



Audiovisual Fiction, Engagement, and Tourism: The Impact of Squid Game on South Korea's Destination Image and Visit Intention

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Audiovisual fiction has become a relevant factor in shaping destination image and influencing travel intentions. Within the framework of film-induced tourism, television series with global reach act as symbolic and emotional mediators between audiences and the places represented on screen. This study examines how exposure to the series Squid Game influences the image of South Korea as a tourist destination and the intention to visit it, considering the mediating role of engagement with both the series and the destination. **Methodology:** A quantitative study was conducted using an online survey administered to 500 Spanish viewers of Squid Game who had not previously visited South Korea. Data were analysed using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) to test two theoretical models focusing on destination image and engagement dimensions. **Results:** The findings indicate that viewing the series positively affects the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions of destination image. Affective and conative destination image significantly influence visit intention, whereas the cognitive dimension does not show a direct effect. Moreover, conative engagement with the series and engagement with the destination positively predict visit intention, while affective engagement with the series presents a negative relationship. **Discussion:** These results suggest that film-induced tourism is driven more by emotional and action-oriented mechanisms than by purely informational processes. **Conclusions:** Audiovisual fiction can enhance visit intention when it stimulates behavioural predisposition and active engagement, providing relevant implications for destination marketing strategies based on cultural narratives.

Keywords: film induced tourism; engagement with serie; engagement with destination; destination image; visit intention; visualization; SEM models.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of audiovisual content has changed the way we consume culture and has opened up new avenues for understanding why certain destinations capture the attention and desire of millions of people around the world. In this context, as Connell (2012, p. 1007) states, "film tourism has become a significant area of tourism development and a powerful vehicle for destination marketing". This phenomenon has emerged as a relevant field within tourism marketing, analysing how exposure to film and television productions can influence the decision to visit a destination shown on screen (Beeton, 2016; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006). This type of tourism not only involves aesthetic appeal, but also responds to emotional, symbolic, and narrative components that reinforce the projected image of the destination and the viewer's connection to it (Connell, 2012; Hao et al., 2024).

A compelling case study is the South Korean series Squid Game, broadcast by Netflix. This series has achieved record viewing figures worldwide, becoming one of the platform's most influential productions in terms of global cultural penetration, social media engagement, and the revitalization of interest in Korean cultural exports (Netflix, 2024; Spangler, 2021). Its impact transcends the merely audiovisual. Through its story, aesthetics and cultural context, the series helped to create a particular image of South Korea in the minds of millions of viewers.

This aligns with previous research suggesting the potential of television fiction to influence perceptions of tourist destinations and encourage visitation even without prior direct experience (Cheng et al., 2020; Kim, 2012). However, can a narrative characterized by dystopian realism and social critique, such as Squid Game, effectively translate this global influence into a concrete desire to visit the destination? Unlike traditional models based on idyllic scenery, Squid Game relies on a disruptive iconography, such as its symbolic color palette and architectural geometry (masks, uniforms, traditional games, minimalist aesthetics). Contrary to the assumption that violence provides "little incentive" for travel, scientific

literature demonstrates that violent content does not necessarily deter potential visitors (Yang et al., 2017, pp. 314-335). This phenomenon aligns with other global successes like *Narcos*, where the attraction is not driven by romanticized escapism, but by a fascination with complex narratives and the symbolic atmosphere of the story (Light, 2017; Månsson, 2011). Therefore, we question whether this 'darker' and more visceral storytelling can trigger a genuine tourist interest through cultural curiosity, moving beyond conventional promotional effects.

In this context, the image of a destination is configured as a multidimensional construct (cognitive, affective and conative), which plays a central role in the decision to travel (Gallarza et al., 2002; Gartner, 1994). At the same time, engagement with the series, understood as the viewer's emotional, cognitive and behavioural involvement with the series, is a key factor in the predisposition to visit the destination (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Kim, 2012); as well as engagement with the destination, transforming viewers into active ambassadors for the place (Molinillo et al., 2019; Puche, 2024).

Consequently, this study aims to analyse how exposure to *Squid Game* influences the image of South Korea as a tourist destination, evaluating the mediating role of engagement with both the series and the destination, and how these factors condition the intention to visit the country. Through this analysis, we aim to provide empirical evidence that contributes to the understanding of current audiovisual tourism and the design of tourism promotion strategies based on cultural narratives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS ESTABLISHMENT

2.1. Film-induced tourism

The empirical evaluation of film tourism or film-induced tourism emerged in the late 1990s and has attracted considerable interest in the academic community, especially since 2020 (Crespo-Almendros et al., 2025). As a result, the academic community has proposed multiple definitions and connotations for its conceptualisation. Specifically, this type of tourism can be understood as tourist visits to a destination or attraction motivated by its appearance in films, television series, documentaries or promotional videos (Busby & Klug, 2001; Cardoso et al., 2017). Hudson and Ritchie (2006) had previously defined it as '[...] tourist visits to a destination or attraction as a result of the destination's being featured on television, video, or the cinema screen' (p. 387), considering it an expanding subtype of cultural tourism. Connell (2012) expanded the definition by emphasising its heterogeneous nature, as it combines cultural, media and experiential components. This approach recognises that film tourism responds not only to aesthetic motivations, but also to symbolic and emotional ones: viewers seek to relive the narrative in physical space, which generates a form of cultural consumption related to identity and collective memory, creating a new type of tourist experience (Hao et al., 2024). In this context, audiovisual content emerges as an agent of unintentional or planned promotion of a destination (Beeton, 2016), making audiovisual production and promotion a powerful creator of tourist imaginability and a decisive configurator of the contemporary urban landscape projected by destinations (Crespo-Almendros et al., 2025). Therefore, the image projected by the audiovisual medium can modify the perceptions of the public, generating motivations for travel associated with aesthetics, landscapes or emotions evoked by fiction (Beeton, 2016; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006).

2.2. Destination image: cognitive, affective and conative components

The concept of image has been widely used in the evaluation of tourist experiences, as it refers to the abstract mental representation that travellers create about the destination (Cardoso et al., 2019). Since the works of Gunn (1972) and Hunt (1975), many researchers have conceptualised destination image in the context of tourism. Most authors argue that destination image is a multidimensional construct,

distinguishing between affective, cognitive and conative dimensions (Casali et al., 2021; Gallarza et al., 2002; Gartner, 1994; Yang et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2025).

