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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Community perceptions of home represented on screen: implications for film-induced tourism

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores how local communities in Fiji perceive the portrayal of their home in films. Yet little is known how local communities collectively construct and interpret the cinematic representations of their homeland. This is important given the need for local community support for tourism. Through in-depth interviews with 22 Fijian residents, and drawing on social representation theory, the study reveals that locals use anchoring to interpret film depictions through their existing cultural values and experiences. While residents take pride in scenic locations featured in films, they also express disappointment, confusion, and concern over the lack of cultural authenticity and the perpetuation of stereotypes. These social representations shape how locals engage with film-induced tourism and influence their relationships with visiting film-induced tourists. The findings highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity and collaboration with local experts in film production to ensure an accurate and respectful portrayal that aligns with the host community's collective identity and shared understanding of their land and way of life.

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## Introduction

There has been a large amount of research on film-induced tourism conducted in the past 30 years (Irimias, 2015). Some scholars argue that film-induced tourism is an esoteric topic, where anecdotes are used to inflate the importance of film-induced tourism destinations (Heitmann, 2010). Other scholars praise the power of the screen to drive more tourists to a destination (Connell, 2005; Macionis & O'Connor, 2011). Several review papers on film-induced tourism highlight the cross-disciplinary nature of the topic (Connell, 2012), and the sustained economic contributions to destinations (Croy, 2011). Film-induced tourism research tends to focus on managing, marketing, perceptions and destination image, often using empirical case studies to highlight

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both the success and failure of films to induce tourism (Connell, 2012, 2022). Much of the previous film-induced tourism research has concentrated on the impact from the tourists' perspective, while the local community is not often considered (Connell, 2012; Thelen et al., 2020). This research examines how local residents perceive their home and their culture as represented in films and TV series set in their homeland. There has been lack of research into how residents react to how their home is portrayed in films (Kim & Park, 2023).

More recently, scholars have also started to look at the impacts of film-induced tourism on the local communities, like Ubud in Bali, Indonesia, associated with the Hollywood film adaptation of *Eat Pray Love* (Kim & Park, 2024), and the television drama series *Downton Abbey*, set around Highclere Castle, a heritage attraction located in the UK (Liu & Pratt, 2019). Other research examining the impacts of film-induced tourism on the local communities are the Japan TV series *Mare*, based in the Ishikawa Prefecture (Thelen et al., 2020), and the Twilight effect in Forks, Washington State, USA (Wright et al., 2023). *Lord of the Rings* films, set in New Zealand, have been synonymous with film-induced tourism and have inspired many tourism studies, more than any other single production (Buchmann, 2010; Li et al., 2017; Zhang & Ryan, 2022). But other sites in Oceania, which are well-known for other forms of tourism, also have the scenery, landscape and culture to stimulate film-induced tourism, for example, *Cast Away* (2000) and the *Survivor* reality TV series (Weaver-Hightower, 2006).

Just as residents' support of tourism is important in other forms of tourism (Pratt et al., 2023; Shah et al., 2023), Croy et al. (2018) note the importance of understanding the host community's awareness of film-induced tourism, its impacts, and how their home; the film locations, are perceived. They also suggest increasing communication between the Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) and the film industry to promote a coherent destination image (Croy et al., 2018).

Subsequently, the objective of this research is to assess how the local community perceives the portrayal of their home through films. To address this objective, a qualitative research approach is used *via* in-depth interviews with local residents living near film locations. We use social representation theory through which to understand these impacts and perceptions.

## Tourism in Fiji

Over the last two decades, tourism has been the main driver of economic growth in South Pacific countries, including Fiji. Conventionally, its main economic impact encompasses the provision of foreign exchange, employment and contributing to the gross domestic product (Harrison & Prasad, 2013). Tourism currently accounts for about 40% of the country's Gross Domestic Product and employs 23% of Fiji's labour force. In 2024 Fiji welcomed 982,938 visitors (Tourism Fiji, 2025).

Most visitors were holiday-goers (79%), with 8% visiting friends or relatives, and 4% visiting for businesses and conferences. While Fiji's main tourism attractions are primarily sun, sand and sea-based attractions, the destination is actively engaged in expanding lucrative segments like film-induced tourism, sports tourism, adventure tourism and medical tourism to enhance its tourism appeal and seasonality challenges (Tourism Fiji, 2025).

Fiji consists of 330 islands, of which 100 are inhabited. Fiji is often depicted as a tropical paradise (Harrison & Pratt, 2013) and has been the film location for several world-famous motion pictures and TV series, therefore serves as an ideal place to conduct research on film-induced tourism impacts and perceptions. Nearly 10 years ago there were plans to develop Fiji into the film hub of the South Pacific, *Bulawood*, that would attract moviemakers to Fiji (Starosielski, 2016), and now Film Fiji, the statutory body tasked with developing Fiji's film industry, is actively advertising their islands as a perfect film set with stunning vistas, skilled local film crew and a 20% tax rebate. Film Fiji has recognized the importance of film tourism to its economy and is actively strengthening its film industry skills base by introducing programs like "Fiji Producers Accelerator" and "Fiji Script Development" program which helps Fijians upskill in the film industry (Acraman, 2024). The creation of the Film Fiji Audio Visual Lab is also part of Film Fiji's continued efforts to enhance the implementation of new audio-visual projects which will strengthen the contribution of the film industry to Fiji's economy.

