

From film tourism to media pilgrimage: visiting the 'real Mama-Coco' in Indigenous Mexico

Del turismo fílmico al peregrinaje mediático: visitando a "la Mamá Coco real" en el México indígena

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Abstract

*This research analyzes the phenomenon of tourist travel to some destinations in relation to the animated film *Coco*, based on the Day of the Dead tradition celebrated in Mexico, and the motivations of tourists to travel; Thus, from a qualitative approach, it is shown how visitors of "Mama Coco" in Michoacan incur in behavioral patterns explained by the concept of media pilgrimage, but unlike similar trips, commonly linked to sites, in this case the center is found in a person whom they associate with feelings of nostalgia and family ties.*

Keywords: Media pilgrimage; Day of the Dead; film-induced tourism; cartoon-induced tourism; media narratives.

Resumen

En esta investigación se analiza el fenómeno del desplazamiento de turistas a algunos destinos a propósito del filme animado *Coco*, basado en la tradición de Día de Muertos celebrada en México y las motivaciones de los turistas para desplazarse; de modo que a partir de un enfoque cualitativo, se muestra cómo los visitantes de "Mamá Coco" en Michoacán incurren en patrones de comportamiento explicados por el concepto de *peregrinación mediática*, pero a diferencia de viajes similares, comúnmente ligados a sitios, en este caso el centro se encuentra en una persona a la que asocian con sentimientos de nostalgia y lazos familiares.

Palabras clave: Peregrinación mediática, Día de Muertos, turismo inducido por el cine, turismo inducido por dibujos animados, narrativas mediáticas.

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Introduction

The global tourist map brings fame to many places because of their relationship with media and popular culture. Visiting sites somehow related to literature, music, sports, film, television, and recently, digital media and social networks, is defined as media tourism, and popular culture tourism (Butler, 1990; Couldry, 2000; Lundberg and Ziakas, 2018; Månsson *et al.*, 2020;) or content tourism –in Japan (Yamamura, 2015).

New fields of study related to the motivation of travel have been defined. Works addressing travels and destinations featured in the audio-visual media (soap operas, movies, TV series), as well as sites related to this type of productions (theme parks, film studios, TV sets, celebrity residences, film festivals, filmed spots tours), fall within the fields of screen tourism, film tourism, film-induced tourism and cinematic tourism (Beeton, 2016; Tzanelli, 2007).

The relationship between tourism and cinema/audio-visual media has been examined by several disciplines and with different objectives. Several studies have scrutinised the phenomenon of increased visits to a site after its appearance on film (Tzanelli, 2004; Di Cesare *et al.*, 2009; Costa and Alvarado-Sizzo, 2021), analysing the perception of visitors to such sites (Ono *et al.*, 2020), the insights of the receiving community (Beeton, 2016), and the impact on hospitality in film-associated locations (Tzanelli, 2007). However, few studies have explored the concept of media pilgrimage (Couldry, 2000; 2003), which stresses the role of media (film and TV) in promoting touristic destinations.

The relationship between animation films and visitors' attraction to real places pictured in them, has been less explored (Nicosia, 2016; Yamamura, 2015; Ono *et al.*, 2020). Our study analyses the tourist activity that followed the release of the animated film *Coco* (directed by Lee Unkrich and Adrián Molina, for Disney-Pixar Corporation, 2017), which gets its inspiration from Mexican traditions and features landscapes of this country. Though Santa Cecilia –the fictional town where the story unfolds– is not a real place, many people assume the film is talking about Santa Fe de la Laguna (SFL), a small town in the vicinity of Lake Patzcuaro in the state of Michoacan, central-western Mexico. Since 2018, this town has been visited by many national and foreign tourists as a result of its association with the film, and remarkably after María-Salud, a local woman, was recognised as being the inspiration for the animated character 'Coco' due to her resemblance with the character in the film –an idea that the media has been quick in disseminating¹. María-Salud Ramírez (1913-2022) was an indigenous widow of the Purepecha ethnic group with numerous descendants (three children and dozens of grand and grand-grandchildren), who dedicated her life to her home and pottery handcrafting. Before her resemblance with the movie character jumped her into the media to become viral, María-Salud was an anonymous inhabitant of a small indigenous town and had a normal life out of the public eye.

Coco recreates the Day of the Dead (*Día de Muertos*, in Spanish), a celebration that since 1920 has been considered representative of Mexican identity and tradition (Hellier-Tinoco, 2010) and is recognised by Unesco as Intangible

¹ María-Salud Caballero, recently known as 'the real mama-Coco' passed on 16th October, 2022 (García, 2022). Nevertheless, her home remains open to public visitation and is still a tourist spot (Arce, 2022).

Cultural Heritage. In 2018, the year following this film's release, an increase of 22.5% in tourist arrivals to the region was reported by the Secretaría de Turismo de Michoacán (Sectur-Michoacán, 2019; graph 1).

This paradigmatic case illustrates a unique relationship between tourism and animation based on an ethnic tradition. Our goal here is to characterise media pilgrimage to the home of 'the *real* Mama-Coco' and to explore the motivations of those who participate in it. To do so, a literature review has been conducted on the relationship between film and tourism (including the field of animation-induced tourism), with special emphasis on the concept of *media pilgrimage*, fundamental to this discussion. The methodological procedure comprises: 1) a review of the media narrative that presents SFL as a destination related to *Coco* and that has constructed the myth of 'the *real* Mama-Coco'; and 2) fieldwork on the site applying ethnographic tools: participant observation and structured interviews with visitors. The results disclose the media narratives and the unique dynamics of this media pilgrimage in SFL, which are discussed based on Couldry's concepts and definitions (2000, 2003), situating this particular tourist phenomenon in the society of spectacle and hyper-reality (Baudrillard, 1978; Debord, 1995).