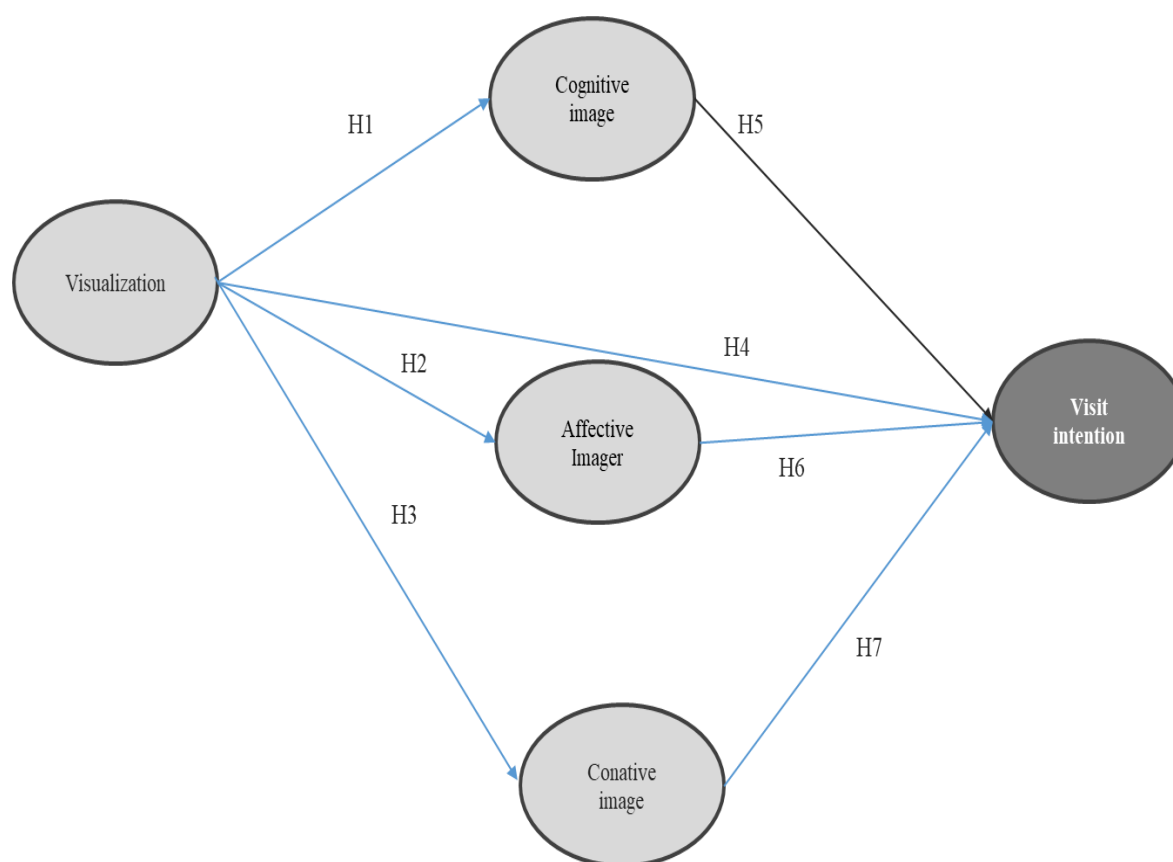
Specifically, the cognitive image is expressed through the sum of beliefs and knowledge reflected in the evaluations of the perceived attributes of the destination (Bigné et al., 2009; Gartner, 1994; Yang et al., 2022); based on tourists' knowledge of the destination (Xu et al., 2020), which may or may not be derived from a previous visit (Pike, 2008). For authors such as Zhou et al. (2024), the cognitive image of a destination includes culture, natural landscape, infrastructure, economic, natural and social environment, diet, entertainment, accommodation and history. The affective image refers to the individual's emotional responses or assessments, reflecting the tourist's feelings towards the destination (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Bigné et al., 2005; Gartner, 1994; Hallmann et al., 2015; Xu et al., 2020). In relation to this dimension, Baloglu and Brinberg (1997) point out that people with different motivations may have a certain opinion about a destination and may evaluate it as an exciting place if they perceive that the benefits they seek are present there. Finally, the conative image is the future disposition to action (e.g., the intention to visit, return or recommend), i.e., it is the behavioural and prospective component of the destination image representing a potential travel destination for tourists (Gartner, 1994; Pike & Ryan, 2004).

It could be said that the image of a destination can be considered as a 'synthesis' of numerous and information related to the destination. The three components of destination image contribute to understanding the construction of an overall image, which is considered more significant than some of its individual components (Yang et al., 2022). Consumers use this construction to facilitate decision-making (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Beerli & Martín, 2004; Echtner & Ritchie, 1993). Authors such as Kim (2012) and Baloglu and McCleary (1999), among others, show that the cognitive image of the destination influences the intention to visit it.

Taking the above into account, we postulate the following research hypotheses:

- H1: There is a positive relationship between viewing the series and the cognitive image of the tourist destination.
- H2: There is a positive relationship between viewing the series and the affective image of the tourist destination.
- H3: There is a positive relationship between viewing the series and the conative image of the tourist destination.
- H4: There is a positive relationship between viewing the series and the intention to visit the tourist destination.
- H5: The cognitive image of the destination positively influences the intention to visit the destination.
- H6: The affective image of the destination positively influences the intention to visit the destination.
- H7: The conative image of the destination positively influences the intention to visit the destination. Figure 1 shows the proposed theoretical model.

Figure 1. Theoretical model. Mediating effect of destination image (cognitive, affective, and conative) between viewing the series and intention to visit the destination



Source: The authors.

2.3. Engagement with the series

Academic literature has shown that cinema and television influence tourists' decision-making. Engagement with the series is understood as the viewer's emotional, cognitive and behavioural involvement with the narrative and its characters (Hollebeek et al., 2014) and is considered a key factor in explaining the impact of exposure to the audiovisual medium (the film) on travel and intention to visit the destination (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Kim, 2012; Kim et al., 2007; Yen et al., 2025). This phenomenon is clearly exemplified by the global impact of Game of Thrones, where empirical research has demonstrated a significant causal effect on tourist arrivals and overnight stays in Dubrovnik, Croatia (Tkalec et al., 2017). Such cases provide a robust comparative framework for Squid Game, suggesting that high-reaching audiovisual productions can fundamentally reshape a destination's attractiveness and drive international tourism through audience engagement (Yen et al., 2025).

Kim (2012) identifies emotional and behavioural engagement with television dramas as key to motivating visits to filming locations, concluding that the level of engagement with the series determines the intensity with which viewers construct mental representations of the places shown. Therefore, those who develop a strong emotional bond or identification with the characters and the plot tend to process the visual and cultural stimuli of fiction more deeply, generating a more vivid, emotional and lasting image of the destination. Kim (2012) himself demonstrated that repeated exposure and narrative empathy significantly increase the cognitive image (knowledge of the country's attributes), the affective image (emotions and feelings towards it) and, finally, the conative intention to visit it.

For their part, Beeton (2016) and Hudson and Ritchie (2006) demonstrated that audiovisual fiction can modify cognitive representations (physical and cultural attributes of the place) and affective representations (associated emotions or values). The intensity of exposure, the degree of identification with the characters and the perceived authenticity of the environment determine the final impact on the intention to visit. Connell (2012) further adds the role of narrative and celebrity as factors of attraction: viewers seek to experience the symbolic connection between fiction and reality. More specifically, in the context of Korean dramas, Kim (2012) demonstrated that this type of engagement enhances the construction of a mental image of the country and predisposes the viewer to desire a direct experience with the destination. When audiences feel "transported" to the narrative universe, they perceive the filming locations as authentic settings that encapsulate the emotional atmosphere of the story (Green & Brock, 2000, pp. 701-703).

In this process, the image of the destination acts as a mediating variable between engagement with the series and the intention to visit. High emotional involvement with the plot leads to the formation of cognitive images (tangible attributes of the destination such as culture, gastronomy, modernity or landscape) and affective images, linked to feelings of sympathy, curiosity or admiration for the country (Lee & Bai, 2016). This integrated image reinforces the conative dimension of tourist behaviour, i.e., the predisposition to visit or recommend the place (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999). In this sense, film-induced tourism is the result of the formation and development of the destination image through the film industry (Ossa & Almendros, 2020). The tourism phenomenon links cinema-driven emotions to filming locations and, at the same time, is responsible for the positive or negative aspects of destination image formation (Juškelytė, 2016). This is how film tourism "helps to increase familiarity with the destination in the eyes of potential visitors" (Akbulut & Ekin, 2017, p. 105).