The earliest known film to be shot in Fiji started with *Mr. Robinson Crusoe* (1932) (Atkin, 2014) but more recent films include *Cast Away* (2000), *Fantasy Island* (2020) and numerous reality TV shows including *Survivor*, *The Bachelorette*, and *Love Island* (IMDB, 2024). Despite the long history of being a location of motion pictures, little research has been conducted in Fiji in the field of film-induced tourism. This research contributes to filling this gap.

## Film-induced tourism

In the past decade, a lot has been written about film-induced tourism. Important reviews include Connell (2012) and Beeton (2016). Nakayama (2021) provides another recent review on film-induced tourism studies on Asia and Oshriyeh and Capriello (2022) who examine film-induced tourism from a consumer perspective. We do not aim to repeat their work but draw on film-induced tourism literature that focuses on residents' perceptions of the phenomena. We then expound on social representation theory and demonstrate how tourism and film-induced tourism, in particular, influence the local community and affects their place image.

Connell (2012) posits that film tourism is a niche activity with only a few destinations specializing in this area. Yet the topic is worth investigating due the interest from both academia and practitioners. Two of the main forms of film-induced tourism are business tourism during the production of films or television shows, and leisure tourism when film fans visit the locations where the films or television shows were filmed (Lundberg et al., 2018). These visits could occur during production and/or postproduction (Croy, 2011; Kim & Park, 2023). Few films become so iconic to initiate film-induced tourism visits. One such iconic film is *The Beach* that enticed so many visitors to the film location of Maya Beach that Thai authorities closed the beach from 2018 to 2022 due to environmental damage (The Guardian, 2022). City of Forks experienced problems due to the lack of tourists after interest in the *Twilight saga* films subsided (Wright et al., 2023) and locals living near set of Japan TV series *Mare* were upset with the behavior of the actors (Thelen et al., 2020). In the large majority of cases, films affect the destination image (Croy & Walker, 2004). According to Croy

(2011), film-induced tourism provides a sustained economic contribution to destinations only where there is very active destination management but specific economic impacts attributable to film-induced tourism are difficult to identify and separate out of other marketing and promotional stimuli (Pratt, 2015).

Kim et al. (2019) note that film-induced tourism can be sustainable by not requiring large investments to build specific tourism attractions, because the image-based familiarity is already present. Croy (2011) emphasizes the characteristics of films that create opportunities for destinations: the audience chooses to watch a film; the film can have an engaging storyline and celebrate its actors; it is distributed internationally through numerous channels and can generate publicity by being widely discussed; and the film can be desirable, credible, and memorable. There can also be a time delay between when a person watches a film and when they visit the destination depicted in it (Croy, 2011). Conversely, some films are not frequently associated with specific destinations.

Regional policies need to be shaped towards film-induced tourism destinations, bringing together two important sectors (tourism and film & video production) in order for film-induced tourism to grow (Bertolini et al., 2022). Several places depicted on the screen are a mix of real places, film sets and digital creations, so the tourists might not be able to experience the landscapes seen in the film (Carl et al., 2007).

## Social representation theory

Social representation theory, developed by Moscovici, explores how individuals and groups collectively interpret their social world (Wagner, 2020). Social representations are shared understandings of things and events, forming the accepted beliefs that shape a society's attitudes (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008). Social representation theory centers on the manner in which individuals collectively construct their understanding of reality (Lee et al., 2022). These "representations" are shared systems of understanding, shaped by values, beliefs, and experiences within a specific context (Wassler & Talarico, 2021). They serve to delineate and structure reality while facilitating individuals' connection to their social and cultural environments (Pearce et al., 1996). When confronted with unfamiliar circumstances, individuals draw upon familiar ideas shared within their reference groups, relying on deeply ingrained perceptions and judgments. The manner in which we interpret and explain phenomena is contingent upon our familiarity with them and the social representations that inform our worldview (Moscovici, 1981). Social representation theory outlines the process by which people collectively construct their shared realities, whereby social groups establish shared meanings of phenomena by aligning them with familiar and comfortable interpretations (Mazzara, 2022).

Social representation theory comprises two key components: anchoring, which fixes the representation within familiar concepts, and objectification, which expresses the representation through concrete images, metaphors, and narratives (Gültekin, 2022). It posits that social groups forge shared interpretations of novel concepts by linking them to existing, familiar frameworks (Wagner, 2020). These representations are shaped by direct encounters, as well as by influences from mass media and interpersonal exchanges (Moscovici, 1981). Through the storytelling and representation of a location or people by film directors and producers, it becomes evident how residents use

anchoring to interpret these new portrayals through their existing cultural values and realities. Social representations are dynamic, constantly evolving through social interactions and exchanges. Films and television series can influence these social representations.

Within the realm of tourism, this theory sheds light on how destinations, cultures, and tourism experiences are collectively understood and valued (Pearce et al., 1996). Residents and tourists form distinct representations of a tourism destination, influenced by their backgrounds, motivations, and interactions. These representations shape expectations, behaviours, and ultimately, the success of tourism itself. Suess and Mody (2016) acknowledge that tourism is a social construction and has implications for destination planning and management, so they use social representation theory to examine the moderating effects of tourism diversification on residents' tax paying behaviour, implementing a structural equation model amongst Las Vegas residents.

