, explanatory power, and late-interview stability rather than by claiming formal theoretical saturation.

### 3.5. Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was strengthened through repeated transcript reading, author cross-checking, analytical memoing, negative case analysis, and continual comparison between codes, quotations, and emerging categories. Credibility was supported by returning category claims to transcript excerpts; dependability and confirmability were supported through coding records and memo trails; and transferability was addressed by describing the case context and sample characteristics. The coding structure and process framework were reviewed by all authors, and interpretive disagreements were resolved through discussion and re-examination of the relevant transcript excerpts. All participants were informed of the research purpose, voluntary participation, audio recording, anonymization,

secure data storage, and their right to withdraw. Participant identities were replaced with codes from P1 to P30, and identifying information was removed from transcripts and quotations.

This study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research, Sirindhorn College of Public Health, Yala (SCPHYL IRB), Thailand. The approval number was SCPHYLIRB-2569/469. The study was reviewed under an expedited review procedure, with approval granted on 28 February 2026 and valid until 28 February 2027. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews.

4. Results

4.1. Participant Profile and Analytical Overview

The 30 tourists in the qualitative sample had visited Zhangjiajie and were aware of its film or media associations. Repeat visitors accounted for 22 participants and first-time visitors for eight participants. Table 1 retains the core participant overview, while Table A4 provides expanded information on participants’ residence, trip type, and main travel motivation, and Appendix B provides the expanded profile variables used to clarify local/non-local status, trip type, main motivation, media-awareness source, and cinematic involvement. As detailed in Table A5, participants differed in their sources of film-related awareness and levels of cinematic involvement, ranging from strong *Avatar* fans to casual viewers and non-fan but film-aware tourists.

The analytical overview indicates that participants moved from media-shaped expectation to embodied encounter, film–reality comparison, social interpretation, authenticity negotiation, emotional connection and cultural place-making. Table 2 reports the descriptive recurrence of main themes across the qualitative corpus, while Appendix A provides the full coding chain and the complete theme-frequency summary.

Table 2. Descriptive summary of main themes across interviews.

| Theme/Category                                  | Participants | First-Time/Repeat | Representative Evidence                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Media-shaped expectation                        | 24/30        | 6/18              | P12 media portrayals made scenery surreal                                       |
| <i>Avatar</i> /Hallelujah Mountains recognition | 21/30        | 7/14              | P3 cinematic elements were more vivid                                           |
| Film–reality comparison                         | 19/30        | 5/14              | P19 real life gave a stronger sense of wonder                                   |
| Photography/check-in practices                  | 17/30        | 5/12              | Photo-taking and viewpoint framing reported across interviews                   |
| Guided or themed activities                     | 12/30        | 2/10              | P21 film-themed tours connected the visit with cinematic identity               |
| Emotional connection                            | 16/30        | 4/12              | P6 reported a deep connection to the film world                                 |
| Authenticity judgment                           | 14/30        | 3/11              | Participants evaluated whether lived place confirmed or exceeded screen imagery |
| Cultural/local meaning                          | 13/30        | 3/10              | P30 described cultural heritage beyond cinematic association                    |
| Fandom or fan-like practices                    | 9/30         | 4/5               | Strong fans and casual fans planned check-ins or recognized iconic symbols      |
| Film not being primary motivation               | 11/30        | 2/9               | Film awareness appeared alongside leisure, scenery, and culture                 |

The following counts are descriptive rather than inferential. They indicate the relative recurrence of themes in the qualitative corpus and should not be interpreted as statistical generalization.

Seven interrelated themes were identified across the interview data: pre-visit cinematic imagination, embodied encounter, film–reality comparison, social interpretation, authenticity negotiation, emotional connection, and cultural place-making. Their descriptive distribution across participants is presented in Table A3. These counts indicate the breadth of participant coverage rather than the statistical importance of individual themes.

#### 4.2. Pre-Visit Cinematic Imagination and Anticipatory Place Meaning

The first stage of engagement construction occurred before the visit. Participants encountered Zhangjiajie through cinematic images, *Avatar*-related associations, destination promotion, short videos, and social media, so the destination had already been partly imagined before physical arrival.

For example, P12 stated, “The media portrayals definitely made the natural surroundings seem more surreal before I arrived.” This quotation was coded as “media-shaped expectation” because the participant described Zhangjiajie as visually intensified through media before the visit. During axial coding, this code was grouped under “cinematic imagination” and placed in Level 1, the pre-visit mediated frame.

P14 similarly noted, “The natural beauty seemed stronger because I had heard stories about the films connected with this place.” This quotation was coded as “narrative intensification of landscape” because the participant’s expectation was shaped by both scenery and film-related stories. Together, these quotations show how pre-visit cinematic imagination operated as an anticipatory frame rather than a fixed motivation.

#### 4.3. Embodied Encounter and Film–Reality Comparison

The second stage involved embodied on-site encounters. Participants not only looked at scenery, but they moved through viewpoints, recognized iconic landscapes, took photographs, joined guided or themed activities, and compared the physical environment with remembered cinematic images.

P3 stated, “The cinematic elements in Zhangjiajie were much more vivid than I expected, especially the Hallelujah Mountains.” This quotation was coded as “iconic recognition” because the participant actively connected the material landscape with remembered cinematic imagery. It was grouped under “embodied confirmation” and placed in Level 2 of the model.

