



FILM - AN EFFECTIVE PROMOTIONAL FORM FOR TOURISM ACTIVITIES IN THE MEKONG DELTA

Nguyen Ngoc Diep¹; Dinh Dao Linh²

¹ Dong Nai Technology University;

² Cultural, sports and Tourism Center of My Tho city

Email: nguyennngocdiep@dentu.edu.vn;

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Abstract

The Mekong Delta is one of the seven tourist regions in Vietnam, known for its unique beauty, culture, and geography. These factors have made the image of the Western region stand out in the minds of domestic and international tourists. In 2023, in response to the government's digital transformation movement, the tourism industry has continuously strengthened its partnerships and promoted destinations through digital transformation and the application of Industry 4.0 technologies. However, in reality, from 2017 until now, and even in previous years, the promotion of Vietnam's destinations has mainly relied on the "film" media channel, but this activity has not been truly effective due to its fragmented nature, lack of a clear direction, and limited investment and attention from relevant authorities and tourism businesses. Using data collection methods and the author's experiences combined with expert methods, this study focuses on analyzing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) of tourism promotion through film. Based on this analysis, the author proposes directions and recommendations for the collaboration between "Film Production Units - Tourism Units - Local Authorities" to achieve effective marketing for the Western region, leveraging its inherent potential.



ĐIỆN ẢNH - HÌNH THỨC QUẢNG BÁ HIỆU QUẢ CHO HOẠT ĐỘNG DU LỊCH CỦA ĐỒNG BẰNG SÔNG CỬU LONG

Nguyễn Ngọc Diệp¹, Đinh Dao Linh²

¹ Trường Đại học Công nghệ Đồng Nai, Việt Nam

² Trung tâm văn hóa, thể thao và du lịch Thành phố Mỹ Tho.

Email: nguyenngocdiep@dntu.edu.vn

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Từ khóa

Du lịch qua điện ảnh, phim về
Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long,
quảng bá du lịch.

Tóm tắt

Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long là một trong bảy vùng du lịch của Việt Nam với những nét đẹp và đặc thù riêng về văn hóa và địa mạo, chính hai yếu tố này đã làm nổi bật hình ảnh điểm đến miền Tây trong lòng du khách trong và ngoài nước. Năm 2023, hưởng ứng phong trào chuyển đổi số của Chính phủ, ngành du lịch không ngừng đẩy mạnh liên kết, quảng bá điểm đến kết hợp chuyển đổi số và ứng dụng công nghệ 4.0. Thực tế từ năm 2017 đến nay, và cả một vài năm trước đó, các điểm đến của Việt Nam được biết đến thông qua kênh truyền thông “điện ảnh” là chủ yếu, nhưng hoạt động này chưa thật sự hiệu quả, do vẫn còn đơn lẻ, chưa có lộ trình cũng như chưa được đầu tư và quan tâm của các cấp, ngành và doanh nghiệp du lịch. Bằng phương pháp thu thập dữ liệu, trải nghiệm của tác giả kết hợp với phương pháp chuyên gia, nghiên cứu này tập trung phân tích những điểm mạnh, điểm yếu, cơ hội và thách thức (SWOT) của hoạt động quảng bá du lịch bằng điện ảnh. Qua đó, tác giả đưa ra những định hướng, đề xuất cho sự liên kết giữa “Đơn vị làm phim - Đơn vị du lịch và chính quyền địa phương”, nhằm đạt được hiệu quả marketing điểm đến Miền Tây như tiềm năng vốn có của nơi này.

1. Statement

In 2017, Vietnamese cinema gained attention from the community for its tourism promotion efforts through films, starting with the success of the movie “Kong - Skull Island.” However, in previous years, films such as “I See Yellow Flowers on Green Grass,” “Bright Kisses,” “The Lady Boss,” and music videos, as well as some TV shows, have also sparked curiosity among viewers about the featured locations. Tourism promotion materials for the Mekong Delta have been disseminated through media channels, primarily commissioned and produced by central

and local tourism management agencies in the form of documentaries, television reports, or compilation videos showcasing local tourist attractions or specific destinations. These promotional materials share a common approach resembling news bulletins, focusing more on informational and educational aspects rather than tourism and entertainment. The target audience and objectives also differ among these materials. Consequently, these films have limited appeal and fail to achieve effective tourism promotion. Observations and quick interviews with some tourists show that they access destination information through social media,

posts by influential individuals such as Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs), TikTokers, famous artists, or through “blockbuster art projects”...