1. Literature review

1.1. From film tourism to secular pilgrimages

The phenomenon of tourists' attraction to places represented on screen has been discussed since the early 1990s, using various concepts, which can be grouped under two different perspectives:

- a) **Business perspective:** considers works that focus on the study of the effects of film on tourism with an emphasis on the management and image of the destination, the economic impact due to the arrival of visitors, the transformation(s) of the host communities, and the perception and motivation of visitors (Beeton, 2016; Kim and Richardson, 2003; Karpovich, 2010; Riley *et al.*, 1998). Tourism management and marketing have given more attention to this perspective (Fernandez and Young, 2008; Oviedo *et al.*, 2016; Nicosia, 2016).
- b) **Socio-cultural perspective:** includes studies related to cinematic tourism by analyzing the film-tourism relationship beyond the economic effects and within broader cultural and social processes (Månsson *et al.*, 2020; Lundberg and Ziakas, 2018; Couldry, 2000, 2003; Tzanelli, 2007; Yamamura, 2015). Social Sciences and Humanities have worked mostly on this perspective. Geography, for instance, has explored the social and cultural effects of movie tourism as well as imaginaries inducted by films (Gámir y Valdés, 2007; Costa and Alvarado-Sizzo, 2021). Recent research in the area of communication has focused on audiovisual narrative as a product itself (Nieto *et al.*, 2015) as well as the study of audiences (Castro-Mariño, 2018).

Karpovich (2010) points out that, from the perspective of socio-cultural studies, media studies, sociology and fan studies, the term pilgrimage is usually understood as belonging to a larger phenomenon conceptualised as secular pilgrimage (Margry, 2008); that is, the affluence to sites which, not being necessarily religious, are consecrated by popular culture (Aden, 1999; Kim, 2010; 2012; Thelen and Kim, 2021). Among such sites, those related to film stand out (Couldry, 2000, 2003; Tzanelli, 2007, 2017; Yamamura, 2015).

The literature review demonstrates the impact of film and media on the attraction of certain tourist spots. The case of the film saga *The Lord of the Rings* and its impact on tourism in New Zealand –the main location– is well known (Carl *et al.*, 2007; Tzanelli, 2004); as well as *Game of Thrones* and its significant influence on attracting tourists to the settings, mainly in Europe, where scenes were filmed (Alvarado-Sizzo *et al.*, 2023). Margry (2008) considers that the movie *The Doors* triggered visits to Jim Morrison's grave in the Parisian Père-Lachaise cemetery. Alvarado-Sizzo *et al.* (2023) point to a similar scenario in La Casa Azul-Frida Kahlo Museum, in Mexico City, after the successful film *Frida*. Recently, the French town Étretat, already famous for the literary work of Maurice Le Blanc, has undergone an increase in visitors motivated by the Netflix production *Lupin* (Thomas, 2021).

Animated/cartoon productions, although less discussed, are a strong motivator for film tourism. Chichibu in Japan, with landscapes similar to those appearing in the series *Anohana: The flower we saw that day* and in many other anime pieces, has become a place of anime pilgrimage (Ono *et al.*, 2020). Parallel displacements are observed in other contexts related to animations: *Frozen* boosted the arrival of visitors to Norway, a country whose landscapes inspired those of the Disney film (Nicosia, 2016); in Brazil, it happened with the film *Rio* (De Albuquerque Meneguel *et al.*, 2017).

Some authors have specifically characterised film-related travel as “media pilgrimage”. In his pioneering work, Couldry (2000, 2003) proposes the term based on visits to the set of the TV series *Coronation Street* in Manchester. Reijnders (2010) takes up the concept to analyse the behaviour of James Bond's fans in some locations of that saga in London. Although she does not use the term “media”, Tzanelli (2017) points out that the Greek island of Skopelos has increased in number of visitors and has become a cinematic pilgrimage site after the release of the Hollywood musical *Mamma Mia!* None of these studies have been carried out in the Mexican context; nor anywhere else with the specific focus on animated films related to ongoing traditions.

The concept of media pilgrimage allows us to understand the relationships between film, media, social structures and recreational mobility in the context of a hyperrealist world.

1.2. Media pilgrimages

Turner and Turner (1978) point out that pilgrimages can respond to motivations other than religion, and in general, they stem from the desire to get in touch with the values most cherished by the traveller. If these values are not religious, pilgrimages will seek another dimension (fandom, identity, culture). This is a way to situate oneself within a community. Drawing from Durkheim's ideas on pilgrimage to reaffirm social links, Couldry (2000; 2003) sees media pilgrimages

as part of the secular ones and indicates: “Any account of media pilgrimages needs, as with religious pilgrimage, to analyse the wider cultural and ritual space within which the act of pilgrimage makes sense [...] media rituals can only be understood as part of a wider ritual space” (2003, p. 79).

New tourist mobilities favour the increase of certain contemporary tourist expressions, such as dark tourism and cinematic tourism, widening the definition of ‘pilgrimages’ after Tzanelli (2017). Based on a series of authors that have theorised about pilgrimage (Durkheim, 1964; Turner and Turner, 1978; Eade and Sallnow, 2013; Graburn, 1997; Tzanelli, 2017 and Couldry, 2000) coincide that, in modern society, pilgrimage is still present in the cohesive function of religion, but it has turned into a kind of popular and secular mobility in which sacred places lose their original meaning and turn into containers of the backgrounds of visitors, inserted through tourism into capitalist systems.

Couldry has defined the ‘myth of the mediated centre’ (2003, p. 75), referring to those places on-screen that turn into popular tourist destinations and whose fame has to do with proximity and access to culture, people, and media processes –that is, the discourses and symbols around it–. At the heart of the categorisation and ordering of such places lies the ritual space of the media. Couldry’s interest focuses mainly on the ritual practices centred on such places and their relation with larger ritualisation patterns, which he has defined ‘media pilgrimages’ as:

Journeys to points with significance in media narratives. Through media pilgrimages, not only is the abstract nature of the media production system ‘re-embedded’ in an encounter, for example, with a site of filming or a celebrity, but the significance of places ‘in’ the media is more generally confirmed. The media pilgrimage is both a real journey across space and acting out in space of the constructed ‘distance’ between ‘ordinary world’ and ‘media world’. Media pilgrimages, therefore, enact a key structuring principle of the ritual space of the media, and not surprisingly are the focus of many detailed media rituals. (Couldry, 2003, pp. 75-76)

Couldry’s post-structuralist approach analyses how media rituals not only reflect but also build certain values. In the case of media pilgrimages, these values are related to the symbolic authority of the media. Reijnders (2010) adds that pilgrimages are not only about the physical movement to a place that is relevant in the media narrative, but also represent a symbolic journey in which the distance between the ‘ordinary world’ and ‘the world of the media’ momentarily collapses. Conversely, the distinction between both spheres and therefore the illusion that a border can be crossed, even if it is temporarily, legitimises the symbolic authority of the media.