Furthermore, engagement with the series does not end with the viewing experience, but is prolonged and amplified through digital practices. Currently, user-generated content on platforms such as Instagram or TikTok plays a central role in the visual reinterpretation of the destination, acting as a catalyst for aspirational experiences (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024; García-Carrión et al., 2025). Viewers act as prosumers who share scenes, locations, or symbols on social media, generating secondary engagement with the destination (Molinillo et al., 2019). This form of participation, including likes, comments, hashtags, fan art, or challenges, not only increases the country's visibility but also produces an emotional contagion effect that stimulates new intentions to visit within the community of followers.

According to Puche (2024), this double level of involvement, with the narrative and with the real space, constitutes a feedback loop: engagement with the series shapes the image of the destination, while the positive image of the destination reinforces engagement and loyalty to the audiovisual production. Nieto-Ferrando et al. (2024) point out that engagement with the series transforms the image of the destination and highlight that the positive perception of the destination reinforces the emotional bond with the series, increasing the desire to visit and loyalty to the destination. In this context, previous studies have demonstrated the mediating relationship between the image of the destination and the intention to visit in contexts of film-induced tourism (El Maich & Zniber, 2023; Li, 2013; Morrison et al., 2026; Northey et al., 2025; Xia et al., 2022). Scientific literature has consistently examined the mediating role of destination image in the decision-making process of film-induced tourists. Along these lines, Li (2013) validated a theoretical model in which the consumption of films and TV dramas impacts visit intention indirectly, with this relationship being mediated by the perceived image of the destination. This mediating effect is further supported by more recent and specialized studies. For instance, Xia et al. (2022), within the context of Chinese Kung Fu film tourism, demonstrated that cognitive destination image exerts a partial mediating effect between audience involvement and travel

intention. From an experimental perspective, Northey et al. (2025, pp. 1-5) provided evidence for the "film-to-behavior" pathway, revealing that specific cinematic components—such as "culture and tradition"—affect travel intention only indirectly through the formation of destination image. Most recently,

Morrison et al. (2026), focusing on Bollywood movies, identified mediation effects through destination image, indicating that destination perceptions mediate the relationship between film-induced stimuli (including visual and vocal cues) and subsequent revisit intentions. This reinforces the consensus that audiovisual impact must first transform the mental image of a location to effectively influence tourist behavior.

2.4. Engagement with the destination

Over the last decade, the concept of customer engagement has attracted growing interest in both academic and professional circles (So et al., 2020). The conceptualisation of customer engagement proposed by Hollebeek et al. (2014) has been widely referenced in the literature to analyse tourist engagement with destinations, integrating the cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions of this relationship (Harrigan et al., 2018). In the context of tourism, engagement with the tourist destination is a key construct for understanding how visitors and potential tourists develop valuable relationships with places beyond the travel experience (Cheung et al., 2023; So et al., 2020). This process involves establishing a psychological connection with the destination during interaction (So et al., 2020). So et al. (2014) consider customer engagement to be a positive and lasting psychological state that emerges from interactive experiences with a tourism brand and manifests itself through cognitive, affective, and behavioural components. These authors empirically demonstrated that engagement predicts loyalty, repurchase intention, and active brand advocacy.

In the field of tourist destinations, destination engagement describes the degree of emotional, symbolic and participatory connection between the individual and the place brand (Cheung et al., 2023). This link arises from the co-creation of experiences between tourists, managers and local communities, and is amplified by digital media, which turn visitors into image prosumers. In this participatory ecosystem, engagement ceases to be a passive response and becomes a dynamic process of co-creation, where visitors and potential tourists collectively shape and communicate the identity of the destination (Candrea et al., 2025).

The most recent academic literature agrees that engagement with the destination acts as a mediator between brand image and tourist behaviour, influencing visit intention, recommendation and loyalty (Cheung et al., 2023; Molinillo et al., 2019). At the cognitive level, it is associated with attention and the processing of relevant information about the place; at the affective level, with feelings of enthusiasm, pleasure and attachment and at the behavioural level, with participatory actions such as sharing experiences, creating content or interacting in digital communities (Brodie et al., 2011; So et al., 2014).

The most recent research on social media shows that immersive visual content and narrative consistency between the message and the positioning of the destination increase user engagement and improve the mental image that users form of the place (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024; García-Carrión et al., 2025). Such engagement therefore acts as a bridge between symbolic communication and behavioural response, transforming media exposure into active participation and cultural affinity with the territory.

From the perspective of audiovisual tourism, engagement with the destination can arise even without prior physical experience (Cheng et al., 2020). Emotional involvement with a series or film generates a symbolic identification that is projected onto the country or city where the narrative is set. Thus, the positive image of the destination reinforced by fiction fuels engagement with the place, which in turn

consolidates emotional loyalty to the work and its narrative universe (Kim, 2012; Lee & Bai, 2016). Finally, it is interesting to highlight the differences between the two. While engagement with the series stems from the audiovisual narrative and is linked to emotions towards characters and plots, engagement with the destination implies a symbolic and participatory connection with the real place, activated even without having physically visited it.

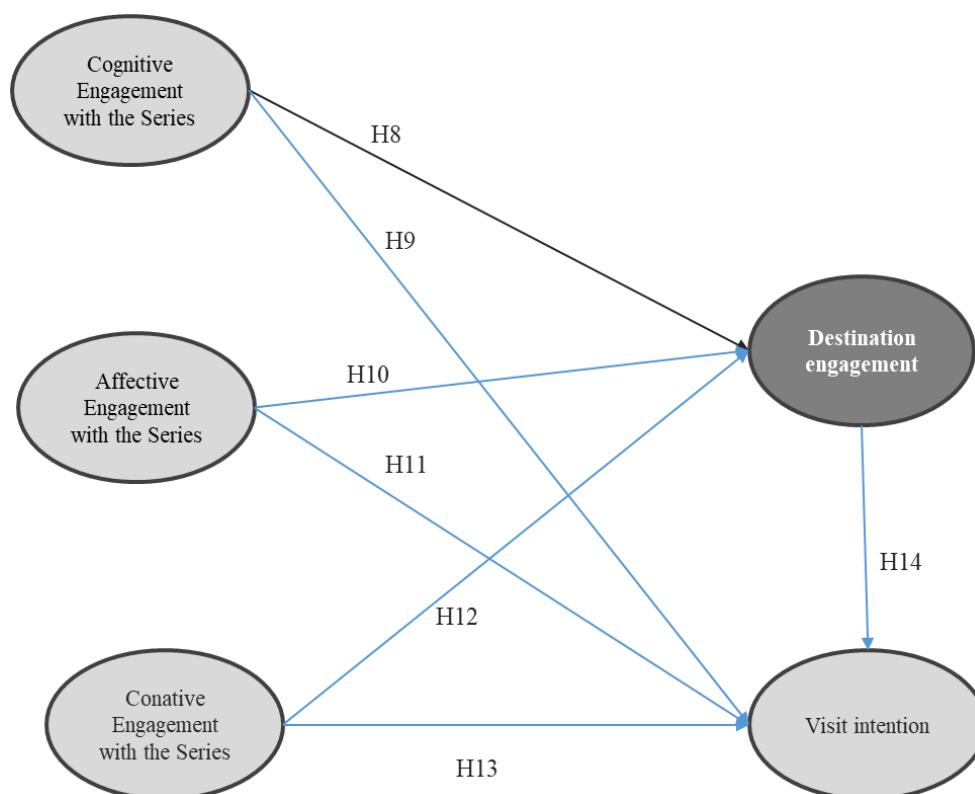
In light of the above, the Squid Game series presents itself as an ideal opportunity to apply this theoretical model. Its global success, its culturally distinctive character and its ability to generate emotional and narrative involvement among viewers allow us to analyse how different forms of engagement with audiovisual content can lead to behaviours towards the real destination, in this case, South Korea.

