

# “Conservation” and co-creation through film tourism at heritage sites: An initial focus on Northern Ireland

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**Abstract** | An increasing number of film and television successes such as *Game of Thrones* and *Dracula Untold* have utilised heritage sites throughout Northern Ireland. This creates an opportunity for heritage sites to expand their traditional markets and to enhance the quality of the experience tourists have on site. This paper draws on the existing literature on heritage conservation, film tourism and co-creation and proposes a conceptual model with the aim of reconciling two very different markets that activate in the same space. A pilot study using an interpretive case study approach was used at three heritage tourism sites where films or television series had been filmed. Key findings revealed that both heritage site tourists and film tourists were interested in finding out the details regarding the filming that had taken place at each site, and wanted to be involved in related activities, as this was considered to enrich their experience whilst visiting. There is also a need for closer cooperation and communication between site management for a long-term, sustainable approach to film tourism, and for an overarching and comprehensive policy encompassing all relevant stakeholders.

**Keywords** | Film tourism, heritage, co-creation, Northern Ireland

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## 1. Introduction

The power of film tourism and its impact on tourism cannot be denied. There are many examples from around the world: *Braveheart* and the romanticism of Scotland, the *Harry Potter* movies and the increase of tourism to a Britain associated with magic and mystery, *Slumdog Millionaire* and the boost in tourism to Mumbai (which aided recovery after the terrorist attack of 2008) or *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy and the positive effect on New Zealand tourism (Bolan & Williams, 2008).

Tourism boards worldwide are now incorporating movie themes in their destination marketing: *Downtown Abbey* and locations in UK, *Game of Thrones* and sites in Croatia or *Star Wars* and sets in Tunisia (Intel, 2016). Visit Britain, the national tourism agency in charge of promoting Britain worldwide, has been utilising film since the 1990s to create a unique marketing proposition (Connell, 2012). The impact of UK films on tourism has been estimated at £2.1 billion of international visitor spending in the UK (Oxford Economics, 2012) with screen tourists bringing between £100 million - £140 million to the English economy in 2014 (Olsberg/SPI 2015).

In recent years the film and television industry has been developing and growing rapidly in Northern Ireland, with many recent film and television successes (such as *Game of Thrones* and *Dracula Untold*) having utilised heritage sites and locations around the country. Film production generated an estimated total spend to the Northern Ireland economy of £82.7m between 2010 and 2012 (Oxford Economics, 2012). For Northern Ireland, this represents a significant opportunity to promote itself to a growing tourism market through a newly emerging and developing form of tourism (stemming from film and television productions). This is occurring against a background of increased competition between destinations, which find themselves in search of that one, unique and identifiable trait that will help distinguish them in a

sea of tourism propositions.

Film and television productions (e.g. *The Da Vinci Code*, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Game of Thrones*) have increasingly utilised heritage sites as key filming locations. The attraction that historic sites, cities and towns in Britain have on foreign visitors is well documented in the literature (Connell, 2012; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Oxford Economics, 2012; Timothy & Boyd, 2003). This has presented the management of such tourism sites with various challenges ranging from maintaining their physical integrity to entrepreneurial opportunities dedicated to cater for new types of visitors, film-induced tourists, whilst also taking care not to alienate their more traditional heritage tourists. It has created the need for a new type of entrepreneurial thinking and approach.

The proposed study was based on bringing these concepts together in order to examine what effects film tourism has on heritage sites and their management, with particular focus on aspects regarding co-creation, authenticity, motivation and entrepreneurship. Although co-creation has been addressed in the heritage tourism context, currently there is still very little literature focusing on co-creation in the context of film tourism. With the increased tendency for the tourism product and/or experience to be co-created between tourist and provider, comes a need to better understand what drives these tourists to visit specific sites and what they would like to experience whilst there. When it comes to film tourism, there are still many unanswered questions and many failed opportunities or mistakes in harnessing its benefits (Bolan & Williams, 2008).