In Couldry’s perspective (2000; 2003), when dealing with media pilgrimage it is important to consider: 1) the organisation of media space; 2) ritualised boundaries around the media world; 3) ritual practices: parcelling out, speaking for the world. Moreover, the author emphasises that each media pilgrimage has its dynamics and meanings: “The ritual space of the media is crossed by other forces, which, although they originate in the very same inequalities of symbolic power, distort the apparent significance of the ritual actions of particular actors” (Couldry, 2003, p. 87).

An interesting contribution to Couldry's proposal is the one by Reijnders (2010) on the risk of characterising media pilgrimages as a product of media power only, when it is necessary to consider the cultural roots of these pilgrimages, acknowledging that the power of the media is linked to other power structures, such as gender and ethnicity.

It should be noted that in the countries of the Global South, where the presence of indigenous groups converges with global movements –in what Couldry (2000) calls *translocal cultures*–, studies on film/media pilgrimage are scarce, so addressing the concept in the Mexican case contributes to broadening the geographical spectrum of studies on film and tourism.

2. Research context and methods

2.1. Study Area

On the shore of the mythic Lake Patzcuaro, at the heart of the Purepecha region in central-western Mexico (state of Michoacan), is Santa Fe de la Laguna (SFL), a small town of fishers and artisans. The population is 5300 inhabitants, 99% of whom are indigenous and speak Purepecha, an isolated original language (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [Inegi], 2020). As occurs with many other indigenous settlements in Mexico, the village has a high marginalisation level (Inegi, 2020). The main economic activity is handcrafting, mainly pottery (Inegi, 2021).

Until 2017, the town used to receive a few visitors interested in gastronomy, handcrafts, traditions, and in the history of the old hospital-town built in the sixteenth century as part of the utopian project of bishop Vasco de Quiroga (Warren, 1977). In November 2017, the release of *Coco* changed the life of this community through the media discourse that associated it with landscapes and characters appearing in the film (figure 1). Secretaría de Turismo Michoacán reported an increase in tourist numbers in the state, considering the arrivals between 2014 and 2019 (graphic 1). The highest increase (22%) occurred in 2018, one year after the release of *Coco*. The growth is consistent with the findings of other studies, which indicate that after a location is linked to a film or an audio-visual production, tourism can increase up to 30% (Fernandez and Young, 2008). Although there are no specific data for SFL (since the town does not have touristic infrastructure nor a tourism office), we can include the location in this tendency since it is part of the region. Also, during our fieldwork, local people emphasised the huge arrival of visitors looking for the home of Mama-Coco after the film was released.

SFL has heritage elements, such as the temple of Saint Nicholas of Bari and the hospital-town, both from the sixteenth century. The community keeps plenty of traditions, such as the patron festivals and the Day of the Dead.

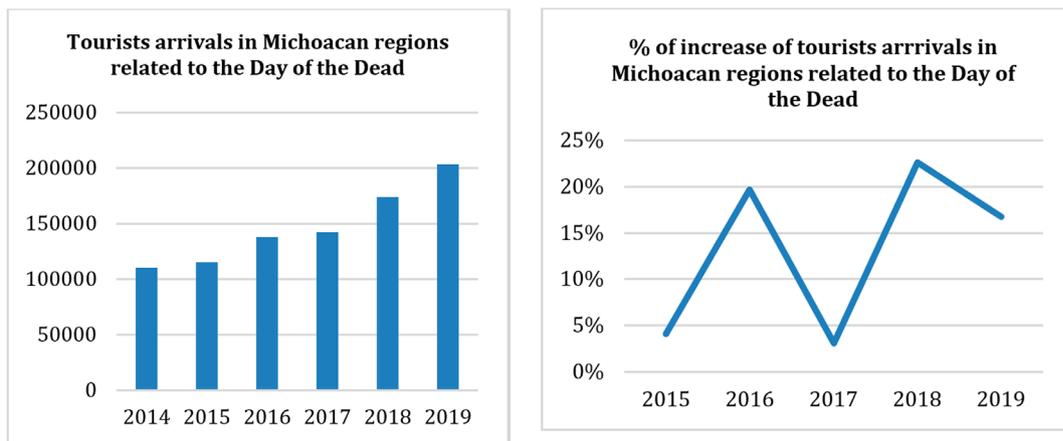
Located an hour's drive from Morelia and 30 minutes from Patzcuaro, the main tourist nodes in the region, SFL is part of the cultural itinerary "Don Vasco Route" (Infobae, 2020). Despite its potential to become a cultural destination given its 947 pottery workshops (Inegi, 2021) (map 1) and its traditional Day of the Dead celebration, SFL remained of little significance on the tourist map before *Coco*, whose world premiere occurred on 27th October 2017, very close to the famous festivity (Associated Press, 2017). The film obtained

Figure 1
Landscapes of Santa Fe: the temple of San Nicolas of Bari; a typical street; musicians at the main square



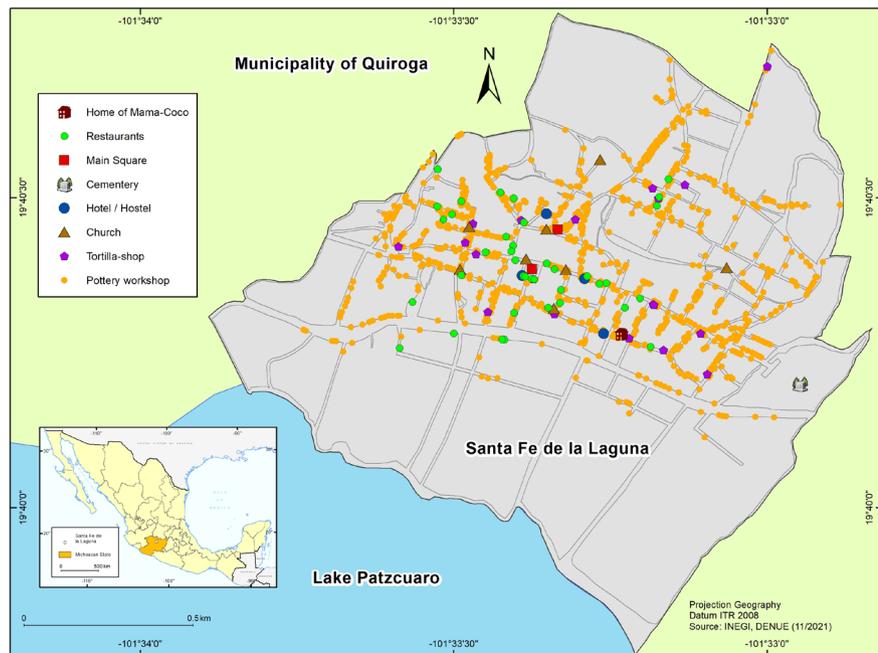
Source: photographs by the authors, 2019 and 2021.