Based on this, we propose the following research hypotheses:

- H8: Cognitive engagement with the series positively influences engagement with the destination.
- H9: Cognitive engagement with the series positively influences the intention to visit the destination.
- H10: Affective engagement with the series positively influences engagement with the destination.
- H11: Affective engagement with the series positively influences the intention to visit the destination.
- H12: Conative engagement with the series positively influences engagement with the destination.
- H13: Conative engagement with the series positively influences the intention to visit the destination.
- H14: Engagement with the destination positively influences the intention to visit the destination.

Figure 2 shows the proposed theoretical model 2. This model focuses on the influence of the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of series engagement on destination engagement, and the subsequent effect of the latter on visit intention. This contrasts with the first model, which examined the direct impact of series viewership on the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of destination image, and how such image influences travel intention. While the first model focuses on destination perception, this second model explores the psychological bond (engagement) formed with the narrative and its transition toward the physical destination.

Figure 2. Theoretical model 2. Effect of engagement with the series (cognitive, affective and conative) on engagement and intention to visit the destination



Source: Own elaboration.

3. GOALS

General goal:

This investigation seeks to analyse the impact of the television series Squid Game on South Korea's image as a tourist destination and on visit intention, considering the mediating role of destination image and the different dimensions of engagement with both the series and the destination.

Specific goals:

- To analyse the influence of viewing the series Squid Game on the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions of South Korea's destination image.
- To examine the relationship between destination image —cognitive, affective and conative— and the intention to visit South Korea.
- To evaluate the direct and indirect effects of viewing the series on visit intention, considering the mediating role of destination image.
- To analyse the impact of the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions of engagement with the series on engagement with the tourist destination.
- To examine the influence of engagement with the series and engagement with the destination on visit intention.
- To compare the relative weight of cognitive, affective and conative factors in explaining film-induced tourism.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Squid Game: the serie

Squid Game is a three-season television serie, in which 22 episodes tell the story of 456 people with low economic resources and in debt, who voluntarily agree to participate in a series of popular games, with the promise that if they win, they will receive a large cash prize that will solve their financial problems. However, the participants quickly discover the consequences of the game: elimination means death for the players, and the coveted cash prize increases as players are eliminated.

Squid Game has been viewed on the Netflix platform, attracting a spectacular audience worldwide. The first season caused the platform to break its own audience record, becoming the number one series of the moment with more than 1.6 billion hours of viewing in just 28 days (Spangler, 2021). Currently, the three seasons are the most-watched series on the platform, being one of only two television series to have exceeded 200 million views on Netflix (2024).

Several factors could explain the series' global impact. On the one hand, the dystopian theme, combined with the culture of the country (South Korea), has led to the series standing out despite its dark and intense plot (Hong & Yang, 2022). The series explores the dark side of capitalism (a significant part of the population experiences major economic problems), which leads them to take high risks (over-indebtedness and extreme decisions to deal with their economic problems), representing the personal and economic despair that is evident in a latent social reality (Chowdhury, 2022).

On the other hand, some of the country's most renowned actors participate in the series, and it has been marketed through Netflix, one of the largest production and streaming platforms (Hong & Yang, 2022). Finally, in recent years there has been a significant expansion of K-pop and K-drama beyond streaming platforms, with social media playing an important role in media dissemination (Siregar et al., 2021).

The selection of Squid Game is neither circumstantial nor merely a reflection of its popularity; rather, it serves as a disruptive case study that challenges traditional destination promotion models. Film-induced tourism has evolved beyond simple landscape-driven motivations. Squid Game has constructed a symbolic and iconographic universe (masks, uniforms, traditional games, minimalist aesthetics) so powerful that it generates conative engagement transcending physical spaces. The tourist's interest does not lie in the "interiors" themselves, but in the cultural curiosity and identity-based resonance emanating from the narrative. Contrary to the assumption that violence provides "little incentive" for travel, scientific literature demonstrates that violent content does not necessarily deter potential visitors (Magano et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2017). According to Yang et al. (2017, pp. 314-335), narrative intensity and the phenomenon of "transportation" can strengthen the bond with the country of origin. The violence in the series acts as a social critique that sparks intellectual and emotional interest in destination reality, which translates into an improvement in the destination's affective and conative image (Contu & Pau, 2022; Magano et al., 2022).

Finally, the series has moved beyond the screen to materialize in theme parks, pop-up stores, and global immersive experiences. This demonstrates that symbolic engagement is a more resilient driver of attraction than conventional aesthetic beauty (Casado & Ruiz, 2022; Dionisio & Nisi, 2021). Studying a "dark" series allows for an analysis of how digital engagement and iconography can mitigate a plot's negative values, converting them into a desire for a real-world experience at the destination.

In sum, the selection of Squid Game as a case study is theoretically justified by its status as a disruptive phenomenon in film-induced tourism. Unlike traditional productions that rely on scenic landscapes or

romantic idealization, Squid Game operates through symbolic and iconographic engagement. Its predominantly indoor filming and dystopian themes do not act as a deterrent; rather, they enhance South Korea's image as a 'creative powerhouse' and a center for global pop-culture innovation.

4.2. Data collection

The data were collected through an online survey with Spanish people as target respondents. The sample was recruited by a market research company that invited respondents via e-mail and social media. The composition of the sample was provided to ensure that it was in line with the profile of the series' viewers. In addition, it was verified whether they had previously travelled to this country to avoid bias in their responses regarding their intention to travel to the destination and their engagement with it. Therefore, those users who had not travelled to the destination were selected. According to Nielsen Streaming Content Ratings, 44% of the audience for Squid Game came from the Hispanic demographic group, with the series being watched mainly by adults between the ages of 18 and 49. These represented 58% of the total audience, with a strong inclination towards the under-35 demographic, which represents 32% of viewers in that group (Mwachiro, 2025). As for the phenomenon in Spain, 38% of the adult Spanish internet population watched at least one episode of Squid Game in the 26 days following its premiere, a proportion that skyrockets to over 70% among young people aged 18 to 24 (Fluzo, 2021).

Following these guidelines, a total of 500 valid responses were gathered. Table 1 below presents the results based on the composition of the sample obtained. The results of the descriptive analysis of the sample are shown in Table 2.