The transformation of tourism in tandem with digital technology nowadays requires continuous updates and changes in promotional approaches. For example, in early September 2023, the Department of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of Dong Thap province launched a campaign to promote local specialties and OCOP (One Commune One Product) products in combination with digital tourism. From this initiative, content creators have the flexibility to produce short clips, films, or TV shows that creatively introduce the people and land of Dong Thap, catering to different groups of tourists. The Mekong Delta (Southwest region) comprises 12 provinces and 1 centrally-governed city, divided into two tourist sub-regions: the East and the West of the Mekong Delta. Localities collaborate to develop tourism products tailored to each region’s unique characteristics. However, tourism activities and promotion efforts in these localities remain fragmented and passive.

During the research process, the author reviewed and compared previous studies by authors Dương Kim Chuyền and La Thi Mong Linh (2018), Đoàn Mạnh Cường (2015) [2], and Nguyễn Thúy Vi (2018) [6], which focused on analyzing the impact of information technology and cinema on tourism promotion in Vietnam or specific localities. Based on these studies, the author inherited and expanded the research to the scale of a specific destination in the Western region of the Mekong Delta. Recognizing the difficulties and challenges in tourism promotion, the author aims to clarify the reasons behind the current situation of tourism promotion through films and propose solutions to combine traditional film promotion with digital platforms for promoting destinations in the Mekong Delta. The author will proceed with collecting data on films, tourism, existing issues in image-based tourism promotion in the Mekong Delta region, and the current preferences of tourists. This will serve as a foundation to propose solutions for localities, businesses, and management authorities on how to approach and create suitable promotional products for the potential target customers of the Mekong Delta destination in the future.

2. Research Methodology

The main subject of this study is the tourism promotion activities of the Mekong Delta, specifically the products that convey messages through film and cinematography, such as television shows, movies, and documentaries. The methods chosen and applied by the author for this research are data synthesis and analysis, experimental methods combined with expert methods. The author conducts data synthesis and analysis by gathering information, theoretical foundations, and analyzing factors and characteristics related to tourism, cinematography, and destination promotion through film in the Mekong Delta region. The theoretical foundations obtained serve as guidelines for the experimentation and evaluation of selected representative films. Subsequently, a comparison and analysis of the current social, economic, and tourism situation are conducted using the author’s observations and the opinions of experts who represent the government tourism management agencies and tourism enterprises.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. *Film and Tourism Promotion in the Mekong Delta Region*

Tourism refers to activities related to people’s travel outside their usual place of residence for a period not exceeding one continuous year, with the purpose of meeting the needs of sightseeing, relaxation, entertainment, learning, and exploring tourism resources combined with other legitimate purposes (National Assembly, 2017). Destination marketing, on the other hand, refers to all processes and activities aimed at attracting tourists to the service providers in that destination. Destination marketing does not specifically promote a particular supplier or business, but it stimulates demand, influences choices, and increases the number of tourists visiting (Pham Hong Chuong, 2007).

According to the Film Law of 2022, “Film is a composite art form that applies audiovisual technology and creative techniques to produce movies”; “A film is a cinematographic work with content, expressed through continuous moving images or images created by technical devices and technologies, with or without

sound and other effects according to the principles of film language; it is recorded on materials, digitally or through other technical means, and disseminated to viewers, including various types of films such as feature films, documentaries, science films, animations, and mixed-genre films.” In reality, film is not only an entertainment industry but also a combination of art and culture.