P7 explained, “Seeing the iconic film locations made me feel like I was part of the movie.” This quotation was coded as “participatory cinematic presence” because the participant’s experience moved beyond visual recognition toward embodied involvement. P19 stated, “Seeing it in real life gave me a sense of wonder I could not have imagined from the screen.” This statement was coded as “lived landscape exceeding screen-based expectation” because the participant did not merely confirm the cinematic image but evaluated the actual landscape as affectively stronger than the mediated representation. During axial coding, this code was grouped under “film–reality comparison,” which became part of the broader interpretive negotiation stage.

Photography, check-in practices, guided film-related interpretation and scene recreation also translated screen memory into action. These practices allowed visitors to frame the landscape, test cinematic associations and share their own interpretation of Zhangjiajie with others.

#### 4.4. Cinematic-Place Negotiation: Authenticity, Emotion, Social Interaction, and Cultural Meaning

The third and fourth stages show how perception, comparison, verification, revision, extension, and social interpretation were integrated into authenticity negotiation, emotional connection, cinematic immersion, cultural interpretation, and sense of place.

Authenticity was not evaluated only by asking whether Zhangjiajie looked exactly like the screen image. Participants interpreted authenticity relationally by asking whether the actual landscape confirmed, exceeded, complicated, or extended the cinematic image they had carried into the visit.

P6 stated, “I could feel a deep connection to the film’s world when I was there.” This quotation was coded as “emotional cinematic connection” because recognition of a film-associated landscape became personally affective. It was grouped under “emotional integration” and placed at the integrative mechanism level.

Social interaction expanded individual viewing into shared interpretation. Guides, other tourists, and online sharing practices provided narrative cues through which visitors could explain the relationship between the cinematic symbol and the lived destination.

P21 noted, “Film-themed tours helped me connect the destination with its cinematic identity.” This quotation was coded as “guided cinematic interpretation” because the participant’s understanding was shaped through organized explanation rather than visual recognition alone. It shows how social and guided interpretation transformed screen memory into shared place meaning.

P30 explained, “The cultural heritage elements added a deeper layer beyond just the cinematic associations.” This quotation was coded as “cultural deepening” because the participant moved beyond film recognition toward local cultural interpretation. It was grouped under “cultural place-making” and placed at the outcome level.

Together, these quotations show the coding chain requested by the reviewers: representative expression, initial code, axial category, aggregate dimension, and model level.

The evidence also shows why cinematic-place negotiation is a process rather than a static theme. Tourists moved between seeing, comparing, verifying, revising, and extending, and these actions shaped engagement over the course of the visit.

The descriptive coding summary in Table 2 shows that media-shaped expectation, *Avatar*/Hallelujah Mountains recognition and film–reality comparison were the most recurrent themes. These themes appeared across both first-time and repeat visitors, while repeat visitors provided richer accounts of comparison, reinterpretation and changing place meaning.

#### 4.5. From CINEMATIC-Place Negotiation to Tourist Engagement and Cultural Place-Making

The final stage concerns outcomes. Tourist engagement emerged as cognitive, emotional, behavioral and cultural involvement produced through the interaction of cinematic expectation, embodied encounter, authenticity assessment, emotional connection, social interpretation, and cultural place-making.

Cinematic immersion was generated when visitors used media memory to inhabit the landscape imaginatively while also sensing its material scale, movement and atmosphere.

Emotional connection was strengthened when visitors felt that the lived landscape exceeded or deepened the film image rather than merely reproducing it.

Relational authenticity operated as a bridge between film representation and lived reality. Visitors judged whether the actual experience was believable, affectively powerful, and culturally meaningful in relation to the cinematic image.

Expectations were not fixed. They became benchmarks for comparison and were revised by direct encounter, photography, guide interpretation and local cultural narratives.

Cultural engagement prevented Zhangjiajie from being reduced to a single film reference. Local heritage, geological distinctiveness, landscape history and cultural storytelling expanded the meaning of the destination beyond screen recognition.

The resulting tourist engagement was therefore not an automatic consequence of film exposure. It was constructed through active interpretation and through repeated movement between screened place and lived place.

Appendix A provides the complete coding chain and extended theme-frequency summary.