Previous research in the tourism field has used social representation theory as a conceptual basis for categorizing local communities according to their varying levels of support for tourism. Monterrubio and Andriotis (2014) segmented a Mexican local community based on their attitudes towards Spring Breakers while Andriotis and Vaughan (2003), recognizing residents are not homogeneous in their support for tourism development, identified three clusters in their segmentation of urban residents in Crete. A multiple-mixed-method approach was implemented by Wassler et al. (2019) to investigate the representations underlying the formation of Vietnamese residents' attitudes towards Chinese inbound tourists. They found that attitude clusters are deeply interconnected with the identified social representations. Five distinct social representations were identified among the residents. Sarr et al. (2021) explore the social representations across 10 communities surrounding the Langue de Barbarie National Park in Senegal using survey and interview data. Specifically, they examine their representations towards tourism and the park as a basis to better inform their empowerment process.

Other scholars use a qualitative text-based approach to social representation theory in the tourism context (Wassler et al., 2019). This research has sort to understand how tourism stakeholders interpret various terms or concepts. Meliou and Maroudas (2010) analyse how hotel employees and postgraduate students on Chios Island, Greece, perceive the term "tourism development" using social representation theory. They find "tourism development" is represented by economic terms as well as cultural, moral and political dimensions. Elsewhere, Shaheer and Carr (2022) uncover 13 unruly tourist behaviours identified by residents, using social representation theory as a lens. While Yang et al. (2019) explore the cultural representation of the Shaolin Temple in China, finding that the temple is overwhelmingly represented through its commercialized "kungfu identity" rather than its religious nature in both on-site and off-site promotions by local destination marketing organizations. Nugroho et al. (2021) used social representation theory among visitors and managers of tourism villages in Indonesia concerning their different understanding of the tourism experience. Visitors sought "authenticity" while managers wanted to create new "artificial" tourism attractions.

Film-induced tourism adds another layer of complexity. Films can create powerful and lasting representations of a place, often romanticizing or stereotyping specific

aspects (Schiavone & Reijnders, 2022). These representations become part of the social discourse around the destination, influencing not only tourists' motivations but also how local residents perceive their own community and its significance (Cobeña et al., 2024). The iconic castle from a fantasy film, for example, might provide the "anchorage" of the representation, while the narrative of bravery and adventure becomes the "objectification." Examining local residents' perceptions of film tourism through the lens of social representation theory can reveal valuable insights. Residents may perceive the industry as an economic boon, a source of cultural appreciation, or a disruption to their daily lives (Kim & Park, 2023). Their representations are shaped by factors like economic dependence on tourism, the portrayal of their community in the film, and the level of involvement they have in the industry (Beeton, 2001). Understanding these complex representations can inform strategies for managing film-induced tourism sustainably and ensuring the well-being of both residents and visitors.

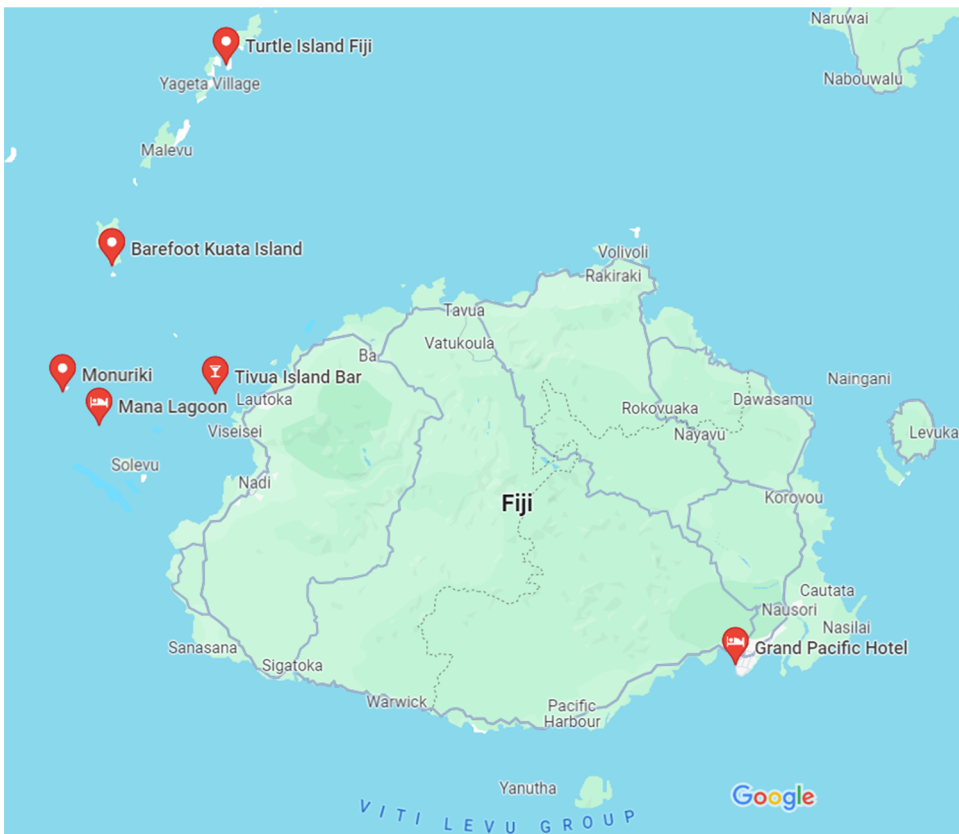
By analyzing social representations, we gain a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics of film-induced tourism and how it impacts local communities. By acknowledging the diverse perspectives and ensuring inclusive representation, there is potential to create a more positive and sustainable future for this growing phenomenon.