Graph 1
Tourist arrivals in Michoacan regions related to the Day of the Dead 2014-2019



Source: own elaboration based on data from Sectur Michoacán, 2019.

Map 1
Heritage sites and places of tourist interest in SFL



Source: own elaboration based on data from Inegi (2021) using ArcGIS (ESRI, 2020).

more than a hundred awards in 2018, including the Oscar, the Bafta, and the Golden Globe for the best-animated film, which had a strong impact on box offices, making more than 800 million US dollars globally. In Mexico, the film became one with the largest ticket sales in 2017, making 57.9 million US dollars (Tartaglione, 2018).

Although the film producers identified SFL as the site of inspiration for some landscapes of the animation, and as a result, the town got publicity from official and informal sources, the case of ‘the *real* Mama-Coco’ was a spontaneous phenomenon outside their purview. In the film, the character Coco (also known as ‘Mama-Coco’) is a 99-year-old woman who can’t walk and is in a wheelchair; she is dressed and combed in the typical guise of Central Mexico indigenous communities. In 2018, a few days before the Day of the Dead, reports began to appear on TV (Telemundo, 2018), print media (Arrieta, 2018), and various websites. These reports were quickly passed on to social media networks and consolidated the idea of the existence of the real-life character. Hence, María-Salud Ramírez, in her more than a hundred years of age, became ‘the *real* Mama-Coco’, and her home turned into a pilgrimage site for film fans and curious passers-by (figure 2). Although her resemblance to the character is surely more a coincidence than a real connection, the transformation of María-Salud into a mediatic personality is an undeniable fact.

Figure 2
Visiting María-Salud/Mama-Coco



Source: photographs by the authors (left: April 2019; right: December 2021).

2.2. Methodological approach

A constructivist perspective applied in tourism research is useful to understand the study phenomenon from multiple realities (Hollinshead, 2006). To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the media pilgrimage phenomenon in SFL, we performed participant observation, structured interviews with visitors, and downloaded media narratives from online journalistic sources.

Participant observation was conducted during four visits to SFL (December 2018, March 2019, November 2019, and December 2021). Each visit was 3-4 days long, and during them, field notes were taken of the observations at the town's entrance, the main square and, especially, inside and outside the house of María-Salud. According to Bernard (1988) and Jorgensen (1999), participant observation is not a method itself, but a strategy that facilitates data collection and includes techniques such as direct observation, casual conversations, in-depth informal interviews, structured interviews, and questionnaires. In this case, the behaviour and speech of visitors within the space under study were carefully observed. On the 1st and 2nd of November 2019 (The Day of the Dead celebration), structured interviews were conducted with visitors to the house of 'the *real* Mama-Coco'. Every visitor to this spot was invited to participate, and data collection stopped at 41 interviews when data saturation was reached.

The interview guide consisted of 14 questions, of which four were demographic, the rest were grouped into four sections: *a*) interest in the Day of the Dead; *b*) location: motivation and impressions of the visit, reasons for recommending, and words related to the place; *c*) movies: the relationship between the films and the visit to the location; *d*) characteristics of the journey: companion, itinerary, etc.

Most interviewees were national tourists (80%), mostly from the same state of Michoacan, followed by those from Mexico City. Ages ranged from 26 to 65 years-old, and most were said to be independent workers. 60% of the sample were women.

The process of downloading the digital news consisted of the following steps: *a*) from December 2021 to February 2022, a search for news articles

was conducted using the Google search engine with specific keywords (figure 3) in both English and Spanish; *b*) the news articles were downloaded, and the search stopped after reaching the fourth page due to information saturation; *c*) a database was created with the content of the articles, avoiding duplications and irrelevancies. In total, a sample of 133 news articles was obtained, and the articles in Spanish were translated into English to standardise the analysis.

Figure 3
Arrangement of the corpus of notes analysed



Source: authors' own elaboration.

We generated a codebook considering the theoretical postulates on media pilgrimage: trans-local cultures, presence of celebrities, ordinary world, media world, cultural rooting and ethnicity (figure 4); the data obtained from all sources were classified into those categories. When analysing media rituals, we present some paraphrases that integrate data from the interviews and our participant observation; we chose this output since informants preferred to stay

Figure 4
Codebook

Category	Code
Symbolic boundaries (Couldry, 2000; 2003)	Ordinary world (Reijnders, 2010) Media world (Reijnders, 2010)
Parcelling out (Couldry, 2000; 2003)	Presence of some celebrity (Couldry, 2003)
Speaking for the world (Couldry, 2000; 2003)	Translocal cultures (Couldry, 2000)
Uniqueness of the pilgrimage (Couldry, 2000; 2003)	Ethnicity (Reijnders, 2010) Cultural rooting (Reijnders, 2010)

Source: Own elaboration based on Reijnders (2010) and Couldry (2000; 2003).

anonymous.

The analysis of data from participant observation, interviews, and media narrative was conducted using a mixed content analysis approach guided by the codebook (figure 4). Content analysis is widely used in tourism research and is considered a mixed-method approach (Camprubí and Coromina, 2016)

that combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The purest quantitative content analysis aims to ensure objectivity by quantifying content according to predetermined categories and in a systematic and reproducible manner (Stepchenkova, 2012). Conversely, qualitative content analysis requires a close reading of a relatively small number of texts, it involves the re-articulation of given texts into new narratives under a hermeneutic approach (Krippendorff, 2004). The qualitative analysis was conducted on the data obtained from the field notes during the participant observation. Quantitative analysis, conducted with the *tm* package in RStudio 1.3.1056 software (Allaire, 2020) and the WordArt website for the visual graph, was performed on data obtained from digital news and structured interviews. Based on the data from the interviews, a connectivity graph was created to represent the main motivations of visitors to the town. The information obtained from the interviews, the media narratives and the field notes obtained during the participant observation helped to identify the sites associated with *Coco* which are part of the tourist itineraries inspired by the film. Using ArcGIS 10.8, the Environmental Systems Research Institute (ESRI, 2020), a map of the '*Coco* tourist route' was obtained, encompassing both the perspectives of tourists, and those of the media.