Table 1. *Sample composition*

Gender	N	%
Male	177	35.4
Women	314	62.8
Lost	9	1.8
Age		
18-29	344	68.8
30-44	76	15.2
45-54	39	7.8
55-64	18	3.6
65	14	2.8
Lost	9	1.8
Income level		
less than €1,000	318	63.6
€1,000-2,000	106	21.2
€2,000-3,000	16	3.2
3000	27	5.4%
Lost	33	6.6

Source: The authors.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
IMAGCOG1	500	1	7	4.03	1.698
IMAGCOG2	500	1	7	3.87	1.558
IMAGCOG3	500	1	7	5.12	1.713
IMAGCOG4	500	1	7	4.34	1.875
IMAGCOG5	500	1	7	4.96	1.498
IMAGCOG6	500	1	7	4.25	1.530
IMAGCOG7	500	1	7	4.05	1.422
IMAGCOG8	500	1	7	4.66	1.632
IMAGCOG9	500	1	7	4.49	1.612
IMAGCOG10	500	1	7	4.18	1.386
IMAGAFECT1	500	1	7	4.39	1.708
IMAGAFECT2	500	1	7	4.37	1.803
IMAGAFECT3	500	1	7	3.93	1.706
IMAGAFECT4	500	1	7	4.64	1.767
IMAGAFECT5	500	1	7	4.70	1.695
IMAGAFECT6	500	1	7	3.53	1.872
IMAGAFECT7	500	1	7	4.19	1.883
IMAGCONT1	500	1	7	4.12	2.154
IMAGCONT2	500	1	7	3.07	1.766
IMAGCONT3	500	1	7	3.77	1.898
IMAGCONT4	500	1	7	3.80	1.816
IMAGCONT5	500	1	7	3.46	1.730
IMAGCONT6	500	1	7	3.60	1.867
ENGIDENT1	500	1	6	1.83	1.311
ENGIDENT2	500	1	7	2.45	1.536
ENGIDENT3	500	1	7	1.87	1.369
ENGIDENT4	500	1	7	1.87	1.392
ENGIDENT5	500	1	7	1.94	1.510
ENGENTUS1	500	1	7	1.90	1.441
ENGENTUS2	500	1	7	2.06	1.646
ENGENTUS3	500	1	7	2.25	1.565
ENGENTUS4	500	1	7	1.92	1.507
ENGENTUS5	500	1	7	2.34	1.652
ENGENTUS6	500	1	7	2.53	1.683
ENGATEN1	500	1	7	3.14	1.826
ENGATEN1	500	1	7	3.14	1.826
ENGATEN2	500	1	7	2.43	1.677
ENGATEN3	500	1	7	2.42	1.626
ENGATEN4	500	1	7	2.07	1.534
ENGATEN5	500	1	7	1.96	1.445
ENGABSOR1	500	1	7	1.92	1.531
ENGABSOR2	500	1	7	1.89	1.481
ENGABSOR3	500	1	7	1.93	1.427
ENGABSOR4	500	1	6	1.86	1.363

ENGABSOR5	500	1	7	1.96	1.429
ENGABSOR6	500	1	7	2.00	2.000
ENGINTERA1	500	1	7	2.39	1.771
ENGINTERA2	500	1	7	2.42	1.741
ENGINTERA3	500	1	7	2.57	1.833
ENGINTERA4	500	1	7	2.09	1.581
INTVIST.1	500	1	7	3	2
SC1	500	1	7	5.24	1.573
SC2	500	1	7	4.95	1.695
SC3	172	1	7	4.22	1.808
SC4	500	1	7	4.52	1.818
SA1	500	1	7	4.63	1.743
SA2	500	0	7	4.65	1.845
SA3	500	1	7	4.57	1.848
SA4	500	1	7	4.08	1.908
SA5	500	1	7	5.06	1.645
SCON1	500	1	7	5.28	1.706
SCON2	500	1	7	2.91	1.974
SCON3	500	0	7	2.34	1.941
SCON4	500	1	7	4.30	2,092

Source: The authors.

4.3. Measures

The construction of the questionnaire was carried out in different phases. First, a set of scales were drawn from extant literature and slightly adapted to the field of study. To assess cognitive image, the 10-item Likert type scale adapted from Agapito et al. (2013) and Styliadis (2022); affective image, the 7-item Likert type scale adapted from Tosun et al. (2015) and Papadimitriou et al. (2015); conative image, the 2-item Likert type scale adapted from Agapito et al. (2013) and Papadimitriou et al. (2015). Thirteen items with three dimensions (cognitive, affective and conative) were drawn from Hollebeek et al. (2014) and So et al. (2014) to assess engagement with the series. For engagement with the destination, the adapted 27-item Likert scale from So et al. (2014) and Harrigan et al. (2018) was used, although in the model it was evaluated as a unidimensional construct according to Van Doorn et al. (2010). Finally, visit intention was measured via one item adapted from Chung et al. (2015) (see questionnaire on Annexe I). Secondly, four marketing department colleagues were asked to review the initial proposal and suggest modifications or improvements. These colleagues considered the proposed scales suitable for the research objective. Thirdly, a pretest was conducted with undergraduate and graduate students (n=60) to assess whether there were any comprehension problems with the items or if any were repetitive. The pretest did not identify any relevant areas for improvement. Finally, a back-translation procedure was applied, involving a bilingual researcher and an external professional translator. This stage aimed to correct any semantic errors. The scale was initially translated into Spanish and subsequently into English. No substantial modifications to the measurement scale were made during this phase.

Furthermore, the questionnaire included two filter questions to ensure the representativeness and suitability of the sample. First, respondents were asked if they had visited the destination; those who answered yes were excluded from the sample. Second, they were asked if they had watched the series, either all seasons or some episodes; those who indicated no were also excluded from the sample. Consequently, it was not necessary to include any audiovisual content related to the series, as all respondents included in the sample had viewed the series in whole or in part.

5. RESULTS

To respond to the hypotheses proposed and estimate the two models established, a structural equation modelling (SEM) analysis was carried out. Both models were estimated using the ML estimation procedure (Satorra & Bentler, 1988, 1994) provided by AMOS 24.

The variables analysed in the conceptual models were all specified as first-order reflective constructs. The data analysis was carried out in three steps: (1) firstly, the goodness of fit of the model was assessed; (2) secondly, the measurement (outer) model was assessed to validate the measurement scales used in the study; (3) thirdly, the structural (inner) model was evaluated to test the proposed research hypotheses. The findings obtained in each of the above-mentioned steps are reported in detail in the next section.

5.1. Model 1

5.1.1. Measurement Model Assessment, Scale Validation and Model Fit.

After performing the analysis using ML, we obtain the goodness-of-fit indicators for model 1, which we will analyse first. The multivariate normality requirement is not met, as both the critical ratio of the multivariate kurtosis statistic and the critical ratio of kurtosis are outside the ± 1.96 interval. Therefore, the Bollen-Stine procedure must be used to correct the p-value associated with the chi-square statistic. In this case, $p = 0.00$, which means that we should reject the proposed model. Nevertheless, the large sample size (500 subjects) influences the statistic's value, thereby necessitating the examination of alternative overall fit indicators. Based on these indicators, we can conclude that the model has an adequate fit, which tells us that we should retain it (Chi-square corrected for Non-normality: (p-value: 0.00); Normed Chi-square: 433.62; RMSEA: 0.04; CFI: 0.098; NCP: 102.71 (Hair et al., 2005; Mulaik, 2009).

As mentioned earlier, all the variables included in the model were specified as first-order reflective constructs. Thus, the second step is to examine the indicator loadings and significance. The results of the measurement model (see Table 3) show that all indicator loadings are statistically significant ($p < .01$) and above the conservative 0.7 cutoff (Ali et al., 2018). In the second step, the internal consistency reliability was assessed through the calculation of Cronbach's α scores and Composite Reliability (CR), which exceeded the 0.7 threshold in all cases, enabling confirmation of the reliability of the measurement scales (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The third step is the measurement of the convergent validity of each construct measure by calculating the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all items on each construct, all the values obtained being above the recommended threshold of 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), thus confirming an adequate convergence validity of the measures.