## Method

To address the research objectives, a qualitative research approach was used. Capturing qualitative data, research participants were able to openly discuss film tourism in Fiji, during their in-depth interviews, and its impact on local communities, reflecting on how Fiji was represented in film during in-depth interviews and the local communities' perception of Fiji's depiction in films. The best method for capturing in-depth knowledge is a qualitative one (Maxwell, 2004). Social representation theory also lends itself to qualitative research as social representation theory is concerned with the ways in which shared beliefs, ideas, and practices are formed and maintained within a society or group and qualitative research often aims to understand how people make sense of their experiences and the world around them. This alignment makes social representation theory a natural fit for qualitative approaches that seek to explore collective meanings and perceptions (Caillaud et al., 2019).

The research targeted a specific population: local residents of Fiji who reside near and were familiar with films set in Fiji (Figure 1). Employing purposive snowball sampling methodology (Bryman, 2016), which is particularly advantageous for selecting participants based on specific criteria (Bryman & Bell, 2011), the process commenced with the identifying villages and communities near previous film locations. The location selection was conducted via a Google Search, using terms "film locations in Fiji" OR "films made in Fiji" OR "movies made in Fiji") as well as suggestions from other researchers. Four films and their main filming locations were selected: *His Majesty O'Keefe* (1953) set in the Grand Pacific Hotel in Suva; *The Blue Lagoon* (1979) set in the Yasawa Islands; *Cast Away* (2000) set mainly on Monuriki Island in the Mamanucas and *Bula Quo!* (2013) set in Tivua Island in the Mamanucas. The rationale for selecting the interview site was that these communities were likely to be more affected by film-induced tourism. However, questions about these four specific films were not asked, as the researchers wanted residents to discuss film-induced tourism more





**Figure 1.** Selected Film Locations set in Fiji.

Source: Google Maps

broadly. During the study, participants identified other locations in Fiji that had appeared in international films or TV series.

Initially, three residents in each location were approached individually to take part in the study, through personal and business networks. The first author familiarized herself with local customs and followed the protocol of entering the village by presenting *sevusevu* (a traditional welcoming ceremony with the presenting and drinking of kava). This gave her an opportunity to build rapport with potential respondents. The first author approached participants explaining the purpose of the research and requesting their participation. Participants were informed that all responses will remain anonymous and participants can stop the interview at any point, decline to answer any question or ask the researcher to stop the audio recording. Interviews were audio recorded. The respondents' names were replaced with assigned codes (e.g. I1). Subsequently, participants were encouraged to refer fellow residents familiar with films set in Fiji. The goal was to include participants from diverse backgrounds. As a result, purposeful sampling was supplemented with snowball sampling techniques. Snowball sampling is deemed appropriate in qualitative research, especially when targeting a closely-knit population (Rao & Perry, 2003), a circumstance fitting within the context of this study, given the interconnectedness prevalent in the Fiji community.



A total of 27 potential participants were approached with five of those declining to take part in the research. The final sample size encompassed 22 in-depth interviews, a number determined by data saturation, which denotes the point where no novel information or themes emerge from the data (Constantinou et al., 2017). Interviews were conducted in November 2022. Interview length averaged 48 min and ranged between 23 min and 1 h 19 min. A discussion guide was developed to address the research objective based on Croy et al. (2018) and modified for this particular context. As seen in Table 1, there was a mix of participants by gender, age and occupation. Sixteen participants were males and six were females. Indigenous Fijians (*Itaukei*) comprised 17 out of the 22 participants with five participants being Indo-Fijian. Participants work in a range of different tourism-related and non-tourism-related jobs.

We utilized the content analysis method grounded in Clarke and Braun (2017) to uncover underlying concepts and themes within our data. Embracing an inductive approach, we identified themes after examining the data, rather than relying on predetermined categories. Field notes were taken at the time of the interview and interviews were fully transcribed at a later date for content analysis. The research team identified recurring themes and major categories from these summaries and transcripts. These initial insights informed the creation of a preliminary set of analytical codes. A draft codebook was developed and applied to the remaining set of transcripts. This draft codebook underwent iterative revisions until no new concepts emerged.

## Findings

Films depict a destination, its people, culture, and landscape in various ways. These portrayals may or may not align with the social representations that residents have of themselves and their homeland. Through in-depth interviews, we found that the