The overall aim of this paper is to investigate film tourism in relation to heritage sites. The objectives of this study were to evaluate film tourism motivation, preference and experience when visiting heritage sites in Northern Ireland, and to investigate management issues, challenges and entrepreneurial opportunities in reference to heritage sites used as film locations.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Heritage tourism and film tourism definitions

Heritage tourism has found its way onto the agenda of many governments, which have recognised its potential not only for identity formation, social and cultural development, but also for its commercial benefit (Jamal & Kim, 2005; Park, 2014). Defining heritage tourism is not without controversy as the many definitions throughout the literature use different perspectives and approaches and authors have not reached a consensus (Garrod & Fyall, 2001). Heritage tourism is often re-interpreted in accordance with the various theoretical discourses and rapid developments in tourism (Conway, 2014; Jamal & Kim, 2005; Park 2014; Poria, Reichel & Biran, 2006; Timothy & Boyd, 2003). However, the World Tourism Organisation defines it as “an immersion in the natural history, human heritage, arts, philosophy and institutions of another region or country” (Timothy & Boyd, 2003, p.1), and most authors agree that it comprises both tangible and intangible resources.

How does film tourism fall into the heritage discourse? Film tourism encapsulates “tourist visits to a destination or attraction as a result of the destination being featured on television, video, DVD or the cinema screen” (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006, p.256) with an extension to digital media (Connell, 2012).

Jamal & Kim (2005) propose a conceptual framework for a micro-macro theory of heritage tourism, which contains key disciplinary areas and their respective immersing concepts. Film tourism and its components can be extracted from tourism marketing, psychology and social psychology, sociology of tourism and leisure through aspects relating to destination image, enactments, nostalgia, authenticity, motivation or experience. It can also be observed in natural heritage, sustain-

ability, planning, policy or management through conservation, preservation, stakeholder and policy, planning and impact management. Finally, the key disciplines of literature, race and ethnic studies, English and performance studies reveal issues regarding performance theory, ethnic and cultural tourism, travel, writings or film impacts (Jamal & Kim, 2005, p.75). Connell (2012) encourages a cross-disciplinary approach to film tourism which would ultimately lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

### 2.2 Heritage site management and the film tourist

Heritage and tourism often conflict in what is perceived to be their ultimate objectives: whilst the former aims to protect specific environments, the latter is focused on maximising profits from utilising heritage (Park, 2014). As such, heritage sites’ managers find themselves caught in a continuous battle between conservation and commodification. A shift towards conservation could undermine the economic potential, whereas strong focus on economic benefits with less regard towards conservation could lead to damages to sites, both physical and cultural (Du Cros, 2001).

There are two main discourses in literature in relation to heritage tourism: one that focuses on the actual heritage space displaying historic artefacts and the interaction it has with the tourist, and one that focuses on tourists’ motivations and perceptions of the heritage (Poria et al., 2006; Timothy & Boyd, 2003). Both views have their own challenges in terms of management. Specific challenges relating to the maintenance of their integrity drive heritage site managers into a perpetual quest to find new sources of financing (Timothy & Boyd, 2003) and film tourism has become such an avenue in the past decades.

Heitmann (2010), while acknowledging the be-

nefits of film tourism, also discussed how both the film and tourism industries can impact not only the natural and cultural environments, but also the community in which it takes place. His research reveals that the planning and sustainability aspects of film tourism have not been fully explored and that the solution lies in a long-term approach to planning and in the collaboration between the film and the tourism industries. This illustrates the need for a collaborative approach between tourism and heritage through stakeholder involvement as proposed by Aas, Ladkin & Fletcher (2005).

### 2.3 Authenticity, motivation and co-creation

Living in a modern society has ironically created a quest for all things authentic. Authenticity is particularly significant when it comes to tourists in search of heritage and film tourism places (Bolan, Boyd & Bell, 2011). The quest for authenticity lies deeply in the psyche of many tourists and there is a need to find what motivates him/her in the first place. Examining the motivational drivers of film tourists, Bolan et al. (2011) identified three categories of film tourists: one that visits only the location, (category B), one that visits only the setting depicted in the movie, (category C), and finally, one that visits both the location where the movie was filmed and the setting depicted in the movie, (category A). Each category is influenced by something different and as such they can be visual tourists influenced by what they see, emotional tourists influenced by their emotions in relation to characters or narrative and the pure film tourist whose motivations are a combination of the above (Bolan et al., 2011).