Tourism and film share common attributes of entertainment, exploration, and discovering new things, providing human values and satisfying the needs for rest and entertainment. Based on the author’s experience and observations, it is not difficult to see that tourism promotion through film is no longer unfamiliar in countries with developed tourism industries such as South Korea, Japan, the United States, and India. While films are not primarily made for tourism promotion, viewers are fascinated and drawn to the filming locations, as well as the characters and the depicted regions. As a result, a new form of tourism has emerged, which involves visiting, learning, and experiencing film sets or local cultures related to the characters in the films. According to Korea.net, after the influx of Korean TV dramas and popular music in 1992, the “Hallyu” wave emerged and excited fans started visiting the filming locations. As of December 2017, there were 73.12 million members of fan clubs in various fields including film, cuisine, and Korean tourism, coming from 92 countries including Asia, Australia, America, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. According to Hoang Lan (2023) [4], film has truly boosted tourism, and the movie “A tourist’s guide to love” was licensed by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism and was released on Netflix in May 2023, creating a sensation in Vietnam and many other countries. Many international tourists expressed on social media that they wanted to visit Vietnam after watching this film.

Film is a form of “subtle” promotion that easily appeals to people through content, settings, performances by actors, and other elements. The simplicity of human life and the landscapes of the Mekong Delta are vividly and realistically portrayed in films, capturing the hearts of the audience. Moreover, film helps the people of the Mekong Delta region

introduce their local landmarks, evoking various emotions with different destinations and impressive tourism products such as occupations related to rivers and water (boat building, fishing net making, “bottom ploughing” occupation, etc.), flood season cuisine (fermented fish, dried fish, lotus stem salad, etc.), folk art forms (chants, songs, “lô tô” singing, traditional music bands, etc.), and the lifestyle of “thuong ho” (floating market trading). Another advantage of incorporating film into tourism promotion is the “fan base” of actors and celebrities who participate in the films. They can support the film crew, actors, and local areas in promoting the work and the destination. TV dramas introduce the beauty of the Mekong Delta’s people and landscapes with the simplicity of “the riverine garden culture,” such as traditional cuisine and customs (“Co Tham Ve Lang,” “Tet Oi, Xuan A”), traditional occupations (Tân Châu silk making in the film “Silk Eyes,” boat building in the film “Fragrance of the Phu Sa”), the unique characteristics of the Mekong Delta region (films like “Endless Fields,” “Buffalo Season”), historical struggles and the spirit of fighting against invaders (films like “Wild Fields,” “The Phu Sa Trails”), or the ancient Southern family culture depicting the landlord and tenant class (films like Earthly Paradise, Tay Do Beauty,...). Or most recently, in early 2023, the movie Turn Face 6 and in October there was the release of the movie Southern Forest Land, which is also causing a stir among viewers with scenes shot in the West (Dong Thap and An Giang). Thanks to these cinematographic works, it helps localities preserve the traditional professions that are being lost, and motivates tourists to visit the locations where the films are set. Cinematographic works that are adapted or inspired or have newly created content all have the meaning of introducing culture, conveying humanistic messages and linking tradition with modernity. To evaluate the effectiveness of communication and promotion of Vietnamese tourism through cinema, Mr. Le Hong Thai (Director of HanoiTourist Travel Company) stated that tourism benefits a lot from promotional activities on cinema (Hoang Lan, 2023) [4].

When a filmmaker chooses a Western river as a film backdrop, it will bring viewers newness and low

film production costs (no need to build a grand studio, rental fees for filming locations are relatively low). , people in the Western region are hospitable, so the crew easily received support when filming, etc. Activities to promote the image of the Mekong Delta to audiences both domestically and internationally, creating a premise for developing regional tourism , thereby awakening the potential for economic development of tourism and cinema in the region and the positive effects brought by tourism: job opportunities, upgraded infrastructure, access to development. of urban areas,... With the strengths that cinema and tourism bring to each other, functional units can take advantage of opportunities for people in the West to benefit from the number of tourists arriving and film works being well received by the community. With a high “rating” rate (program viewership rate), not only film producers but also advertising businesses also gain quite a large economic profit from the film. Or thanks to the viewership ratings and reviews from the traditional values of the work, some films received nominations and prestigious awards, such as the film *Co Tham Returns to Village 4*, which won the “Vietnamese Television Film” award. “Most Popular Male” at the 2019 *Ngoi Sao Xanh* award [8], [9].