Table 3. Results of the Measurement (Outer) Model 1

Up to	From	Unstandardised coefficient	Standardised coefficient (SC)	p-value	Cronbach's α	Composite reliability	Extracted variance
IMAGCOG1	Imag-cogn	1	0.775	<0.001	0.92	0.93	0.58
IMAGCOG2		0.862	0.728	<0.001			
IMAGCOG3		1.172	0.8	<0.001			
IMAGCOG4		0.978	0.823	<0.001			
IMAGCOG5		0.865	0.859	<0.001			
IMAGCOG6		0.78	0.744	<0.001			
IMAGCOG7		0.897	0.722	<0.001			
IMAGCOG8		0.951	0.723	<0.001			
IMAGCOG9		0.669	0.777	<0.01			
IMAGCOG10		1	0.635	<0.001			
IMAGAFECT 1	Imag-Afec	1.06	0.849	<0.001	0.93	0.95	0.72
IMAGAFECT2		0.918	0.852	<0.001			
IMAGAFECT 3		1.136	0.781	<0.001			
IMAGAFECT4		1.028	0.932	<0.00			
IMAGAFECT5		0.992	0.879	<0.001			
IMAGAFECT6		1.133	0.769	<0.001			
IMAGAFECT 7		0.965	0.873	<0.001			

Source: The authors.

To assess discriminant validity, we applied the traditional metric proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981), who pointed out that the shared variance for all model constructs should not be larger than their AVEs. Thus, the square root of the AVE was calculated (see Table 4) and resulted to be greater than the correlations between each pair of constructs, meeting the criterion posed by Fornell and Larcker (1981) to confirm the discriminant validity.

Table 4. Assessment of discriminant validity via the criterion proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981)

visualisation	visualisation	imag-cogn	imag-afec	imag-cona	intvist
visualisation	1.00	0.02	0.03	0.09	0.05
imag-cogn		0.76	0.77	0.57	0.34
imag-afec			0.85	0.80	0.47
imag-cona				0.90	0.51
intvist					1.00

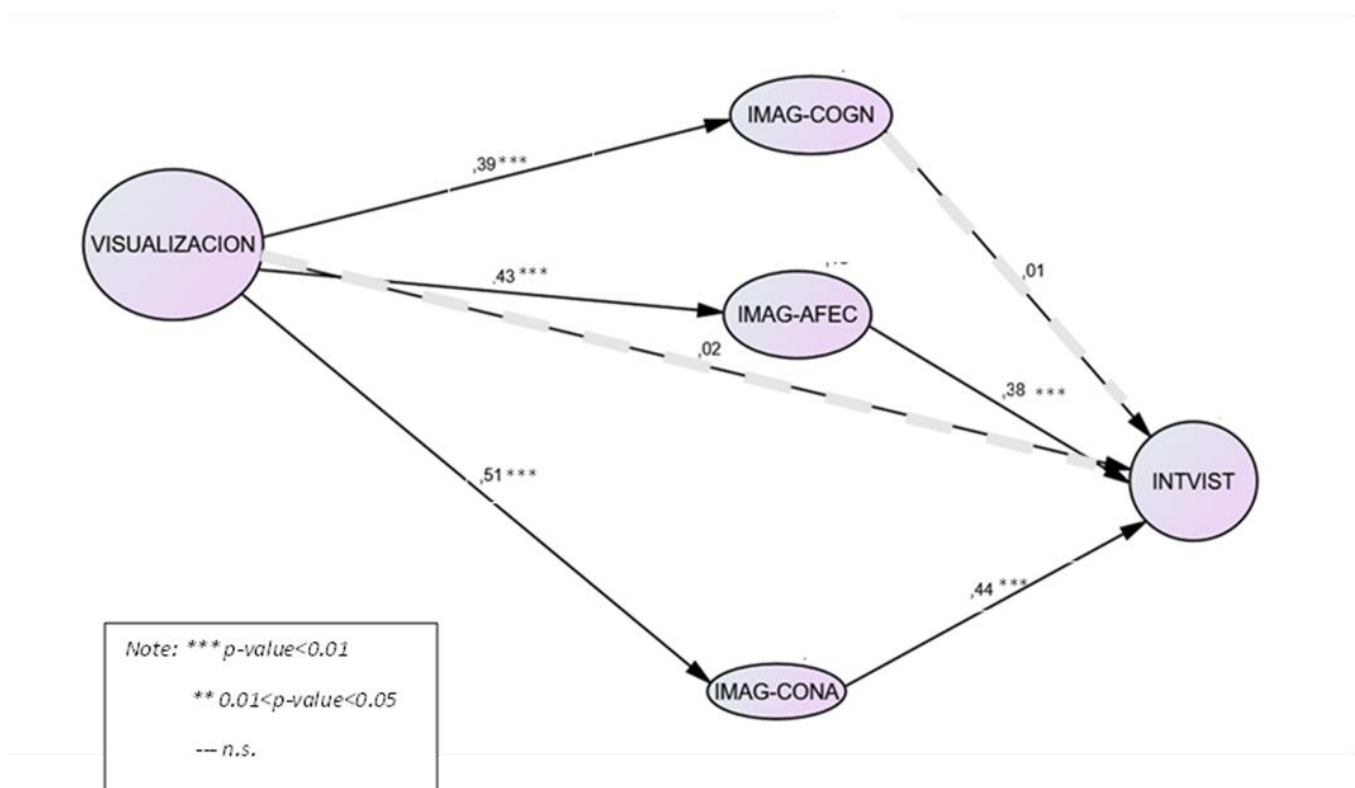
Note: The diagonal entries (in bold) represent the square root of AVE estimates; the off-diagonal entries represent the correlations between constructs. **Source:** The authors.

5.1.2. Structural (inner) Model Assessment and Hypotheses Testing

Once the preliminary steps (measurement model, goodness of fit of the model) have been carried out, the structural (inner) model was assessed to test the hypotheses. Visualisation was found to be positively and significantly related to three dimensions of perceived image: Cognitive ($\beta = .389$; $p = .00$), Affective ($\beta = .430$; $p = .00$), and Conative ($\beta = .513$; $p = .00$), thus providing empirical support for H1, H2 and H3. Similarly, the results also indicate that the direct relationship between Visualisation and Visit Intention

($\beta = .020$; $p = .692$) is not significant, thus not providing empirical support for H4. Likewise, the results also indicate that the direct relationship between Affective dimension ($\beta = .38$; $p = .00$) and Conative dimension ($\beta = .44$; $t = 5.963$, $p = .00$) of destination image and Visit Intention is positive and significant, therefore also H6 and H7 gathered empirical support. Both the affect generated by viewing the series and behavioural intention directly affect the intention to visit the destination that appears. On the contrary, the cognitive dimension of destination image was found to be unrelated to visit intention ($\beta = .01$, $p = .844$), thus not providing empirical support for H5. Although there is no direct effect between viewing the series and visit intention, the results show that there is a significant and positive indirect effect through the different components of the image ($\beta = .392$; $p = .00$). Those who view the series have a higher intention to visit South Korea than those who do not.