3. Findings

What motivates tourists to travel to a site of little touristic interest, look for an ordinary house and visit a woman who until then was just one inhabitant among many of a small town in the Purepecha region? Though the obvious response is already in the media —namely, the *Coco* effect—, the field research between 2019 and 2021 shows that beyond the influence of the film, other factors underlie this movement and allow us to understand the media pilgrimage to meet the '*real* Mama-Coco'.

3.1. The media narrative around 'the real Mama-Coco'

In the narrative extracted from the digital news, we identified mainly ideas and texts associated with the ordinary world (82%); followed by texts about the media world (7%); in third place, texts giving notions about the celebrity (5%) who has the duality 'Mama-Coco' | María-Salud; the codes of cultural roots (2.6%), trans-local cultures (2.1%) and ethnicity (1.3%) were found to a lesser extent in the corpus of texts collected (figure 5).

It is logical to find, in a corpus of news, more references to the ordinary world in the form of mentions of cities, towns, buildings or physical places, which is why the discussion presented below focuses on how the other codes intermingle with the ordinary world.

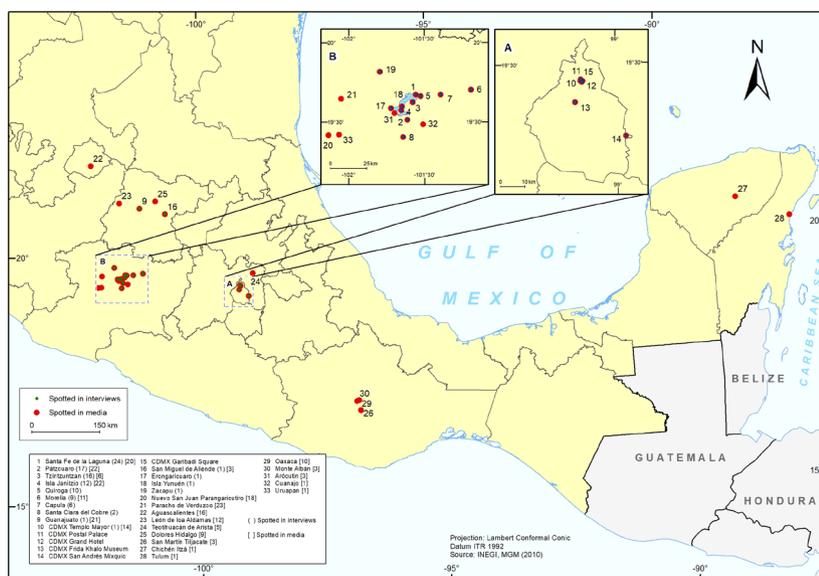
3.1.1. Cultural Roots

The success of *Coco* instilled a great interest in the production details as well as in the [imaginary] characters and [real] places that inspired the story. The plot is situated on the eve of the Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico, and avails of several cultural traditions (Mariachi music, *alebrijes*, Frida Kahlo...) to tell

a story of love for music and family through Miguel, the protagonist, and Coco, his centenary grandmother.

The *Coco* film’s promotion included a media campaign that presented the film as a tribute to the culture and traditions of Mexico. The film creators underlined the documentation and research conducted before and during the production (Giardina, 2017). According to co-director Sergio Molina, the film is based in a real place and real traditions founded on deep field research (Disney News Contributor, 2018). The creators stressed their respect for Mexican culture and claimed to have sought advice from specialists on Mexican culture and to have included consultants of Mexican origin to attain “cultural honesty” (Robinson, 2016). This preoccupation derived from the rejection Disney corporation had experienced from the Latino community in the US after their attempt to register the phrase “*Día de los Muertos*” before the United States Patent and Trademark Office (Robinson, 2016; Ugwu, 2017). Along with the controversy of whether the film was a copy of *El libro de la vida*, a film directed by Jorge R. Gutiérrez (2014), there was great media hype over *Coco* even before its production.

Map 2
Locations on the ‘Coco Route’ in Mexico



Source: own elaboration.

The premiere of *Coco* was surrounded by great publicity over the story and its relationship to Mexico, the representation of the country’s landscapes and traditions, and the characters and their relationships with real people.

3.1.2. Translocal cultures

Soon after *Coco*’s premiere, travel routes were proposed in the media for visiting places that echoed the images of the film (Infobae, 2020), including the home of the ‘*real* Mama-Coco’, a fact that unleashed María-Salud’s notoriety attracting thousands of visitors to her doorstep in SFL. The house is one of the *must*

spots in the routes, and it is even featured in popular transit applications (MiMorelia.com, 2021).

As a result of the film's success and the significant mobilisation of tourists to the places that had inspired the film, in 2018 the Secretariat of Tourism (Sectur) announced the 'Coco Tourist Route' (García, 2018). Through media review, we identified the sites included in the route. The most important places associated with the Day of the Dead in the Lake Patzcuaro region are part of the tour, and Michoacan is the state with the most sites included (map. 2). Other states have also been integrated into the route, such as Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, the State of Mexico, Mexico City, and Oaxaca. In general, the sites identified have some association with the tradition of the Day of the Dead, such as San Andres Mixquic, one of the most renowned places for this celebration in the centre of the country, or with specific sites that were taken up by the film, such as Monte Alban in Oaxaca. SFL is the site that is repeated most frequently in the routes, which also coincides with the responses of the interviewed visitors during our field research (map 2).

3.1.3. Ethnicity and presence of some celebrity

Both the route and the woman who "inspired" the character of Coco, turned SFL into a site of attraction for fans of the movie. The narrative in the corpus of assessed media highlights that María-Salud Ramírez-Caballero had a great resemblance with the fictional character.