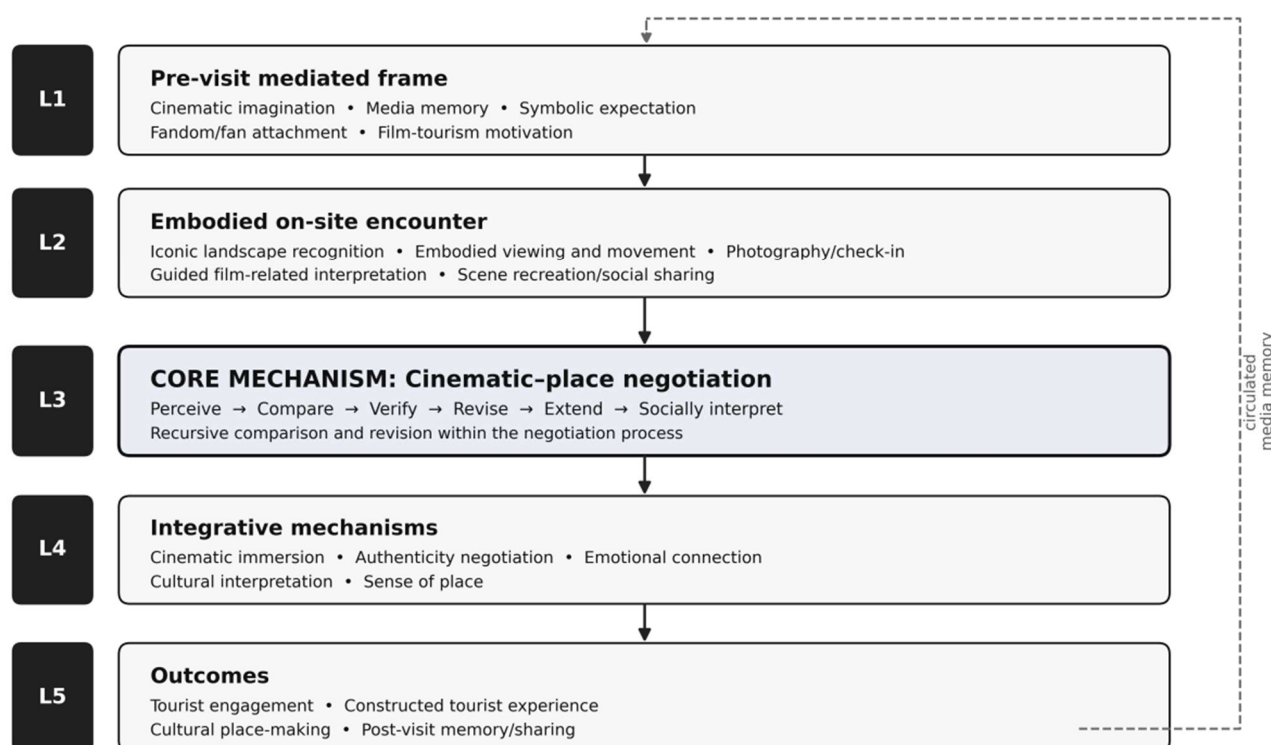
The stronger presence of repeat visitors in the sample have made comparison and reinterpretation especially visible, a point returned to in Section 5.4.

Fandom and fan-like practices were also relevant, but they formed only one pathway within a broader media-aware visitor spectrum. This affects how far the findings can be compared with strong fandom destinations.

The process model therefore explains a context-sensitive pathway rather than a universal typology of all film tourists.

Post-visit memory and sharing were also treated as part of the outcome level when participants described photographs, travel notes, online sharing, or retrospective storytelling after the trip. These accounts were coded as “post-visit memory/sharing” because tourists continued to circulate and reinterpret the relationship between screened place and lived place after the on-site visit.

Figure 1 integrates the five process levels and positions cinematic-place negotiation as the core mechanism linking pre-visit mediated frames, embodied encounters, integrative mechanisms, and engagement outcomes. The revised framework retains fandom/fan attachment, photography/check-in, guided film-related interpretation, scene recreation/social sharing, cultural interpretation, sense of place, and post-visit memory/sharing, while removing the duplicate side box from the previous figure.



**Figure 1.** Cinematic-place negotiation from screened place to lived place: a grounded theory-informed process framework.

The framework shows that cinematic imagination provides a pre-visit mediated frame, embodied encounter activates comparison, interpretive negotiation develops through perception, comparison, verification, revision, extension, and social interpretation, integrative mechanisms connect authenticity, emotion, and culture, and the outcomes include tourist engagement, constructed tourist experience, cultural place-making, and post-visit sharing.

The model also explains how open codes entered the five-level framework: media-shaped expectation belongs to Level 1, iconic recognition and embodied confirmation to Level 2, film–reality comparison to Level 3, emotional integration and authenticity negotiation to Level 4, and cultural place-making to Level 5. The dotted feedback line indicates that post-visit memory and sharing may recirculate tourists’ lived interpretations into broader media memory, thereby shaping future visitors’ pre-visit mediated frames.

Cinematic-place negotiation is therefore the core mechanism linking screened place and lived place across the visit.

In summary, tourists bring cinematic expectations to the material environment of Zhangjiajie, perform these expectations through observation, movement, photography, and social sharing, and interpret the connection between screen images and lived experience. Engagement becomes strongest when this process produces emotional resonance, authenticity assessment, and a culturally grounded sense of place.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal that the transformation of a screened place into a lived place is not a direct consequence of film exposure, nor is it simply the confirmation of a pre-existing destination image. Rather, tourists’ engagement with Zhangjiajie developed through a progressive and recursive process. Participants first arrived with media-shaped expectations and cinematic associations; these expectations were then activated through embodied encounters with the material landscape. During the visit, tourists compared cinematic representations with what they saw and experienced, evaluated whether the relationship between film and place was believable, revised earlier expectations when differences emerged, and extended cinematic meanings through guide narratives, photography, social interaction, emotional response, and cultural interpretation. The findings therefore identify cinematic-place negotiation as the central mechanism connecting pre-visit cinematic imagination with tourist engagement, relational authenticity, emotional connection, sense of place, cultural place-making, and post-visit memory and sharing. Importantly, this process was heterogeneous. Strong fans, casual viewers, and broader media-aware tourists did not engage with Zhangjiajie in the same way, and cinematic association was only one interpretive resource among scenery, leisure, photography, and local culture for many participants.

The first major finding is that cinematic representations continue to influence tourists after arrival, but their role changes from image formation to interpretive negotiation. Previous film tourism studies have primarily demonstrated that films influence destination awareness, destination image, travel motivation, and behavioral intention (Northey et al., 2025). The broader structure of the field has similarly remained concentrated around motivation, destination-image formation, marketing, and destination management (Crespo-Almendros et al., 2025). These studies have established why screen exposure can make a destination desirable, but they provide less explanation of what tourists subsequently do with cinematic expectations once they encounter the destination itself. The present study extends this research by showing that cinematic images remain active during the visit as reference points rather than fixed scripts. Participants repeatedly compared remembered images with material landscapes, confirmed some expectations, revised others, and incor-

porated new cultural and sensory meanings. This finding is consistent with recent attempts to connect audiovisual representation, audience reception, and tourism effects within a more integrated analytical framework (Nieto-Ferrando et al., 2024), but it goes further by identifying the interpretive operations through which such connections are produced during the visit. Cinematic influence, therefore, should not be understood only through an exposure–image–intention sequence; it also operates through a post-arrival process of comparison, verification, revision, and extension.