Figure 3. Results of Structural Model 1



Source: The authors

5.2. Model 2

5.2.1. Measurement Model Assessment, Scale Validation and Model Fit.

After performing the analysis using ML, we obtain the goodness-of-fit indicators for model 2, which we will analyse first. The multivariate normality requirement is not met, as both the critical ratio of the multivariate kurtosis statistic and the critical ratio of kurtosis are outside the ± 1.96 interval, so the Bollen-Stine procedure must be used to correct the p-value associated with the chi-square statistic. In this case, $p = 0.00$, which means that we should reject the proposed model. However, the sample size is large (500 subjects), so the value of the statistic is affected by this and prompts us to look at other indicators of overall fit. From these indicators, we can conclude that the model has an adequate fit, which indicates that we should retain it (Chi-square corrected for Non-normality: (p-value: 0.00); Normed Chi-square: 258.72; RMSEA: 0.03; CFI: 0.099; NCP: 100.11 (Hair et al., 2005; Mulaik, 2009). As mentioned earlier, all

the variables included in the model were specified as first-order reflective constructs. Thus, the second step is to examine the indicator loadings and significance. The results of the measurement model (see Table 5) show that all indicator loadings are statistically significant ($p < .01$) and above the conservative 0.7 cutoff (Ali et al., 2018). In the second step, the internal consistency reliability was assessed through the calculation of Cronbach's α scores and Composite Reliability (CR), which exceeded the 0.7 threshold in all cases, enabling confirmation of the reliability of the measurement scales (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The third step is the measurement of the convergent validity of each construct measure by calculating the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all items on each construct, all the values obtained being above the recommended threshold of 0.5, thus confirming an adequate convergence validity of the measures (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 5. *Results of the Measurement (Outer) Model 2*

Up to	From	Unstandardised coefficient	Standardised coefficient (SC)	p-value	Cronbach's α	Composite reliability	Extracted variance
SERIECOG1	SCOG	1	0.98	<0.001	0.95	0.98	0.91
SERIECOG2		0.97	0.98	<0.001			
SERIECOG3		0.832	0.932	<0.001			
SERIECOG4		0.86	0.919	<0.001			
SERIEAFEC1	SAFEC	1	0.966	<0.001	0.95	0.98	0.92
SERIEAFEC2		1.025	0.971	<0.001			
SERIEAFEC3		0.997	0.966	<0.001			
SERIEAFEC4		0.927	0.954	<0.001			
SERIEAFEC5		1.032	0.948	<0.001			
SERIECOND 1	SCOND	1	0.92	<0.001	0.91	0.93	0.76
SERIECOND 2		0.65	0.846	<0.001			
SERIECOND 3		0.558	0.781	<0.001			
SERIECOND 4		0.923	0.938	<0.001			

Source: The authors.

To assess discriminant validity, we applied the traditional metric proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981), who pointed out that the shared variance for all model constructs should not be larger than their AVEs. Thus, the square root of the AVE was calculated (see Table 6) and resulted to be greater than the correlations between each pair of constructs, meeting the criterion posed by Fornell and Larcker (1981) to confirm the discriminant validity.

Table 6. *Assessment of discriminant validity via the criterion proposed by Fornell and Larcker (1981)*

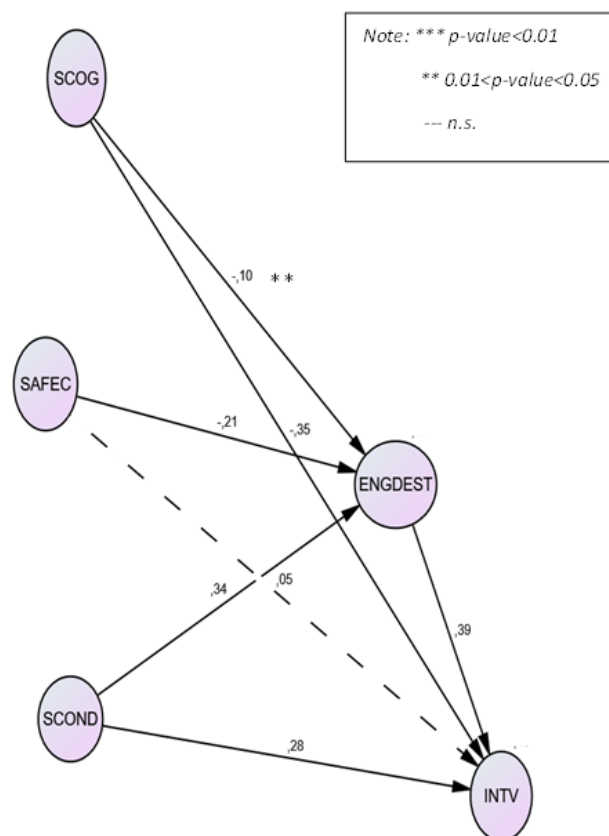
	<i>scog</i>	<i>safec</i>	<i>scond</i>	<i>engdest</i>	<i>intv</i>
Scog	0.95	0.87	0.82	0.00	0.00
Safec		0.96	0.86	0.00	0.00
Scond			0.87	0.00	0.00
engdest				1.00	0.18
intv					1.00

Note: The diagonal entries (in bold) represent the square root of AVE estimates; the off-diagonal entries represent the correlations between constructs. **Source:** The authors.

5.2.2. Structural (inner) Model Assessment and Hypotheses Testing

Once the preliminary steps (measurement model, model fit) have been carried out, the structural (inner) model was assessed to test the hypotheses. The three dimensions of engagement with the series were found to have a significant effect on engagement with the destination. However, while the cognitive ($\beta = -.10$; $p = .036$) and affective ($\beta = -.021$; $p = .00$) dimensions negatively affect engagement with the destination, the conative dimension does so positively ($\beta = .34$; $p = .00$). Consequently, empirical support is received for H12, while H8 and H10 are rejected. In addition, the results also indicate that the direct relationship between the cognitive dimension of series engagement and Visit Intention ($\beta = -.346$; $p = .00$) is negative and significant. Therefore, H9 is empirically rejected. The direct relationship between the affective dimension of series engagement and Visit Intention ($\beta = .05$; $p = .418$) is not significant, thus not providing empirical support for H11. On the contrary, the relationship between the conative dimension of series engagement and visit intention ($\beta = .28$; $p = .00$) is positive and significant, thus providing empirical support for H13. Likewise, the results also indicate that the direct relationship between destination engagement and Visit intention ($\beta = .39$; $p = .00$) is positive and significant, therefore also H14 gathered empirical support.

Figure 4. Results of Structural Model 2



Source: The authors.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Our study analyses how exposure to Squid Game influences the image of South Korea as a tourist destination, as well as the role played by engagement with the series and engagement with the destination as antecedents of visit intention. To this end, we have proposed two models that provide empirical evidence on the process through which an audiovisual production such as Squid Game impacts the intention to visit South Korea.

On the one hand, the results of the first model support the central idea of our study: exposure to audiovisual content can trigger a psychological process in the audience that transforms their perception of the destination and predisposes them to visit it (Crespo-Almendros et al., 2025; Kim, 2012). Specifically, our findings show that viewing the Squid Game series has a significant influence on the three dimensions of destination image: cognitive, affective and conative, in line with previous studies. This suggests that the series operates through an affective-experiential flow rather than a purely rational one. Therefore, it can be concluded that audiovisual consumption does not merely inform; it activates a visceral predisposition to action. Notably, it is the conative image, followed by the affective image, that is, most strongly influenced by viewing the series. Therefore, it can be concluded that audiovisual consumption not only informs or excites, but also activates a predisposition to action. At the same time, the results confirm that only the affective and especially the conative dimensions of destination image exert a significant influence on visit intention, whereas the cognitive dimension does not show a direct effect. This finding reinforces the idea that emotional evaluation and behavioural predisposition play a more decisive role than purely informational perceptions in shaping tourism decisions related to audiovisual fiction.