The film tourist and the heritage site meet in the “authentic” space/discourse. The objective perspective of authenticity in relation to the originality and genuineness of the place resonates with the visual film tourist, whereas the subjective pers-

pective relating to self-discovery and exaltation relates to the emotional film tourist. Consequently, the marketing of these sites need to be carefully managed to factor all these aspects into their strategies.

As part of a new perspective on marketing, experiential marketing challenges organisations to actively involve customers in the proposition of new products by collaborating with and also learning from them (Vargo, Maglio & Akaka, 2008). There are many discourses in the current literature regarding co-creation, but the two main approaches, as identified by Campos, Mendes, Oom do Valle & Scott (2016) are: one focusing on the interrelated interactions and activities between the tourist and organisations which generate value for the customer (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009) and a second approach focusing on the tourism experience occurring whilst the tourist is on site. The two key dimensions of co-creation are in this case the tourist’s interaction with others and active participation (Campos et al., 2016; Prebensen & Foss, 2011). Minkiewicz, Evans & Bridson (2014) propose a co-creation framework revealing three aspects: co-production through active participation and physical interaction; engagement through emotional and cognitive immersion and finally, personalisation through tailoring of the experience, interaction with employees and technology.

The sparse literature on co-creation as far as film tourism specifically is concerned (Kim, 2010) leads to a need to better understand the on-site experiences of film tourists as well as the management challenges and entrepreneurial opportunities. Rusu, Florin & Cureteanu (2015) argued that entrepreneurs and openness to foreign visitors are key to the development of touristic services that collectively make a destination distinctive and appealing.

Film tourism faces specific challenges that come from the mix of real places combined with film sets and the digital enhancements (Carl, Kinson & Smith, 2007). Film tourists judge the real

landscape against the film landscape (Aitken & Zonn, 1994). It is what Beeton (2005) referred to as “real” against “reel”. Research has illustrated a number of ways to help overcome these issues such as the use of guides who are able to provide behind-the-scenes anecdotes and to re-interpret the actual landscape to be recognisable from the movie (Alderman, Benjamin & Schneider, 2012; Carl et al, 2007), to re-enact scenes and to photograph them (Kim, 2010), to dress in costumes and participate in social and spatial practices (Alderman et al, 2012; Carl et al, 2007; Kim, 2010). The importance of guides and interpretation has been underlined by the heritage literature as well as finding ways of enhancing the customers’ experience, providing a more authentic experience and also as means of education and promotion of culture and cultural values (Conway, 2014; Minkiewicz et al., 2014; Poria et al. 2006).

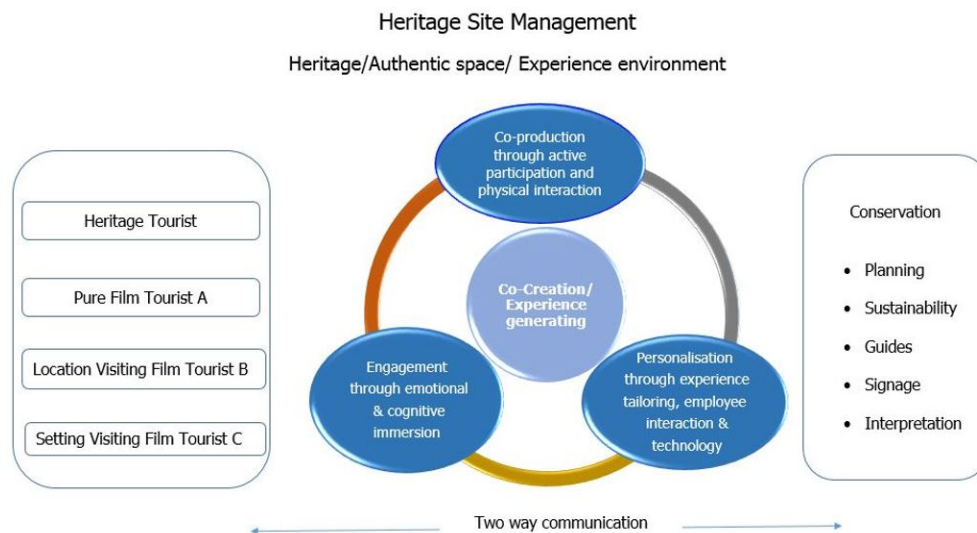
Experience in the 21st century cannot take place without technology. On-line booking facilities, customer rating websites, or mobile technology applications mean that organisations have to compete more than just on price, but also on the enhanced value of experience they offer to customers (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009). A sophisticated technology that is continuously updated combined with a high number of consumers will lead to a more profound tourist experience (Neuho-