The second finding concerns the transformation of mediated seeing into embodied place experience. Tourist-gaze research has long argued that tourists do not encounter destinations neutrally because ways of seeing are structured by media representations, cultural signs, and prior expectations. More recent ethnographic work further emphasizes that the tourist gaze should be examined through situated practices and social interaction rather than treated as detached visual consumption (Apchain, 2025). The Zhangjiajie findings support this development but also specify how this transformation occurs. Participants did not merely recognize *Avatar*-related scenery. They moved through viewpoints, experienced the scale and atmosphere of the landscape, framed photographs, participated in check-in practices, listened to guide narratives, and discussed the relationship between the cinematic world and the physical destination. These embodied and social practices gradually changed the meaning of Zhangjiajie from a recognizable media image into an experienced place. This is consistent with research showing that sensory and embodied encounters can generate emotional resonance and strengthen place identity (Zhang et al., 2024), as well as research conceptualizing destination attachment as a process involving bodily, perceptual, emotional, and spatial mechanisms across the travel experience (Qu & Dong, 2026). The contribution of the present findings lies in explaining the transition mechanism: media-shaped perception becomes meaningful place experience when cinematic recognition is repeatedly reworked through movement, sensation, comparison, interpretation, and interaction.

A third finding is that tourist engagement emerged as an uneven and processual outcome, rather than as an automatic response to cinematic exposure. Previous engagement research has generally examined the antecedents and consequences of engagement, linking it with experience, emotion, satisfaction, behavioral intention, loyalty, and related tourism outcomes (Rasul et al., 2025). Film tourism studies have also shown that engagement can contribute to memorable tourism experiences and post-visit subjective well-being (Yen et al., 2025). The present study does not contradict these relationships, but it addresses a different question: how engagement actually develops during the tourism experience. The findings indicate that engagement intensified when cinematic recognition became connected with reality comparison, authenticity assessment, emotional resonance, social interpretation, and cultural meaning-making. This helps explain why equal levels of film awareness did not produce equal levels of engagement. For some participants, *Avatar* provided only a loose frame for viewing the landscape; for others, cinematic recognition generated stronger emotional involvement and fan-like practices. Engagement in film tourism should therefore be treated as differentiated and cumulative. Screen exposure may initiate attention, but deeper engagement depends on what tourists are able to do cognitively, emotionally, socially, and culturally with that cinematic association during the visit.

The fourth finding concerns authenticity. Participants did not generally judge Zhangjiajie according to whether the physical landscape reproduced a cinematic image exactly. Instead, authenticity was constructed relationally through the perceived coherence between cinematic imagination and lived encounter. This finding is broadly consistent with research showing that staged and existential forms of authenticity can coexist at film

tourism destinations (Cui & Song, 2024), and with studies demonstrating that perceived authenticity is shaped by cultural, social, sensory, and functional aspects of the tourism experience-scape rather than physical fidelity alone (Chen et al., 2024). It also resonates with Zhangjiajie-specific research emphasizing that the association among *Avatar*, Pandora, and Zhangjiajie is produced through interactions among cinematic signs, material landscapes, destination discourse, and tourist practices (Hao et al., 2024). However, the present study further demonstrates that difference itself may become productive. When the lived landscape exceeded, complicated, or differed from cinematic expectations, participants did not necessarily experience disappointment. Such differences could stimulate comparison, emotional surprise, reinterpretation, and personal meaning-making. Authenticity in this context is therefore not the successful reproduction of fiction in material form; it is the experiential credibility of the relationship tourists construct between media representation and encountered place.

Finally, the findings suggest that film tourism engagement cannot be reduced to fandom. Popular-culture tourism research increasingly recognizes considerable diversity across media forms, fan communities, tourist practices, and destination place-making processes (Lexhagen et al., 2023). Research on highly fan-oriented destinations has shown that affective identification with fictional worlds, connections between fiction and history, and desires for collective identity can motivate travel and participation (Gómez-Morales et al., 2024), while fan-pilgrimage places may be co-produced by visitors, residents, destination organizations, and other stakeholders (Thelen et al., 2025). Zhangjiajie presents a different configuration. Although fan attachment was evident among some participants, the sample also included casual viewers and tourists whose awareness of *Avatar* came from destination promotion, travel platforms, or social media rather than strong fan identity. Moreover, for many participants, the film was not the primary reason for visiting. The findings therefore identify Zhangjiajie as a media-aware natural landscape destination, where cinematic symbolism interacts with scenery, photography, leisure, social interpretation, and cultural meaning. This extends film tourism research beyond strong fandom settings and suggests that cinematic-place negotiation is particularly useful for understanding destinations in which media associations are influential but coexist with independent natural, cultural, and recreational attractions.

Taken together, these findings show that the significance of cinema in tourism lies not only in its capacity to attract visitors or shape destination image before travel. Its continuing influence depends on how tourists negotiate cinematic representations through material encounters, embodied practices, authenticity judgments, emotions, social interpretation, and cultural meaning-making. Cinematic-place negotiation therefore explains the intermediate process through which a destination initially encountered as a screened image can become an emotionally and culturally meaningful lived place.