María-Salud has been projected and legitimised as 'the real Mama-Coco' and the narrative has been created that she was the (unrecognised) inspiration for the Disney-Pixar character (Villagómez, 2018). Her place of residence and the possibility of visiting her have also been disclosed. The role of the media in the construction of a celebrity and a secular pilgrimage site is clear and reaffirms what Couldry (2003) points out regarding the central role of the media in this type of pilgrimage. Not only in the official media but also through social networks, the fame of María-Salud has been widely publicised, showing that, in contemporary society, the information transmitted by digital means and/or social networking magnifies the reach of news and strengthens the power of the media.

The narrative states that one day, while María-Salud was leaving the temple, some foreign people (supposedly, *Coco's* team) photographed her without explaining their purpose. Some sources claim that the old woman lives in poverty and was exploited by Disney without compensation (Villagómez, 2018; Moran, 2021). The production team denies that she was the inspiration for the film: "The character of Mama-Coco is not based on any real person we met in our travels. She came solely from our imagination" (Unkrich, 2018).

After the revision of the content of the media publications, the mediatization of the narrative of the "real Mama-Coco" is disclosed: it is said that a publication on social media, made by one of María-Salud's grandchildren, triggered her fame. The news began to spread in early November 2018, and reports have continued in subsequent years. The 2021 media corpus focused on describing the celebration of María-Salud's 108th birthday, with a cake decorated with the image of Grandma Coco. "Coco", "Mama-Coco" and "Michoacan" are the words most mentioned in our media corpus (figure 5), which indicates that

indicating to the visitor that this is the end of the route (figure 6). In the same way that religious pilgrims recognise the entrance to the sanctuary and make devotional gestures, visitors to Mama-Coco's home recognise in that poster the arrival to the place they had hitherto known through the media. This poster marks a *symbolic boundary* that separates the ordinary world from the media world. Moreover, the attitudes of tourists before this landmark (show emotion, take photographs of and with the poster) (figure 6) turn it into a *ritualised boundary* that separates everyday space from media space (Couldry, 2003).

Figure 6
The entrance to SFL and Mama Coco's home (Oct, 2019); Tourists arriving to Mama Coco's home (Oct, 2019) and María-Salud (April, 2019)



Source: photographs by the authors.

2) Parcelling out: Is about “the marking out, as significant, of differences in ritual space [...] the process of differentiation helps to confirm the category differences in which the ritual itself is based. Media locations are rife with the marking of such minor differences”.

On meeting María-Salud, visitors go through the inevitable comparison between the real person and the fictional character and show themselves pleasantly surprised (figure 6). Then they ask the woman about her life, her profession, her family and how Disney took advantage of her: many visitors affirm that one day while María-Salud was at the town's Main Square, some foreigners (gringos) asked her permission to photograph her; years later one of her grandsons, who lived in the US, told the family that the character of Coco was identical to his grandmother. This story resounds strongly in the media narrative and is assimilated by visitors, who being there before her get convinced that she is truly the character in the animated film. After verifying the ‘authenticity’ of María-Salud, tourists talk with her and take photos of her and with her.

Sometimes (for example, during fieldwork on the eve of the Day of the Death in 2019), the number of people is so large that they have to queue to enter the house and come close to María-Salud (figure 7). However, they are not discouraged by the wait and instead use the time to take more photographs of the entire place or purchase handcrafts and souvenirs at the stands located between the entrance to the house and the old woman's seat, which her children and grandchildren have set up for the occasion (figure 7). When their turn comes to be with María-Salud, tourists greet her effusively: "Your film made me cry", a woman tells her while prompting her grandson who is with her: "Take a photo with her, not everyone has the chance to meet Mama-Coco". Later, tourists go through the souvenir shops inside the house and buy one or several to take home or give away. The last stage is leaving the house and going around town looking for other resemblances with the film landscape.

Figure 7
Mama-Coco's altar; at the media space;
commodifying Mama-Coco



Source: Photographs by the authors (2019, 2021).

3) *Speaking for the world* When they are at a site of mediatic importance, visitors think that their opinions may have a greater impact and feel compelled to position themselves.

This involves claiming, or acting out, the representative significance of the site, and therefore of anything you say there. It is after all a mark of ritual action that has a 'higher' level of significance: media pilgrimage sites do so because somehow, they participate in the media's representational power (Couldry, 2003, p. 89).

At María-Salud's home, tourists give their opinions, which also reflect the media narrative about the 'real Mama-Coco'. It is common to hear resentment toward Disney because visitors assure that the film company stole her story and gave her neither credit nor payment. Also, some tourists appreciate that the house is open for visitors because it is a way for the old woman to get some benefit; some others think that the family is utilising her and making profit without taking care for the elder's wellbeing (in the context of covid-19 pandemic).

Other visitors stress the ludic side, the experience of getting to know the “authentic Mama-Coco”, and consider it: “a privilege to get to know the inspiration of a successful famous film”; they also show surprise at the fact that she was over 100 years old and seemed to have good health. Some visitors expressed love and tenderness towards María-Salud because they consider that she represents the grandmother of everyone and, particularly, those Mexicans who live in the US, feel close to Mexico when they see the film.

In the heyday of information technologies, the ritual of speaking for the world is manifest in the various social networks, on which visitors share photos and videos, to extend the visual memory that perpetuates the testimony of having been in a special place, as well as for expressing their opinion and their experience, for instance through comments on María-Salud’s fan page.

4) Uniqueness of the pilgrimage: Couldry emphasises that, aside from some general features, each site must be analysed about its particularities and the media/social context in which it is immersed.

Unlike religious ritual, which is usually enacted against a complex background of explicit and shared beliefs, media rituals are not played out in an even, consensual space. The ritual space of the media is crossed by other forces, which, although they originate in the very same inequalities of symbolic power, distort the apparent significance of the ritual actions of particular actors (2003, p. 87).