fer, Buhalis & Ladkin, 2014).

### 3. Proposal of conceptual model

Drawing from the literature regarding the robusticity of the heritage site (DuCros, 2001), Bolan et al.’s (2011) types of film tourists and Minkiewicz et al.’s (2014, p.49) co-creation framework, a conceptual model is proposed, which aims to reconcile the conservation efforts with the delivery of experiences through co-creation to the different types of film tourists, all in the context of communication and cooperation (Figure 1).

The conservation efforts of the heritage site require meaningful management and strategies to achieve it, whilst the delivery of experiences takes place using the three aspects of the co-creation framework. The heritage site is the “authentic” space in which film tourists A, B and C, that is the pure film tourists, location visiting film tourists and setting visiting film tourists alongside heritage tourists engage in various immersive activities. A very important aspect is the two-way communication between the site and the tourists, all in the context of cooperation, which should involve all relevant stakeholders.



**Figure 1** | Heritage site management through conservation/co-creation model

**Source:** Author's own work adapted from "We've seen it in the movies, let's see if it's true, authenticity and displacement in film-induced tourism" by P. Bolan et al., 2011, *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes*, 3 (2), p.110, and "How do consumers co-create their experiences? An exploration in the heritage sector" by J. Minkiewicz et al., 2014, *Journal of Marketing Management*, 30 (1-2), p.49

In order to evaluate this conceptual model, a pilot study was carried out at three well-established heritage sites and locations, and with private sector entrepreneurs who have already begun to deliver packages and activities for film tourists at such locations.

#### 4. Methods

A pilot study using an interpretative, qualitative approach employed focus groups and interviews at three heritage sites in March and April 2015. Qualitative research allows the use of small samples, and is useful for in-depth investigation which leads to a better understanding of the topic and ultimately to the evolution of new theories and is particularly appropriate in business and management research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). A research method involving case studies provides the opportunity for the in depth investigation of a phenomenon that is both contemporary and in a real-world context (Saunders et al., 2016).

Film tourism, by definition, falls into these categories and pertains to this type of exploration.

Two focus groups (consisting of six visitors at sites) were conducted at the following sites that had featured in a film or television production: Castle Ward, Mount Stewart and the Giant's Causeway. Examples of film/TV production include *Your Highness*, *Game of Thrones* and *The Frankenstein Chronicles* at Castle Ward, *Dracula Untold* at Mount Stewart and *Hellboy II: The Golden Army*, *Your Highness* and *Dracula Untold* at Giant's Causeway. These sites are all owned and operated by National Trust which is the largest charity conservation organisation in the UK looking after coastlines, lands and over 500 historic houses, gardens and parks in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The themes discussed included the motivations for travel to the site, perceptions of the site, issues of authenticity, perception of the film tourism phenomenon and overall quality of the experience. A limitation of the focus groups at Mount Stewart and Castle Ward was related to the time of the year the data was collected. Research was carried out during the off-peak season, which

was not very favourable for international tourists at these particular sites. The majority of the participants were local people and some were members of National Trust, the organisation that owned the heritage sites. However, the focus groups allowed the exploration of the opinions and feelings of the local community, one of the major stakeholders involved in the process of film tourism.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with key executive members who manage the sites. These included a Visitor Services Manager, an Assistant Visitor Services Manager and a Site Manager. The aim of these interviews was to assess the impact of the site being featured in a movie or TV series, to identify their marketing strategies, as well as specific management issues in terms of preserving the heritage site.