**Table 1.** Profile of participants.

#	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation	Resides near set of (film)
1	Female	Indo-Fijian	Education administrator	His Majesty O'Keefe
2	Female	Itaukei	Librarian	His Majesty O'Keefe
3	Male	Itaukei	Stock market officer	His Majesty O'Keefe
4	Female	Itaukei	Retired teacher	The Blue Lagoon
5	Female	Itaukei	Domestic duties	The Blue Lagoon
6	Male	Itaukei	Subsistence fisherman	The Blue Lagoon
7	Male	Itaukei	Home stay owner	The Blue Lagoon
8	Male	Itaukei	Construction worker	The Blue Lagoon
9	Female	Itaukei	Teacher	The Blue Lagoon
10	Male	Itaukei	Tourism activities business owner	The Blue Lagoon
11	Male	Itaukei	Subsistence farmer	The Blue Lagoon
12	Female	Indo-Fijian	Travel agent	Bula Quo!
13	Male	Itaukei	Resort manager	Cast Away
14	Male	Itaukei	Resort receptionist	Cast Away
15	Male	Itaukei	Tourism operator	Cast Away
16	Male	Itaukei	Resort worker	Cast Away
17	Male	Indo-Fijian	Resort worker: food and beverage	Cast Away
18	Male	Itaukei	Security officer	Cast Away
19	Male	Itaukei	DMO representative	Bula Quo!
20	Male	Itaukei	Cruise ship entertainer	Bula Quo!
21	Male	Indo-Fijian	Taxi driver	Bula Quo!
22	Male	Indo-Fijian	Retired accountant	Bula Quo!

local community in Fiji holds diverse perceptions of how their home is represented in films shot in the country. Analyzing these perceptions through the lens of social representation theory provides insight into how individuals construct shared meanings and understandings of their cultural identity and interactions with film tourists.

### ***Scenic locations versus people and culture***

First, residents stressed that films and TV series shot in Fiji primarily focus on the scenic locations rather than showcasing Fijian culture or people as main characters. Fiji provided a setting for these cinematic representations. The absence of Fijians as central figures in movies leads to a perception that films emphasize locations over cultural authenticity; the physical environment over the people; potentially influencing how outsiders view the country. As one participant noted:

I think the appeal in the Fiji films is the tropical environment. There is something appealing, something dramatic about the islands – the coconut trees...the tropical rainforests... the beach to the sea, to the immediately scary forest behind them, that adds to the Fiji movies, like *The Blue Lagoon*. (I4)

Residents note that often Fiji is portrayed as a generic paradise, filled with white sandy beaches and lush tropical forests:

But they don't mention that it is Fiji. It is like other location but it was filmed here. (I1)

In Fijian culture, indigenous communities function as complex, adaptive systems where social and ecological components are interconnected through traditional knowledge and customs, and daily lived practices (Movono et al., 2018). *Vanua* is an important indigenous Fijian concept, often translated as "land", though it includes many interconnected aspects. Physically, *vanua* refers not only to the land but also to the plants, animals, and people living on it, and it extends to the sea and coastal areas (Long, 2017). Culturally, *vanua* represents a way of life, encompassing beliefs, knowledge, and customs passed down through generations. This is reflected in the Fijian term *vakavanua*, meaning "the way of the Fijian people" or "matters of the land" (Ravuvu, 1983). For Fiji communities, the objectification process of social representation theory would show communities interacting with the nature environment, while the anchoring process would give meaning to this symbiotic relationship of environmental stewardship. The absence of people in the environment is perceived to be incongruent. Locals express a desire for films to showcase Fijian culture and people as central figures, filmmakers often focus on scenic locations. The absence of Fijians as main characters in movies may influence how outsiders perceive the country, highlighting the importance of cultural authenticity in film portrayals. Several residents felt there was a reinforcement of stereotypes and tropes of Fiji being a deserted tropical paradise, devoid of humans.

### ***Authenticity versus touristic hospitality***

Residents reported numerous interactions with tourists over the years, but few with those who could be described as 'film tourists' or 'film-induced tourists'. The community

perceives these visitors as curious and adventurous individuals eager to explore locations featured in movies, demonstrating a desire for authenticity and a connection to the film's settings. While Fiji's pristine environment is a significant attraction, residents believe the primary reason tourists visit is the local communities' renowned hospitality and welcoming nature, embodied in their "*bula spirit*" (*bula* in Fijian means life, health, hello, and welcome). The stereotype of warm friendly Fijian hosts to international tourists has been excessively reinforced to become a trope (Phillips et al., 2021).

Tourists visiting film sets are perceived as valuing authenticity and seeking to explore both the "real" Fiji and the locations featured in movies. This reflects a blend of curiosity about what took place in the film and what they are experiencing in real life. Interestingly, while tourists come to see the film sets, residents also wish to participate in the experience, even if they have not seen the film or do not remember specific scenes. Through this interaction, the film settings and storylines become part of the residents' collective narrative and modern culture. Locals begin to 'own' scenes from the films and share this collective storytelling with tourists. As one participant explained:

So, they (the tourist) would talk about a scene in the film 'oh, I remember this, it was right here, where the rubber duck came up'. I don't know what they are talking about. And they said 'oh, it was right here where the pilot got washed up' and you know all that stuff. And I am like 'yes, yes' and the next time someone comes, I say 'oh, you remember, this is where the pilot got washed up' and they are 'yes, yes, exactly'. So, it is even fun to participate and get yourself involved when you see their faces light up. It's amazing. (I20)

This process creates a unique cultural exchange where fictional narratives blend with real-life experiences, enriching both the tourist experience and the local community's cultural identity.