## 5.2. Theoretical Implications

This study makes three theoretical contributions to film tourism research.

First, it repositions cinematic representation within the causal architecture of film tourism experience. Much of the existing literature treats cinematic exposure primarily as an antecedent that influences destination awareness, destination image, travel motivation, and behavioral intention before travel (Crespo-Almendros et al., 2025; Northey et al., 2025). Even more recent attempts to connect audiovisual narratives, audience reception, and tourism effects continue to begin analytically from the effects of mediated representation on audiences (Nieto-Ferrando et al., 2024). The results suggest that this formulation is incomplete because cinematic representations do not cease to matter once destination choice has been made. They remain available during the visit as interpretive resources against

which tourists perceive, compare, question, confirm, revise, and extend the meaning of the encountered landscape.

The theoretical significance of cinematic-place negotiation therefore lies not simply in extending film tourism research from the pre-visit stage to the on-site stage. More importantly, it changes the conceptual status of cinematic representation. Rather than treating screen imagery as a one-directional stimulus whose principal theoretical function is to produce attitudes or intentions, this study conceptualizes it as a recursive interpretive resource whose meaning can be modified through material encounter. The relationship between film and destination is therefore not fixed at the moment of media exposure. It is reconstructed through interaction between remembered representations, bodily experience, spatial perception, social interpretation, and local cultural narratives. This shifts the explanatory logic of film tourism research from a relatively linear model of media effects toward a recursive model in which mediated representation shapes experience while experience simultaneously reinterprets mediated representation. Cinematic-place negotiation thus provides a mechanism for theorizing how media-induced destination meaning remains open to modification after arrival.

Second, the study identifies cinematic-place negotiation as a meso-level mechanism between mediated perception and place-based engagement. Existing research on the tourist gaze explains how tourists' ways of seeing are socially and culturally organized, while recent work increasingly situates such looking within concrete practices and interactions (Aphchain, 2025). Research on embodied tourism shows how sensory encounters contribute to emotional resonance and place identity (Zhang et al., 2024), whereas engagement research has tended to examine relationships between engagement and outcomes such as memorable tourism experience and post-travel well-being (Yen et al., 2025). These studies illuminate different parts of the tourism experience, but the theoretical transition from media-shaped perception to emotionally and culturally grounded engagement remains insufficiently specified.

This study addresses this gap by theorizing negotiation as the process through which mediated ways of seeing are converted into situated forms of involvement. In this formulation, embodied movement, photography, scene recognition, guided interpretation, social interaction, and film–reality comparison are not merely tourism activities occurring alongside engagement. They constitute the interpretive practices through which engagement is produced. Similarly, authenticity assessment, emotional connection, and cultural interpretation are not independent outcomes added after cinematic recognition; they are mechanisms through which tourists reorganize the relationship between representation and place. The contribution, therefore, is not simply to combine tourist gaze, place attachment, and engagement within one framework, but is to specify the missing process that connects them. Cinematic-place negotiation explains how a socially mediated gaze becomes situated interpretation, how situated interpretation becomes emotional and cultural involvement, and how repeated interpretive work contributes to the transformation of an externally represented destination into a personally meaningful place.

Third, the study decouples film tourism engagement from two assumptions that remain influential in the literature: representational fidelity and strong fandom. Authenticity research in film tourism settings has already demonstrated that staged and existential authenticity can coexist within the same experience (Cui & Song, 2024). Zhangjiajie-specific research likewise shows that the relationship among *Avatar*-related imagery, material landscape, destination discourse, and tourist practices is socially and symbolically constructed rather than given (Hao et al., 2024). At the same time, popular-culture tourism research has expanded the understanding of fandom by emphasizing differentiated identities, practices, media relationships, and place-making processes (Lexhagen et al., 2023).

This study advances these arguments by showing that meaningful film tourism engagement does not require either exact correspondence between screen representation and material place or a strong fan identity. Authenticity emerged relationally from whether tourists could construct a convincing and meaningful connection between cinematic imagination and lived encounter. Perceived differences between representation and reality were therefore not necessarily failures of authenticity; under some conditions, they became interpretive resources that generated surprise, comparison, emotional intensification, and new cultural meanings. In parallel, cinematic-place negotiation was not only evident among strongly attached fans but also among casual viewers and broader media-aware tourists for whom cinematic association formed only one part of the destination experience.

This finding introduces media-aware natural landscape destinations as a theoretically important context that differs from highly themed attractions and organized fan-pilgrimage sites. In such destinations, cinematic meanings coexist with scenic appreciation, leisure, photography, cultural interpretation, and other travel motivations. Film tourism theory therefore needs to account for forms of engagement in which media awareness is influential without being motivationally dominant. By distinguishing cinematic awareness from strong fandom, and relational authenticity from representational similarity, the study broadens the scope of film tourism theory to explain how cinematic meanings operate in hybrid destinations where media symbolism is layered onto independently significant natural and cultural landscapes.

### 5.3. Practical Implications

Destination managers should design screen-to-site guided routes that connect film-related images, actual viewpoints, walking paths, and local interpretation. Film-scene comparison panels should be placed at key viewpoints to help visitors compare mediated images with actual landscapes and understand how differences between screen representation and lived reality can enrich authenticity.