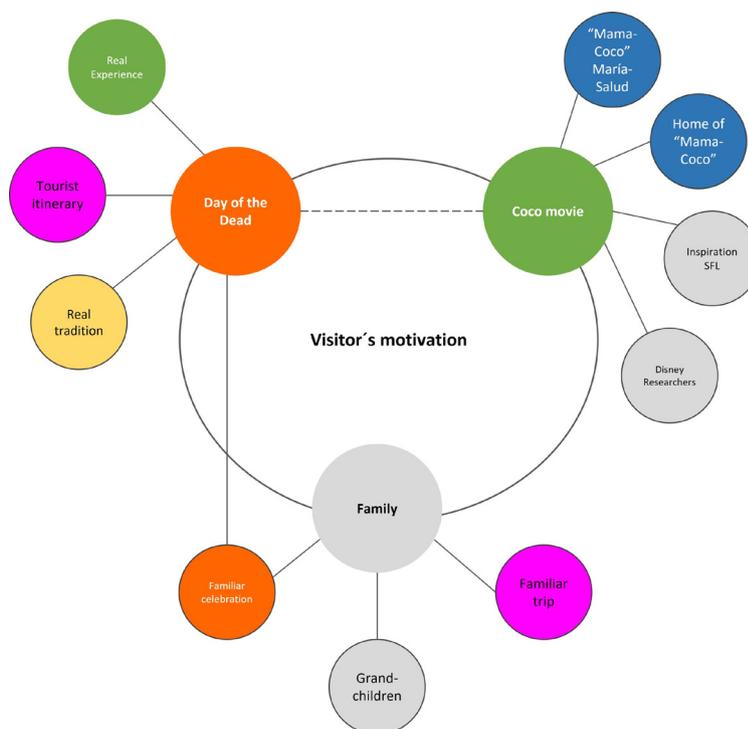
Though media pilgrimages do not have a religious element, in this case, the organization of space inside the house bears a clear resemblance to religious sanctuaries, where the devotional image is in a leading location and the devotees get in the queue to get close to it. On Day of the Dead 2019, an arch of yellow flowers was hung behind María-Salud’s seat, framing her (figure 7). This could be regarded as a controversial situation, as such arches (*watzákuri* in Purepecha) have a ritual function as facilitators of the transit of the dead to the material dimension, and in this case, their use is totally out of context.

The behaviour of visitors, such as leaving money (an offering) and buying some souvenirs inside the house as evidence of their presence on the site, is similar to what can be observed in religious pilgrimage sites (Morinis, 1992). On the eve of the Day of the Death 2019, one of the dates when Mama-Coco’s home received masses of visitors, María-Salud was unwell and remained behind a glass door (as saints inside churches), so tourists limited themselves to photographing her while she made the cross sign blessing them. A young woman, excited, exclaimed on leaving the house: “Mama-Coco blessed me!”

3.3. Exploring visitor’s motivations

The analysis of the interviews demonstrates a relevant link between the media world, e.g. film *Coco*, and the ordinary world, e.g. the family. The totality of the interviewees had seen the film previously, and 39% of them mentioned that it had motivated them to visit the town. From the interviews, we identified three main motivators linked to the codes previously established (figure 8).

Figure 8
Motivation of visitors



Source: Own elaboration based on interviews and using WordArt.com: <https://wordart.com/>

1) Media world and the presence of some celebrity/ the movie

The power of the media has created a world in which the association between *Coco* and the town is reinforced, triggering the movement of visitors. On the one hand, the inspiration based on the aesthetics of SFL to create the fictional town of Santa Cecilia, and on the other, the incarnation of ‘Mama-Coco’ in María-Salud: in this sense, the analysis shows that the spots visited in SFL by the interviewees were: Mama-Coco’s home, (the house of María-Salud), the temple of Saint Nicholas of Bari, and the main square, which indicates that the visit goes along the elements represented in the film.

2) Ordinary world- The Family

Another element that links the ordinary world and the media world is the family. The film’s narrative revolves around family and Mama-Coco, the grandma’s figure, representing the family union. The motivation to visit relies on the nostalgia for family ancestors. The majority of interviewees (59%) travel accompanied by their families, and, in some cases, the visit is meant to please children’s desire to get to know ‘the *real* Mama-Coco’, who has become the town’s celebrity.

3) Cultural rooting and ethnicity- Day of the Dead

Given the proximity of villages and towns in the Patzcuaro Lake shores, the tourists interviewed had established an itinerary including other towns, such

as Patzcuaro, Tzintzuntzan, Janitzio, and Quiroga, all of them with a strong cultural tradition of celebrating Day of the Dead —now enhanced by the film—, ethnicity plays a fundamental role in the attraction of visitors. In many cases, the holiday has been motivated by the idea of finding authenticity, the roots of traditions and experiencing 'reality' in two ways: SFL is the place where real traditions are practised and, at the same time, the real place of the film. There is a sense of nostalgia in the encounter with the 'authentic' Mexican and the pre-Columbian past associated with this festivity and this region.

Discussion and conclusions

The concept of media pilgrimage helps to understand what occurs in SFL ever since the animated film *Coco* came out in cinema halls. On the one hand, the media narrative around the 'real Mama-Coco' is present in the perception of those who come to visit the home of María-Salud, and during their visit reproduce a series of rituals that coincide with Couldry's proposals (2000, 2003) about the places that reflect and reproduce the power of the media. The magnetism of SFL, and particularly the home of María-Salud, respond to the expectations and imaginaries created by the media.

A key point in the discussion is about the social structures that media pilgrimage has triggered. To this effect, Reijnders (2010) emphasises the weight of other factors, such as gender and ethnicity, along with that of the media. In his analysis of the pilgrimages around James Bond films, Reijnders concludes that a great deal of visitors' motivation revolves around gender issues, particularly the search for 'an idealised masculinity', namely the 'mediated masculinity' of Bond (2010, p. 376).

In the case of the 'real Mama-Coco', Mexican ethnicity and identity play a fundamental role in the attraction of visitors. The film's plot, characters, and aesthetics are inspired by some segments of Mexican society, which has generated both controversy and interest even before its production and opening. Moreover, the film happened to open amid a political climate in the US characterised by contempt and racism towards Mexicans, instilled by its former president: "For critics and audiences, the film takes a stand against Donald Trump's portrayal of Mexicans as rapists and criminals, as highlighted in a rambling speech he gave during his presidential campaign in 2015" (López Varela, 2020, p. 131).