3.2. The reality of promoting tourism in the Mekong Delta region through cinema

Cinema brings many advantages for the development of tourism in the Mekong Delta region, specifically, and tourism in Vietnam in general. However, there are still several limitations and challenges that need to be addressed in using cinema as a marketing tool for the Mekong Delta region. These include:

Firstly, currently, there are many films about the Western river region, but they mainly consist of documentaries and television dramas. These types of films target housewives and those who have an interest in research, so their promotional role is limited. Each genre of film (cinema, television, documentary, etc.) has a different target audience, so filmmakers need to be cautious in directing, writing scripts, and conveying messages that are suitable for the main audience of the work. Although there have been efforts to promote tourism through cinema, the actual activities have mostly been limited to producing multi-episode

documentaries, news reports, or short promotional films aired on television in some countries. This approach is costly and yields modest results. In addition, television dramas about the Western region are primarily broadcast in the Mekong Delta, Ho Chi Minh City, and some neighboring provinces. Therefore, viewers are not particularly interested in visiting and exploring the locations featured in the films, as the culture of the river region is familiar to them, or tourists mainly engage in day trips or short visits, resulting in lower tourism spending.

Secondly, the Mekong Delta region has a complex system of canals and channels, which is a unique feature and a specific tourism product that attracts visitors. Therefore, most localities in the Western region have similar tourism products and landscapes. Filmmakers need to have a better understanding of the actual locations to choose suitable and distinctive filming scenes, thereby creating a unique feature for the film and attracting the audience. This requires coordination between tourism agencies and the local community.

Thirdly, film promotion and publicity have been neglected for many years and have not received adequate attention from film crews and investors. As a result, after production, films are quietly broadcasted in a certain time slot on a few television channels. This affects the film’s revenue, makes it difficult for filmmakers to assess the true quality of the work, and diminishes their enthusiasm for other film projects. Moreover, viewership is low, and there is little interest in watching the films or staying updated on related information. On the other hand, poor publicity results in less attention to the film, low ratings, and fewer television channels choosing to air it, leading to the neglect or outdatedness of tourism information and the film’s messages. Currently, some television stations have started paying attention to this issue. For example, Vinh Long Television station introduces films with trailers for each episode, Ho Chi Minh City Television station widely announces the broadcasting schedule of films for the week/month, and Vietnam Television publishes film reviews to stimulate viewers to re-watch and be impressed by notable film scenes. This approach

helps films reach the audience more quickly, even those who do not regularly follow films.

Fourthly, filmmakers do not truly understand the culture of the Western river region, specifically, and the culture of the Southern region in general. Researching, understanding, and incorporating customs, dialects, and the river culture into film works is a difficult issue that requires consultation and in-depth knowledge. Some films set in the Western and Southern regions in the past have used modern language and costumes or inappropriate behavior by characters, which has reduced the quality of the film and left viewers dissatisfied with negative impressions. The superficial exploration of the setting and the depiction of the personalities of people in the Western region also diminishes the audience's interest, reduces the attractiveness and curiosity of visitors to the destination.

Fifthly, information about filming locations is often introduced after the end of TV episodes (television dramas, documentaries) or the film itself (cinema), with small-sized text, fast pace, and limited information. During this time frame, the audience is usually less interested and may switch channels or leave immediately after the film ends. Therefore, the effectiveness of introducing information about destinations or the names of supporting actors is very low. On the contrary, there is an excessive amount of time allocated for advertisements. However, this is an essential need for television stations to increase their revenue.

Sixth, the difficulty in choosing the setting, building the film set, and the activities of the film crew and facilities also makes filmmakers afraid. In addition, people in the West are not familiar with "filmmaking", so convincing people to rent a location is also a difficult task or can easily cause cultural conflicts as well as the interests of both parties and licensing. Recording locally is also a difficult problem.

Seventh, the Mekong Delta or the Mekong River Delta through the camera angles of the filmmakers is sparkingly beautiful but also very realistic, making the audience feel excited to come. However, from cinema to actual sightseeing to professional travel experiences, there are still many shortcomings. Because

the information recorded on the film is limited, the audience visits on their own and spontaneously, leading to the fact that the film and real life are two different perspectives. This makes it easy for audiences/tourists to lose trust in Western cinema and tourism because the region's facilities and tourism service system are still limited, especially the majority of people are not familiar with the activities. Business Travel.