Tour guides and interpreters should be trained to explain cinematic-place negotiation rather than simply repeat promotional claims. Guided interpretation should help visitors understand the relationship between *Avatar*-related visual imagination, Zhangjiajie's sandstone pillar landscape, geological formation, local culture, and embodied viewing experience.

Marketing teams should move beyond simple *Avatar*-related fame. Promotional materials should invite visitors to compare, reinterpret, and personalize the relationship between screen images and lived experience. This can reduce unrealistic expectations while encouraging deeper engagement.

Local cultural institutions should connect cinematic recognition with ecology, geomorphology, history, and regional culture. This can prevent Zhangjiajie from being reduced to a single film reference and support more sustainable cultural place-making.

Digital platforms can encourage visitors to share film-reality comparison, reflective photography, scene recreation, and post-visit narratives. Such practices can extend cinematic-place negotiation beyond the visit and support participatory destination storytelling.

### 5.4. Limitations and Future Research

This research has several limitations. The sample size was 30 and was recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, so it does not provide statistical representativeness. The study also used grounded theory-informed coding procedures rather than strict classical theoretical sampling. Repeat visitors accounted for 22 participants, while first-time visitors accounted for eight participants. This imbalance may have strengthened themes of comparison, reinterpretation, and changing place meaning. In addition, variables such as fandom status, origin/residence, and overnight/day-trip status were treated as qualitative

profile categories rather than standardized survey measures, limiting fine-grained comparison among visitor subgroups. Some expanded profile variables, including cinematic involvement and media-awareness source, were summarized from interview narratives and coding records rather than collected through a standardized demographic questionnaire. Therefore, subgroup comparisons should be treated as interpretive qualitative comparisons rather than statistically definitive comparisons.

Zhangjiajie is a natural landscape film-related destination and differs from studio-based attractions, urban filming locations, heritage towns, and strong fandom destinations. The interview data are also retrospective, so they cannot record moment-by-moment changes in experience during the actual visit. Because the data were based on self-reported retrospective interviews, participants may have reconstructed their experiences through memory, post-visit reflection, and socially available narratives about Zhangjiajie and *Avatar*-related imagery.

The study did not systematically analyze official destination marketing materials or visitor-generated social media content, although these materials may shape cinematic-place negotiation before, during, and after the visit. Future research should compare natural landscape destinations, urban filming locations, studio-based attractions, heritage towns, and long-running television series destinations. It should also compare first-time visitors and repeat visitors, strong fans, casual viewers, and media-aware tourists in the future. In situ observation, travel diaries, visual elicitation, mobile methods, and visitor-generated content could capture experience as it unfolds, while mixed-methods or survey designs could test the cinematic-place negotiation framework across broader samples.

## 6. Conclusions

This study examined how Zhangjiajie film tourists move from screened place to lived place. The findings show that cinematic-place negotiation is the core mechanism through which tourists compare, verify, revise, and extend cinematic representations during embodied travel. Cinematic-place negotiation is an interpretive process through which tourists connect cinematic representations with lived, embodied, and culturally situated experiences. Engagement is not produced automatically by film exposure; it forms through embodied encounter, authenticity assessment, emotion, social interaction, and cultural place-making. The study therefore contributes a process-based and context-sensitive explanation of film tourism engagement. It explains how screened destinations become lived places while also recognizing that Zhangjiajie is a specific natural landscape destination rather than a universal model for all film tourists.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, S.C. and S.J.; methodology, S.C. and S.J.; software, S.C.; validation, S.J. and N.P.; formal analysis, S.C.; investigation, S.C.; resources, S.J. and N.P.; data curation, S.C.; writing—original draft preparation, S.C.; writing—review and editing, S.J. and N.P.; visualization, S.C.; supervision, S.J. and N.P.; project administration, S.J.; funding acquisition, S.J. and N.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research, Sirindhorn College of Public Health, Yala (protocol code SCPHYLIRB-2569/469; approval date: 28 February 2026).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A. Supplementary Conceptual and Coding Tables

**Table A1.** Conceptual distinctions between cinematic-place negotiation and related concepts.

| Concept                     | Main Focus                                                  | Limitation                                                    | How Cinematic-Place Negotiation Differs                               |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Destination image           | Pre-visit perception and travel intention                   | Does not fully explain on-site reinterpretation               | Explains how cinematic images are revised during lived experience     |
| Tourist gaze                | Media-shaped ways of seeing                                 | Does not fully explain interaction and meaning reconstruction | Explains how gaze becomes comparison, verification, and extension     |
| Authenticity negotiation    | Perceived realness                                          | Not always film-specific                                      | Focuses on the relation between film representation and lived reality |
| Place-making                | Construction of place meaning                               | Too broad                                                     | Explains how cinematic symbols enter place meaning                    |
| Fandom/media pilgrimage     | Fan travel, route planning, and sharing                     | Does not apply equally to all visitors                        | Distinguishes hardcore fans from media-aware tourists                 |
| Cinematic-place negotiation | Comparing, verifying, revising, and extending screen images | Core concept of this study                                    | Explains the transition from screened place to lived place            |

**Table A2.** Coding progression from initial codes to the cinematic-place negotiation framework.

| Representative Evidence                   | Initial Code                           | Axial Category          | Aggregate Dimension      | Model Level |
|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------|
| P12 media portrayals made scenery surreal | Media-shaped expectation               | Cinematic imagination   | Pre-visit mediated frame | Level 1     |
| P3 cinematic elements were more vivid     | Iconic recognition                     | Embodied confirmation   | On-site encounter        | Level 2     |
| P19 real-life sense of wonder             | Lived landscape exceeding screen image | Film–reality comparison | Interpretive negotiation | Level 3     |
| P6 deep connection to film world          | Emotional cinematic connection         | Emotional integration   | Higher-order mechanism   | Level 4     |
| P30 cultural heritage beyond cinema       | Cultural deepening                     | Cultural place-making   | Engagement outcome       | Level 5     |

Note: The table illustrates the analytical progression rather than the frequency or statistical importance of individual codes.