Though the film presents a stereotyped, idealised, and romantic image of Mexico's indigenous population, it reproduces an imaginary that, as much within the country as abroad, has been assumed as authentic: colourful, musical, magical, jolly (though impoverished) and indigenous. The pro-Mexican sense of *Coco* was strengthened by the use the film makes of one of the most emblematic traditions in the country: the Day of the Dead, which is a referent of the 'authentically indigenous' and a tourist attraction linked to the region of Lake Patzcuaro, whose notoriety has increased thanks to the publicity and media-cinematic representations (*Spectre*, *El libro de la vida*, *Coco*). Thus, *Coco* is received as a production that allegedly celebrates Mexican identity, a discourse that was quickly appropriated by the Mexican population (López Varela, 2020), especially those living in the US. Coming back to Reijnders (2010), the 'medi-

ated masculinity' of Bond can be translated here into the 'mediated ethnicity' of Coco.

Because of the colour of their skin and their dressing style, the film's characters are easily identified with the indigenous population of Mexico. In this way, María-Salud, belonging to the Purepecha ethnic group, fits the cinematic representation of a Mexican grandmother, often the pillar of the family nucleus, protector of her children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren, especially in the context of rural and migrating communities (Arias, 2013). The image of María-Salud/Mama-Coco doubly refers to the meaning of rooting: being from an indigenous/rural community and being a motherly figure. Though the role of women and the family structure has changed, in the psychosocial formation of the Mexican population "the myth of the Mexican mother" still prevails. Veneration to the mother began officially in 1922 as a specific type of woman, consecrated to the life of others, abnegation and sacrifice being the main axes on which her representation is articulated (Espinosa, 2013, p. 81).

Coco's plot is universally touching, as it appeals to deep human emotions and affections (fear of death, abandonment, love for the family, respect for ancestors), and touches deep into the majority of spectators, which translates into popular acclamation all over the world.

The pilgrimage to María-Salud's home makes visitors feel, in the Turnerian sense, part of a community in two ways: 1) fans of the film who—at least momentarily—can access the illusory—and mediated—world thanks to their contact with 'the *real* Mama-Coco', and increase their fans' cultural capital (Thelen and Kim, 2021); 2) members of the Mexican community, whose identity and roots the film intends to represent (albeit partially and stereotypically) for whom meeting María-Salud means to prove that *Coco*, despite being an animation, has a *real* side to it, which is legitimised by the cinematic representation. In both cases, María-Salud/Mama-Coco represents a bridge between the ordinary world and the media world.

The particularity of 'the *real* Mama-Coco' is that, in Couldry's proposal of a mediated centre (2000; 2003), this centre materialises not only in a place but also in a person. María-Salud is the centre of the media narrative—entirely alien to her and her reality. The power of a film production combined with the power of the media focused on an individual are a clear example of hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1978): an animated, fictional character is incarnated in a real person, whose actual life is usurped by the fantastic one. María-Salud has been turned into 'Mama-Coco', the one from the film. Although visitors were sure of being before 'the *real* Mama-Coco' (meaning the character in the flesh, not because there were other women claiming that identity), what they were seeing was just a product of a media narrative derived from fiction. As they scrutinised María-Salud's face and asked her about her age, her profession, and her real name, she smiled and calmly replied to the questions, posed for the photos, and accepted the attentions of strangers, to whose presence she had grown accustomed. However, she seemed not to be aware of the media context in which she was involved. During our visits to her home, we asked her if she knew why she was called 'Mama-Coco' and she always replied negatively, though the surname seemed not to bother her. And when we asked her "Do you like being called Mama-Coco?", she replied, raising her shoulders and smiling, "And what can I do?". Indeed, little can be done against the media narrative and the Hollywood

film industry, which is the most important source of popular mass culture today, characteristic of modern industrial society (Bartra, 2018).

The case of María-Salud proves that media pilgrimages can be an outcome not only of live-action productions, as the literature on the subject has already confirmed (Couldry, 2000; 2003; Reijnders, 2010; Tzanelli, 2017), but also of animation films. With all their fantasy, such films create places of tourist pilgrimage supported by media narratives, and *Coco* demonstrates that this is also possible outside the universe of Manga in Japan, the locus of the animation-tourism relationship that has received the most attention. Ono *et al.* (2020, p. 3) point out that: “like film tourism, anime pilgrimage may be partially motivated by traveller’s evaluations of the image of the destination”. It is about fictional landscapes that materialise into real landscapes on account of their aesthetic similarity; however, in the case of media pilgrimages, such as the one to SFL and other Mexican locations, it is not the community of fans that identify the places, but the media narrative itself. In the specific case of María-Salud, social processes are incarnated beyond the image and valuation of tourist destinations, tourist development, and animated film representation. Turned into a celebrity and object for tourist consumption, this indigenous woman is an example of the *Disneysation* of contemporary society, a phenomenon linked to consumption and globalisation (Bryman, 2004) and the spectacularisation of society (Debord, 1995).

Couldry states: “The media do not simply reinforce existing metropolitan bias, because marginal areas (whether geographically, politically, economically, culturally) can have attractions for media production, for example as the sites on which nostalgic narratives of the past can be projected” (2003, p. 81). A similar scenario takes place in SFL, a segregated settlement that remained far away from the metropolitan and tourist dynamics until the opening of *Coco* and the media narrative about María-Salud came to change things. The interviews with visitors convey nostalgia for Mexico’s pre-Columbian past, which somehow is revitalised by Disney’s film and to which visitors seek to connect through their pilgrimage to the home of Mama-Coco.

The scrutiny of the media pilgrimage to SFL can be done from two perspectives: one in ethical terms, as we ask ourselves about the limits of tourist consumption, which in this case goes as far as substituting the identity of a real person by that of a fictional, caricatured character, and makes her an object of tourism consumption (forcing a 108-year-old woman to spend her last days receiving visitors). The second is that the power of the media quickly detonates the touristic potential of a destination, which calls for strategies that can avail of the media impact to the benefit of local communities without surrendering to the banalisation or exploitation of cultures and peoples involved. As Tzanelli points out:

the transformative potential of mediated representations should lie in enabling articulations of any marginality suffered by the hosts [...], as well as their own marginalised guests [...] And here comes my plea for sensitive mediatised tourist business that does not reproduce native or customer shortcomings. (2017, p. 2)

Film/media tourism and media pilgrimages can be used for the benefit of communities and subaltern groups (women, indigenous people, artisans, in

the case of SFL), for empowering them instead of reinforcing negative/pejorative stereotypes.

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