On the other hand, our findings in the second proposed model allow us to clearly identify which forms of engagement with the Squid Game series translate into a greater intention to visit the destination featured in the series (El Maich & Zniber, 2023; Xia et al., 2022). Among the three dimensions analysed (cognitive, affective and conative) it is conative engagement that has the most significant impact on both visit intention and engagement with the destination. This finding confirms that action-oriented attitudes are particularly influential in the viewer's predisposition to become a visitor. In contrast, affective engagement shows a negative relationship with both dependent variables. Its negative association with visit intention and engagement with the destination suggests that, while an emotional connection to the series may be intense, it does not necessarily translate into tourist interest. In the case of Squid Game, this could be because the predominant emotions are tension, suffering, or social criticism, which could generate rejection or prevent idealisation of the real place. This finding is crucial for understanding the "analytical density" of the phenomenon: while an emotional connection to the plot may be intense, the nature of the emotions in Squid Game (tension, suffering, social criticism) does not necessarily lead to the traditional idealisation of the place.

Unlike the "escapist" emotions of other genres, the engagement here is rooted in a fascination with the creative and symbolic power of the narrative. This emotional and symbolic connection often transcends the screen and translates into digital participation, cultural affinity, and a desire to visit South Korea. In this sense, a feedback loop is observed that explains the power of global phenomena such as Squid Game, where the viewer's experience is prolonged and amplified through digital practices. Regarding cognitive engagement, no significant effects were observed on engagement with the destination or on visit intention, indicating that a rational or informative understanding of the plot and the cultural environment represented is not enough to mobilise tourism decisions. Finally, it is confirmed that engagement with the destination acts as a mediator between engagement with the series and visit intention (Cheung et al., 2023; Molinillo et al., 2019).

To further deepen this analysis, it is relevant to contrast these effects with other Hallyu phenomena. Our findings suggest that Squid Game's effects on visit intention are qualitatively different from those of the previous successful Korean audiovisual content in a global context. While productions like Crash Landing on You have promoted tourism through romantic idealisation, emotional warmth and the aesthetic promotion of identifiable filming locations, Squid Game is much more symbolic and iconographic in how it engages. That configuration of narratives, defined by dystopian realism, social critique and emotional tension, might mitigate such direct translation of affective engagement into visit intention. It also helps in establishing South Korea as a centre for cultural innovation and creative leadership, and thus to attract international visitors who are curious about cultural curiosity or who take up media pilgrimage, or who have an interest in global pop-culture phenomena. In this respect, fiction-induced tourism cannot be read in the abstract of the idyllic destination image but also in the particular terms in which it engages with narrative meanings and experiential imaginaries.

In summary, both models converge on one key point: audiovisual fiction activates emotional and action-oriented mechanisms rather than purely informative processes. In terms of both image and engagement, affective and conative factors better explain the intention to visit the destination, whereas purely cognitive elements lack a significant direct impact. This finding reinforces the idea that fiction-induced tourism operates more on a symbolic and experiential level than on a rational one.

6.1. Theoretical contributions

This research contributes to the academic literature on film-induced tourism in several ways:

- Firstly, it advances our understanding of this phenomenon from two complementary perspectives: image construction (model 1) and series engagement (model 2). This approach provides a broader and richer explanation of the effect of film productions on tourist behaviour, specifically on the intention to visit and engage with the tourist destination featured in the fiction.
- Secondly, by analysing separately the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions of both engagement with the series and the image of the destination, the study shows that not all forms of connection generate the same effects. This finding challenges the idea that greater engagement always implies a greater intention to visit.
- Finally, it is worth highlighting an unexpected result that qualifies previous studies: affective engagement with the series does not always drive the intention to visit the destination. The negative result between affective engagement and visitation suggests that strong emotional involvement with the series does not guarantee interest in the destination. It may indicate that negative feelings or distress generated by the series inhibit the desire to visit the places depicted.

6.2. Implications for management

Our findings have several implications for the management of tourist destinations. Firstly, it is important to prioritise audiovisual content that stimulates action (desire to participate, experience something similar, share it), as this content has proven to be more effective than purely informative or emotional content. Therefore, campaigns should focus on creating a bridge between the audiovisual experience and the real possibility of living it at the destination. Secondly, given that strong emotional engagement does not guarantee tourist interest, but can even generate rejection if the emotions are negative (pain, injustice, violence), promotional strategies must carefully select which scenes and values of the destination to represent. Thirdly, it is necessary to facilitate the identification of real locations where the series was filmed. This identification will help to build a symbolic link that reinforces engagement with

the destination. The design and implementation of themed routes, immersive experiences and content related to the series can amplify this effect. Fourthly, it is advisable to design strategies that increase and strengthen engagement with the series. For example, to reinforce conative engagement, it is recommended to offer experiential activities, such as guided tours or themed escape rooms. Additionally, offering explanatory, cultural, and historical content about the destination would help increase cognitive engagement.

6.3. Limitations and future lines of research

Like any empirical study, this research has certain limitations that must be recognised in order to establish the basis for future research. First, the effect of image and engagement (with the series and the destination) on the intention to visit South Korea has been investigated through a single television series, *Squid Game*, which limits the generalisation of the findings to other audiovisual productions with different characteristics. Although this series was chosen for its strong global impact, narrative content, and cultural relevance, future research could contrast these results using different genres, formats, and cultural contexts, including more positive fiction or fiction focused on the direct promotion of destinations. Secondly, the study is based on a cross-sectional design, which prevents definitive causal relationships between variables from being established. It would be advisable to apply longitudinal or experimental designs in future research, which would allow changes in perception and visit intention to be observed over time, or after controlled exposure to different audiovisual content. A third limitation lies in the emotional complexity of the content analysed. Affective engagement with the series has shown negative effects on visit intention, which raises doubts about the emotional valence of the content and its relationship with tourist behaviour. This aspect deserves to be explored in greater depth in order to establish possible differences between positive, negative or ambivalent emotions generated by audiovisual narratives. In this sense, social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram prove to be essential as digital spaces where the destination's image is visually reinterpreted. Further studies need to investigate how UGC and viral challenges involving *Squid Game* can counter psychological negative effects, or enhance aspirational effects from a 'digital prosumer' perspective. This would make it possible to shed more light on the emotional contagion effect and have an understanding of its ability to maintain tourist engagement long after the initial broadcast (Blanco-Moreno et al., 2024; Molinillo et al., 2019). Also, in future research, it would be interesting to explore the mediating and/or moderating effect of culture by conducting a cross-cultural analysis. In this regard, it is recommended that comparative studies be carried out between countries or cultures to analyse whether the influence of the same series varies according to the culture of the audience, their levels of familiarity with the destination, or their previous travel experiences.

Finally, it should be noted as a limitation that this study focuses exclusively on quantitative data. Future research could benefit from qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, to explain —from the viewers' own narratives— the specific nuances through which a dystopian series like *Squid Game* manages to activate tourist desire.

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