**Table A3.** Descriptive distribution of themes across participants.

| Theme/Category                                  | Participants | First-Time/<br>Repeat | Representative Evidence                                           |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Media-shaped expectation                        | 24/30        | 6/18                  | P12 media portrayals made scenery surreal                         |
| <i>Avatar</i> /Hallelujah Mountains recognition | 21/30        | 7/14                  | P3 cinematic elements were more vivid                             |
| Film–reality comparison                         | 19/30        | 5/14                  | P19 real life gave a stronger sense of wonder                     |
| Photography/check-in practices                  | 17/30        | 5/12                  | Photo-taking and viewpoint framing reported across interviews     |
| Guided or themed activities                     | 12/30        | 2/10                  | P21 film-themed tours connected the visit with cinematic identity |
| Emotional connection                            | 16/30        | 4/12                  | P6 reported a deep connection to the film world                   |

Table A3. Cont.

| Theme/Category                    | Participants | First-Time/<br>Repeat | Representative Evidence                                                                      |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Authenticity judgment             | 14/30        | 3/11                  | Participants evaluated whether the lived place confirmed or exceeded screen imagery          |
| Cultural/local meaning            | 13/30        | 3/10                  | P30 described cultural heritage beyond cinematic association                                 |
| Fandom or fan-like practices      | 9/30         | 4/5                   | Strong fans and casual fans planned check-ins or recognized iconic symbols                   |
| Film not being primary motivation | 11/30        | 2/9                   | Several participants treated film awareness as one frame among leisure, scenery, and culture |

Note: Participant counts indicate the descriptive coverage of each theme within the interview dataset. They should not be interpreted as measures of statistical prevalence or theoretical importance.

## Appendix B. Expanded Participant Characteristics

The following profile variables summarize participants' screening responses and interview narratives. They are intended to provide contextual information for qualitative interpretation, not to serve as statistically standardized demographic measures.

Table A4. Expanded participant profile: residence, trip type, and motivation.

| ID  | Origin/Residence           | Local/Non-Local  | Trip Type | Main Motivation                                        |
|-----|----------------------------|------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| P1  | Hunan/provincial           | Local/provincial | Overnight | Scenery revisit and <i>Avatar</i> -related recognition |
| P2  | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Leisure travel and landscape photography               |
| P3  | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Iconic <i>Avatar</i> landscape recognition             |
| P4  | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Scenic hiking and film-scene comparison                |
| P5  | Zhangjiajie/Hunan local    | Local            | Day trip  | Family leisure and local scenic pride                  |
| P6  | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Emotional connection with the film world               |
| P7  | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Feeling part of a cinematic landscape                  |
| P8  | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Photography and comparison with media images           |
| P9  | Hunan/provincial           | Local/provincial | Day trip  | Repeat leisure and guide narrative                     |
| P10 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | <i>Avatar</i> check-in and youth travel                |
| P11 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Nature escape and media memory                         |
| P12 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Surreal media-shaped landscape expectation             |
| P13 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Repeat sightseeing and cultural storytelling           |
| P14 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Scenery enhanced by film-related stories               |
| P15 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Photography and landmark comparison                    |
| P16 | Zhangjiajie/Hunan local    | Local            | Day trip  | Local leisure and film branding                        |
| P17 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Cultural interpretation and scenic experience          |
| P18 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Day trip  | Youth hiking and visual check-in                       |
| P19 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Wonder of the real landscape                           |
| P20 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Leisure sightseeing with film awareness                |
| P21 | Hunan/provincial           | Local/provincial | Day trip  | Film-themed tour and repeat leisure                    |
| P22 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Family trip and iconic scenery                         |
| P23 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Cultural heritage and media symbolism                  |
| P24 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Nature photography and <i>Avatar</i> reference         |
| P25 | Hunan/provincial           | Local/provincial | Day trip  | Repeat leisure and visual check-in                     |
| P26 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | <i>Avatar</i> check-in with friends                    |
| P27 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Scenic hiking and film–reality comparison              |
| P28 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Guided interpretation and cultural experience          |
| P29 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Family sightseeing and destination fame                |
| P30 | Non-local domestic visitor | Non-local        | Overnight | Cultural heritage beyond cinema                        |

Cinematic involvement was coded analytically from participants' descriptions of *Avatar*-related awareness, media exposure, travel motivation, check-in practices, and film–reality comparison. The categories distinguish strong fans, casual fans/viewers, media-aware tourists, and non-fan but film-aware visitors.