3.3. Effective Use of Film in Promoting Tourism in the Mekong Delta

3.3.1. Film Production Unit

It is necessary to have a clear understanding of the local culture to create creative and flexible materials for scriptwriting and film directing. The film production team needs to be proactive in seeking investors for the project, which allows the filmmakers to secure funding for film production and receive support in promoting the film and other related tasks.

The director and screenwriter should consider both creative expression and the preservation of the local cultural beauty, minimizing the impact of the film crew on the daily lives of local residents. Additionally, cinema plays a role in communication and education; therefore, the film's content needs to be reviewed and approved by the filmmakers and the relevant authorities (the Film Department).

The film production unit should consider and arrange information about destinations and the culture of the Mekong Delta in appropriate segments or release trailers and behind-the-scenes clips to provide additional introductions to the filming locations and the local culture. Through these supplementary clips, actors and the film crew can share the filmmaking process, naturally introducing the destinations without following a standardized approach, creating a subtle yet impactful impression on the audience through the episodes. Strengthening film promotion from the beginning of the production through media outlets, local authorities, and sponsors (if any) is crucial. Additionally, the film crew should enhance interaction on social media platforms to create a viral effect within the online community, fan clubs, and other potential audiences.

Advertising information should be thoughtfully incorporated into the film to achieve the goal of promoting the product without compromising the film's quality or causing discomfort to viewers. Television stations, in particular, can consider reducing or limiting the duration of advertisements. It is especially important for the film crew to creatively caption filming locations in the film, avoiding clichés.

3.3.2. Tourism Units

Tourism units, especially local tourism agencies, can commission film production companies to create promotional films for the province's tourism. Proactive investment and selection of filming locations will contribute to promoting local tourism, facilitating the film crew's preparations for welcoming tourists. Moreover, local tourism units and film production companies can collaborate on promoting the film and the destinations, creating a dual marketing effect for the product.

Travel companies can organize "farm trips" tours that allow directors, screenwriters, actors, and media to experience the destinations, immerse themselves in the local culture and people's way of life. This helps film production companies accumulate materials for film creation and contribute to promoting local tourism through the followers of actors and celebrities in fan clubs. Additionally, travel companies and local tourist attractions can collaborate to build themed areas based on popular films or create smaller film sets, providing tourists with more options for their visits. Furthermore, tourism businesses can generate additional income by renting out locations for wedding photoshoots, filming, or organizing special events for organizations or individuals with specific needs.

Travel agencies can actively market and sell new products and tour packages based on the audience's response to the film. This allows travel agencies to proactively promote and sell new products, providing customers with the opportunity to explore new destinations with careful preparations from the travel company. Additionally, travel agencies play a role in bridging the gap between tourists and the local community, helping the local area predict visitor trends and the number of tourists arriving in a specific period.

3.3.3. Local Government

For many years, the tourism industry has been creating promotional videos about Vietnam tourism, ranging from a few seconds to a few minutes in length, and broadcasting them on international television channels or some national television channels. These short-duration videos have limited content but high costs, and although the number of tourists visiting Vietnam has only increased slightly, they mainly target foreign visitors, while the Vietnamese market has been neglected in recent years. The promotion of tourism in the Mekong Delta region and domestic tourism, in general, is primarily carried out through the information channels and websites of travel companies. In addition, some television stations with documentary or series programs such as "Miền Tây Trong Tôi" (My Mekong Delta), "Miền Tây Du Ký" (Mekong Delta Chronicles), "Rong Ruổi Đất Phương Nam" (Wandering in the Southern Land), are helping viewers to gain concise information about the destinations. These activities once again show that the promotion of tourism in the Mekong Delta region has not received much attention and is mainly driven by individual businesses silently. Viewers have to search for information themselves if they need it, while marketing should be proactive in making consumers aware of the products and creating the motivation to consume those products, which the Vietnamese film industry and tourism have not been able to achieve for many years.