Several participants highlighted that Fiji serves as a model for how the world should function and how people should live, suggesting that tourists visit to experience this lifestyle first-hand. However, films often depict the destination as a deserted paradise. Interactions between locals and tourists are marked by mutual respect and a welcoming attitude. When local guides are familiar with film scenes, they enhance tourists' experiences by pointing out specific filming locations, fostering a deeper connection between visitors and the destination. This positive relationship between residents and film-induced tourists contributes to Fiji's appeal as a tourist destination, combining the appeal of cinematic landscapes with authentic cultural experiences. On the other hand, locals often feel obliged to revisit and 'reconstruct' film locations so that tourists see the places that were combined into the storyline from different locations. As noted by one resident:

Like a *Cast Away* movie, pretty much whole movie you see the cave and the big waves. But those things are not the real thing. They have been taken in different places around the area. Like with the big waves that is from Wakaya Beach, caves in some other place up in the Yasawas ... sometimes when we take tourists out there, they say 'oh, we want to see the cave, Wilson and...'. You know it is really hard. We just drive the boat around in the area. (I6)

### ***Sacred sites versus attractive filming locations***

As with many Pacific island communities (and noted above), Fijians have a special relationship with the land. Some locations in Fiji have significant cultural meaning and are deemed sacred (Pearce et al., 2021). Participants referred to these areas as *tabu* (taboo in Fijian). These areas may be forbidden, prohibited, or religiously sanctioned; only be visited at certain times of the year by certain individuals. This can create a dilemma when choosing film locations, if film producers want to use those sites in their production. One participant highlights this concern:

There is an island in this side. It is empty. When guests go there, it is written "No guests allowed there". ... There is one place, a tree, with stones around. That is our sacred place. Our grandfather always told us that it is our ancestor island. When you go to inside the island you can feel the power. But part of the *Survivor* series was filmed there. (I6)

I did not watch it but this what was told to me that when they did the film in Yasawas the crew was told not do film in this particular cave, because it is a sacred place. (I1)

Efforts are made to protect sacred sites from overuse due to filming activities, emphasizing the importance of respecting local customs and traditions.

The Eco Challenge [reality TV series] was, in certain areas, absolutely gorgeous, and people do want to go see. But villages own that land and there are rules around accessing [the land], asking for permission [to visit]. (I19)

Film crews are asked to consult with villages regarding sacred places before filming, ensuring that sensitive locations are not depicted in films to prevent unauthorized tourist access, for those tourists seeking to visit a well-known film location that they see on screen. Since local residents are familiar with the landscape, they recognise these locations in films:

...one side of this island where the movie was taken with Tom Hanks, you know. I have seen this movie and it is on one side of this island where the cliff is really steep to the ocean. ... (I10)

Another issue is the fragile natural environment that is often presented on screen, motivating tourists to visit after production:

We are not sure how stable the mountain rocks are with the constant landing of helicopters there and things might unsettle some of the structures up there. (I4)

### ***Authentic representations versus creative freedom***

Similarly, Fiji residents watch films and TV series set in their homeland. They, too, cognitively reconcile the portrayals of their environment, customs, and culture in films and TV series with their lived experiences and their individual and collective identities. In some films, these representations align with their collective identity and values. At other times, there will be a disconnect. One issue which causes discontent among residents was films depiction of nudity, for example, in *The Blue Lagoon* and the *Survivor* series. Watching films in Fiji is undertaken by the extended family. The

showing of naked bodies causes discomfort and is culturally inappropriate for this conservative community with strong Christian values.

Brook Shield (in *Blue Lagoon*) getting naked. ... It is still tabu (taboo) here... We are really superstitious, you know, a body attracts tevoro (demons). (I20)

Residents found amusement in the 'goofs' or creative liberties taken by filmmakers, particularly regarding the physical environment with which Fijians are familiar. Instead of causing dissatisfaction, these cinematic gaffes became a source of entertainment for the locals. The residents' deep knowledge of their surroundings allowed them to spot discrepancies between the film's portrayal and reality, creating a light-hearted aspect to their engagement with film productions. A resident laughed:

It is funny because watching *Cast Away* in Fiji in a cinema was hilarious, because everybody is laughing – green coconuts falling! Green coconuts don't fall. You have to climb up and get them. Anyone who lives on the island knows about coconut trees – because look at any coconut tree, green ones are still up there, and brown ones are on the ground. The brown ones are about to fall. Also, the wave on the reef that he could not get over – everybody knows you wait for the set to finish and then you go. Why he doesn't just walk over the reef at low tide? So, half of the movie everybody was laughing hysterically. That was not about consulting locals, that was basic biology. It wasn't necessarily confronting to Fijians, we were just like 'that does not make sense'. I think when they produced the movie, they were assuming that the audience would not know. (I19)

Residents suggested that production teams should incorporate local experts to ensure the authenticity of the locality, similar to the approach taken in the TV series *Mare* (Thelen et al., 2020). Incorporating local knowledge can help prevent disconnects between a film's portrayal and the actual community. When filmmakers fail to accurately represent a location, it can lead to disappointment among residents who feel their home is being misrepresented. This misrepresentation can create challenges for future film-induced tourism by perpetuating unwanted stereotypes and tropes. As a result, such inaccuracies may lead to a lack of local support for tourism development.

In conclusion, social representation theory provides a useful lens for understanding how the local community perceives the portrayal of Fiji through films, emphasizing cultural identity, economic impacts, interactions with film tourists, and the balance between showcasing scenic locations and preserving cultural authenticity. These perceptions shape how locals engage with film-induced tourism and influence their relationships with visitors exploring their homeland through cinematic lenses.