**Table A5.** Expanded participant profile: media awareness and cinematic involvement.

| ID  | Film/Media Awareness Source                    | Fan Status/Cinematic Involvement          | Reasons                                                                                  |
|-----|------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| P1  | Travel platform and <i>Avatar</i> clips        | Casual viewer; repeat media-aware visitor | Visited Zhangjiajie and compared <i>Avatar</i> -related scenery with lived landscape     |
| P2  | Short-video platforms and social media         | Media-aware tourist                       | Visited after encountering cinematic and social-media images of Zhangjiajie              |
| P3  | <i>Avatar</i> clips and online film discussion | Strong <i>Avatar</i> -related fan         | Connected on-site scenery with remembered cinematic elements                             |
| P4  | Destination promotion and travel blogs         | Casual viewer; repeat visitor             | Discussed the difference between promoted film imagery and actual viewpoints             |
| P5  | Local tourism promotion                        | Non-fan but film-aware                    | Interpreted local landscape through its public film tourism identity                     |
| P6  | <i>Avatar</i> and online fan communities       | Strong fan                                | Reported a deep connection between the lived place and the film world                    |
| P7  | <i>Avatar</i> imagery and travel vlogs         | Casual fan                                | Described embodied presence in an iconic film-associated landscape                       |
| P8  | Short videos and travel-platform images        | Casual viewer                             | Used photographs and comparison to evaluate cinematic expectation                        |
| P9  | Local promotion and guide interpretation       | Media-aware repeat visitor                | Linked repeat visits with guide narratives about the destination's cinematic identity    |
| P10 | Social media and <i>Avatar</i> clips           | Casual fan                                | Visited with explicit attention to <i>Avatar</i> -related symbols and check-in practices |
| P11 | Travel platform recommendations                | Casual viewer                             | Recognized the destination through media images before evaluating the landscape on site  |
| P12 | Online visual media and destination videos     | Media-aware tourist                       | Explained how media portrayals made the landscape feel surreal                           |
| P13 | Friends and travel forums                      | Casual viewer; repeat visitor             | Used prior visits and media stories to reinterpret Zhangjiajie                           |
| P14 | Destination advertising and film stories       | Casual viewer                             | Connected stories about filming with anticipatory place meaning                          |
| P15 | Short-video platforms                          | Media-aware photographer                  | Framed the visit through cinematic viewpoints and photographic comparison                |
| P16 | Local tourism promotion                        | Non-fan but film-aware                    | Discussed how local scenery was rebranded through media and film associations            |
| P17 | Travel platform and destination guide          | Media-aware tourist                       | Related cinematic recognition to cultural and place interpretation                       |
| P18 | Short-video platforms                          | Casual fan                                | Visited film-associated viewpoints and described check-in practices                      |
| P19 | Social media and travel guides                 | Casual viewer                             | Compared the lived landscape with screen-based expectation and found it stronger         |
| P20 | Destination advertising                        | Media-aware tourist                       | Understood Zhangjiajie as both scenic landscape and film-related destination             |

Table A5. Cont.

| ID  | Film/Media Awareness Source                       | Fan Status/Cinematic Involvement     | Reasons                                                                         |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| P21 | Guide and film-themed tour                        | Casual fan                           | Used guided interpretation to connect the visit with cinematic identity         |
| P22 | Friends and user-generated travel content         | Media-aware tourist                  | Recognized iconic scenery through shared media and travel stories               |
| P23 | Travel platform and guide explanation             | Strongly engaged media-aware tourist | Linked film symbolism with deeper cultural interpretation                       |
| P24 | Short-video platforms                             | Casual viewer                        | Used <i>Avatar</i> references to organize on-site photographic attention        |
| P25 | Local tourism promotion                           | Non-fan but film-aware               | Visited repeatedly while recognizing the destination's film tourism label       |
| P26 | Social media and <i>Avatar</i> clips              | Casual fan                           | Connected peer travel plans with <i>Avatar</i> -related destination recognition |
| P27 | Travel platform images                            | Media-aware repeat visitor           | Compared remembered media images with embodied scenic movement                  |
| P28 | Travel agency and guide interpretation            | Casual viewer                        | Used guide narratives to interpret the cinematic landscape                      |
| P29 | Destination advertising and online travel content | Media-aware tourist                  | Associated destination fame with film-related visual identity                   |
| P30 | Guide and local cultural interpretation           | Media-aware cultural tourist         | Extended cinematic recognition toward local cultural place meaning              |

### Appendix C. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

| Number | Semi-Structured Interview Questions                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Q1     | What motivated you to visit Zhangjiajie as a film tourism destination? Could you describe any internal or external factors that influenced your decision?                               |
| Q2     | How have films, media portrayals, or cinematic imagery shaped your expectations of Zhangjiajie before your trip?                                                                        |
| Q3     | Can you describe the specific aspects of Zhangjiajie that felt connected to the films you have seen? How did these elements influence your anticipation or emotional response?          |
| Q4     | During your visit, what experiences did you find most immersive, memorable, or meaningful? Why did these moments stand out to you?                                                      |
| Q5     | How did the natural scenery, atmosphere, and cultural features of Zhangjiajie contribute to your overall experience?                                                                    |
| Q6     | What were your perceptions or mental images of Zhangjiajie during your visit? How did these compare with your pre-trip expectations shaped by film content?                             |
| Q7     | In what ways did your visit make you feel more involved or engaged with the destination? Can you describe moments when you felt strongly connected, attentive, or emotionally absorbed? |
| Q8     | Did any symbolic, aesthetic, or narrative elements of Zhangjiajie enhance your sense of engagement during the trip? If so, how?                                                         |
| Q9     | How did interactions with film-related locations, viewpoints, or storytelling features influence your engagement with the destination?                                                  |

|     |                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Q10 | Were there any aspects of the experience that strengthened or weakened your connection with Zhangjiajie during the visit? Please explain.                             |
| Q11 | From your perspective, what characteristics make Zhangjiajie a compelling or distinctive film tourism destination?                                                    |
| Q12 | Is there anything else about your motivations, experiences, or perceptions of Zhangjiajie that you feel contributed to your level of engagement with the destination? |

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