The local governments in the Mekong Delta region need mechanisms or policies to support and encourage directors and filmmakers to pay attention to or "commission" the production of films with content or settings related to the destinations. This brings benefits to both parties. Currently, local television stations such as Vinh Long Television, Can Tho Television, and Ho Chi Minh City Television are implementing cooperation programs by commissioning film production companies, film crews, and media companies to produce television programs and copyrighted TV series. For example, in 2021, the films "Dap Tat Lua Long" (Extinguish the Fire in the Heart) and "Tinh Mau Tu" (Maternal Love) were broadcast on Vinh Long Television at 8:00 pm from Monday to Saturday. Alternatively, local authorities can actively

invite directors and film producers to visit as part of a “famtrip” to introduce and attract film investment to local tourist attractions. This activity has been actively implemented by the provincial government of Quảng Bình after the release of the film “Kong - Skull Island.”

After the completion of the film projects, the promotion of the films is mainly carried out by the film crew, producers, and the cast. However, it would be more effective if the local community also participates in the promotion. For example, the films “Co Tham Ve Lang” (Miss Thắm Goes Back to the Village) and “Lat Mat 6” (Face Off 6) were filmed in the Sa Dec flower garden and Dinh Yen village (Đồng Tháp province), and the film “Huong Phu Sa” (Scent of Burnt Grass) was filmed in Ben Tre province. The localities need to have promotion campaigns or collaborate with film crews to introduce these works. In addition, before, during, and after filming, the localities need to provide support to the film crew, such as assisting in finding filming locations, negotiating rental agreements for settings (ancient houses, local residences, businesses, etc.), providing accommodation for the crew, and particularly sharing information about the local area and the way of life of the people in the Mekong Delta region.

The Mekong Delta region, with its rivers and canals, remote and rustic landscapes, and people who still maintain a simple rural lifestyle, is very suitable for works depicting the ancient and contemporary way of life and people in the South. On the other hand, due to the specific characteristics and nature of the people in the riverine region, who have not had much exposure to filmmaking and tourism activities, cultural shocks are inevitable. Therefore, local governments need to disseminate information, provide training, monitor, and support the local residents in accessing and integrating with the opportunities, challenges, and adaptations brought about by tourism activities.

Furthermore, in order for film projects to thrive, cinema complexes need to arrange and prioritize favorable screening times for films, especially those produced in Vietnam and associated with tourism promotion, which are licensed by the Film Department and the Tourism Department. For television series, television stations need to prioritize prime time slots

and rearrange the duration of advertising to enhance the promotion of films on social media channels.

The Film Department should support film crews in the censorship process, provide feedback, and make adjustments to the content to facilitate the film production. Avoiding situations where a film is completed, including post-production, but fails to meet the requirements of the regulatory authority during the censorship process, leading to the suspension or cutting of certain segments of the film. This creates confusion and concern for the filmmakers and affects the overall quality and impact of the films.

In conclusion, the local government in the Mekong Delta region plays a crucial role in promoting tourism through film production. They should implement supportive policies, collaborate with film crews, and actively participate in the promotion of films. By doing so, they can attract more tourists, both domestic and international, to the region and showcase its unique cultural and natural attractions. Additionally, providing support and training to local residents in adapting to tourism activities is essential for sustainable development.

4. Conclusion

The promotion of tourist destinations, especially in the Mekong Delta region, through film works is still limited and passive, without fully exploiting the potential and existing advantages of both sectors. Within the scope of this study, the author has identified several obstacles and proposed solutions to help remove barriers and enhance the connection between the Film Unit, Tourist Unit, and Local Government to harness the roles and strengths of both Vietnam’s tourism and film industries. This, in turn, creates a competitive advantage for the Vietnamese tourism market on a global scale. Additionally, synchronized cooperation in investment policies and management of tourism and film will contribute to promoting tourism investment, improving economic efficiency, and, most importantly, avoiding potential tourism fees for the region and Vietnam as a whole. The research findings of this article will provide guidance for further in-depth studies on local tourism promotion through film works, especially on digital platforms.

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