## Discussion and conclusions

Social representation theory places a strong emphasis on language and communication as vehicles for the formation and dissemination of social representations. As such, it makes a valuable lens through which to interpret a local communities' perception of film-induced tourism locations. With film directors and film producers' storytelling and representation of a location or people, it is clear residents use anchoring to help them interpret these new representations through their existing cultural values and realities. Social representations are dynamic, constantly evolving through social interactions and exchanges (Moscovici, 1981).

The local community perceive the portrayal of their home through film in various ways. These social representations of shared understandings of values, beliefs, and experiences are confirmed, changed and challenged through both tourism and film portrayal. For example, Fijians, especially indigenous Fijians, have a special relationship with the land and environment (Kerstetter & Bricker, 2009). The Fijian word for land, *vanua*, is an integral concept to Fijians that goes beyond just the physical land but has socio-cultural meanings that includes long-life cultural bonds and the concept of identity, as well as recognizing their dependence on their land and sea for survival (Kerstetter et al., 2010). So, when film-induced tourists desire to see the physical landscape where films are set, and admire its beauty, residents are proud and it aligns with their social representations. A segment of residents lament that films shot in Fiji often focus on scenic locations rather than showcasing Fijian culture or people as main characters, leading to perceptions of emphasizing locations over cultural authenticity. This is incongruent with the socio-cultural aspect of the land (*vanua*). Further, it does not align with the notion that tourists come to Fiji to meet and engage with the friendly, warm-welcoming Fijians with the *bula* spirit (Phillips et al., 2021). Locals think that tourists come to Fiji to experience local culture and not to look for stories in film. After locals discover tourists are coming to see film settings, this research shows that this might disappoint the local community, since locals are not often familiar with films.

Given the local residents' communal relationship with the land and sea, there are areas which hold spiritual significance to the community (Farran, 2020). Some areas are taboo (*tabu*) and forbidden to enter or only enter at certain times of the year (Singh et al., 2021). The local community reveres and respects these sacred sites. In contrast, producers make use these locations for their film settings, inadvertently disrespecting the land and its owners, leading to conflict between the film producers and the custodians of the land and sea. Here, the communities' collective values and social representations are juxtaposed with film producers' creative interpretations. The Fiji Film Commission is now trying to rectify this.

In Fiji, local indigenous knowledge concerning the environment is extensive, complicated and multi-layered (Kitolelei et al., 2022). The local communities, especially in rural areas, engage in subsistence fishing and farming. When film producers take artistic license by not being scientifically accurate (e.g. green coconuts falling from the trees), the local community find this absurd and incredulous. This incongruence with the laws of nature is a source of amusement and confusing to residents as to why they would include this in the film.

As noted earlier, the local community does not have control of storylines in a film or TV series (Beeton, 2016). This means that images and actions by film characters may be uncomfortable to local residents viewing films set in their homeland. Fiji is a conservative society, deeply influenced by underlying Christian values concerning modesty and nudity (Ravulo, 2021). One issue which caused discontent among residents were films depicting nudity, such as in *The Blue Lagoon*. Naked bodies caused discomfort, especially when the films set in their homelands are watched with their extended family. This is concerning for the local community.

### Contribution to theory

In terms of contribution to knowledge, this research uses social representation theory to shed light on how locals perceive the portrayal of Fiji in films, highlighting the importance of cultural authenticity, interactions with film tourists, and the balance between showcasing scenic locations and preserving cultural identity. This theory of how individuals and groups collectively construe their social world (Wagner, 2020), has been surprisingly underutilized especially in the area of film-induced tourism where films and TV series represent the host location, culture and peoples in a particular way, which may be congruent or not with how the hosts perceive themselves (Schiavone & Reijnders, 2022).

We build on recent work by Kim and Park (2023) who found social representation theory useful in providing insights in explaining the collectively perceived high level of discomfort and resentment against the commodification process of the community's spiritual and religious practices shown in *Eat, Love, Pray*. By exploring residents' perceptions of how their culture, environment and peoples are presented (or not presented) in films, we add to the literature by identifying the different reactions and emotions that the collective society feels about these representations. Unlike Kim and Park (2023), this research demonstrates that social representation theory is a valid lens through which communities can collectively experience a range of emotions as their 'home' is depicted in films, not just discomfort and resentment. As Wassler and Talarico (2021) discussed, shared systems influenced by values, beliefs, and experiences can make films powerful enough to create controversies. We found that communities felt a sense of pride, as highlighted by Kim and Park (2024), but also confusion and amusement. Emotional responses to films are an underexplored area of film-induced tourism research that warrants further attention. The benefit of social representation theory is its ability to consider community values and attitudes, which is particularly important in collectivist societies.

The Fijian concept of *vanua* aligns closely with social representation theory in shaping how Fijians perceive and define their sense of home and identity (Long, 2017). As *vanua* represents not only the physical land but also the people, customs, and natural environment, it forms a collective framework through which Fijians interpret their surroundings and cultural heritage (Ravuvu, 1983). More than just a geographical space, *vanua* embodies a living, dynamic connection between individuals and their ancestry, where cultural values, kinship ties, and spiritual beliefs are intertwined. Social representation theory helps explain how this shared understanding of *vanua* becomes a mental map for individuals and communities, influencing values, behaviors, and a sense of belonging. This collective knowledge is passed down through oral traditions, rituals, and daily practices, reinforcing a communal identity that emphasizes stewardship, reciprocity, and respect for the land. Through the lens of *vanua*, Fijians view their home as an interconnected ecosystem, linking land, sea, community, and cultural practices - a holistic identity that is both inherited and constantly reinforced through everyday life. The relationship between people and place is not static; rather, it evolves as communities adapt to modern challenges while striving to preserve the foundational principles of *vanua*.



Films and film tourism can disrupt or overlook the deep-rooted connections between land, people, and culture inherent in the concept of *vanua*. When film productions depict Fijian landscapes merely as exotic backdrops, they often fail to capture the cultural significance that Fijians attach to their land as part of their identity and heritage. The commercialization of these locations can lead to a detachment between the land's traditional meaning and its portrayal on screen, reducing a sacred or historically significant space to a mere visual backdrop. Consequently, film tourists, drawn to these scenic locations, may perceive the land as a commodity or photo opportunity, unaware of its role within Fijian social and spiritual frameworks (Phillips et al., 2021). This superficial engagement can lead to misunderstandings or disrespect of local customs, as visitors may not recognize or appreciate the symbiotic relationship between the land and the Fijian people's way of life, values, and traditions.

This research adds to the body of knowledge of film-induced tourism. The film may be a representation endorsed by the local community or may be at odds with the cultural attitudes and values of the local community. It may be an actual representation of the film location or it may be contrived or as Carl et al. (2007) pointed out a combined landscape from both different places or artificial creation. This impact then affects how potential tourists perceive the destination as well as modifies how the local community perceived itself. This impact is not necessary found in non-film-induced tourism.

The context of Fiji and the South Pacific, more generally, tends to be under-researched in the area of film-induced tourism. This is surprising given the popularity of early films such as the Academy Award-nominated *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935, 1962 and 1984) and *South Pacific* (1958 and 2001) (Pratt, 2013). This research contributes to the anthology of work in this context.

### **Contribution to practice**

Our research findings align with the work of Croy et al. (2018) and Croy (2011), who emphasized the importance of enhancing communication among these key stakeholders. While filmmakers possess creative autonomy in crafting their narratives, it is crucial to recognize that their stories, though fictional, often depict events grounded in reality. This can have important implications for the local communities where these films are set and produced. Our study, focused on Fiji, revealed that certain storylines in films shot on location elicited strong reactions from the local community.

Given these findings, we recommend that film producers engage in meaningful consultation with local communities. This inclusive approach serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it fosters a sense of involvement and ownership among community members, potentially mitigating negative reactions to film content. Secondly, it provides filmmakers with insights into local culture, customs, and sensitivities, which can enrich their storytelling. This collaborative process can significantly contribute to building local support for tourism initiatives. When communities feel heard and respected in the filmmaking process, they are more likely to embrace film-induced tourism. This positive sentiment can translate into a more welcoming atmosphere for visitors, enhancing the overall tourism experience.

It is also necessary to include a wider range of stakeholders to promote the destination through the film. The film needs to be linked to the destination which is not

happening automatically. For some local communities that do not customarily watch films and may not have seen the films so they do not know what tourists are looking for. DMOs could offer its residents a free screening of the film, so that the local community is aware of the settings and storylines of the films and TV series so that local communities are knowledgeable about how their home and culture is portrayed in films. In developing countries such as Fiji, especially in remote areas, the local communities may not have the access or means to visit a movie theatre or subscribe to Netflix or other streaming services. Hence, they will be unable to answer questions from film-induced tourists about the storylines of the film and important film locations, leading to a lesser tourist experience.

Film-induced tourism can assist budget-strapped DMOs in less developed countries to achieve their marketing goals in terms of enhanced or increased awareness and interest of their destinations from their targeted markets. Films are a powerful medium to promote destination imagery and awareness, particularly to attract tourists to film locations (Cobeña et al., 2024). While minimal research has been undertaken to measure or quantify this impact on a country like Fiji, market evidence points to increased awareness of and interest in countries that gain exposure from film-induced tourism, akin to *Lord of the Rings* in New Zealand (Pagello, 2010), and *Game of Thrones* in Dubrovnik, Croatia (Tkalec et al., 2017). In addition, film tourism boosts industry spin offs including the building of local capacity and development of ancillary industries like producers and scriptwriters as Film Fiji already does.

### **Limitations and areas for future research**

The research explored residents' perceptions of how Fiji was portrayed in films and TV series set in Fiji. Future research could focus on specific popular TV series set in Fiji, such as *Survivor* (2006–) and *Eco Challenge* (2020), which participants mentioned as having significant impacts. There are several other fruitful avenues for further research. Given the large financial incentives that film commissions provide to film production companies to host a filming (Messerlin & Parc, 2020), an economic impact study taking into account these inducements as well as the film-induced tourism revenues would quantify a more accurate assessment of the economic impact of film-induced tourism. Another avenue of research would be to compare and contrast residents' perceptions of their homeland as depicted in films with the diaspora's views of their homeland as shown in films. Diaspora tourism is a growing market (Huang et al., 2016). Further, the diaspora often has different perceptions and attachments to their homeland (Huang et al., 2018). Therefore, it would be insightful to explore how films set in the homeland are interpreted by these different cohorts (Bandyopadhyay, 2008).

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