## 5. Results

Following an interpretative approach, the discussions from the focus groups and interviews were initially transcribed, then through a process of thematic content analysis, the data was sorted and placed in different categories which displayed similar characteristics. The emergent themes were identified, extracted and are now discussed.

### 5.1 Expectations when visiting a site associated with movies/TV series

Contrary to what the literature has declared so far (Bolan et al., 2011; Bolan & Williams, 2008), analysis showed that even though there was an expectation with regards to the sites as seen on screen, participants were aware that the actual space might differ. When faced with the reality, there was no disappointment, one respondent saying she was surprised, rather than disappoint-

ed. This attitude appears to show a shift from the existing idea as presented by Beeton (2005) in that visitors to film sites are disappointed when faced with a reality different from what was in the movies. The majority of participants declared that people are now more aware of this and know not to expect the exact space.

From the focus group discussions, it was evident that the landscape played a major role in attracting visitors to a particular site associated with movies. When asked if there was a demand for sites associated with films/TV series, the majority of the participants said "Yes", however, their reply might have been influenced by what they had heard or seen in the media. One respondent declared: "We saw the effects in the twittersphere, via social media"(Visitor, Mount Stewart). Another participant visiting Castle Ward, who was highly appreciative of the site's heritage aspect, saw *Game of Thrones* and film media as a fleeting phenomenon, in contrast with the historic property that had stood the test of time. However, respondents recognised the economic benefit of attracting film tourists.

Participants agreed that all sites involved in any type of filming should display some sort of recognition that filming had taken place, for example keeping 'props' to provide additional points of interest. A participant referring to the TV series *Game of Thrones* and the lack of proper signage throughout Northern Ireland, commented: "without information, only the big fans know about it"(Visitor, Giant's Causeway). Promotion was carried out at the time of the release of the movies/TV series but it was either short term or met with obstacles involving intellectual property rights. This reinforces the importance of signage used to locate hard to access areas, to enhance the tourist experience or as a marketing tool (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006). It is also extremely relevant when it comes to bridging the assumed gap between film tourists and heritage tourists.

## 5.2 Co-creation and film tourist experience

When discussing the film tourism related experiences, it was found that Castle Ward was the only site offering engagement due to their unique collaboration with the private organisation Clearsky. Clearsky, who have branded themselves as “Winterfell Tours Castle and Demesne” (Winterfell is the seat of the Northern Kingdom of the fictional continent Westeros featured in the TV series *Game of Thrones*) offer the opportunity for re-enactment and memorability through their activities. These include archery, dressing up in costume and learning how to shoot arrows, cycle tours of the filming locations, boat tours or camping overnight in the “Winterfell woods” (Winterfell Tours Castle and Demesne, 2015). These types of experiences fall into the categories of co-production and engagement as identified by Minkiewicz et al. (2014) and are included on the conceptual model. Other definitions include active participation (Campos et al., 2016), performance as a metaphor for tourist practice (Kim, 2010) or immersion (Carl et al., 2007), and contribute to a higher satisfaction for the tourist in general, and film tourist in particular.

It is relevant to note that Castle Ward itself is not keen to expand the experience to include the house as its focus is on conservation and education. This is in spite of the fact that the site has experienced an increase in visitor numbers, especially international ones, directly linked to filming. The management of the site assumes that the film tourist is a separate entity, which shows little to no interest in the historic property whilst the heritage tourist will show no interest in experiencing what film tourism has to offer. This view was contradicted when one respondent, a self-declared heritage passionate, and her group, following the discussion and a tour of the house, stated that a corner dedicated to *Game of Thrones* where one can dress up and do activities, would in fact be welcome.

Giant’s Causeway enjoy a special status due to its iconic image as a World Heritage Site as explai-

ned by its site manager: “I think their [film tourists] expectations are set for other reasons, the range of reasons is so wide and varied is hard to know them all” (Site Manager, Giant’s Causeway). Although it does not offer any film related activities, this pilot study uncovered a need for them as expressed by the younger generation: “I like to experience something that I couldn’t in my normal life”(Visitor, Giant’s Causeway).

Overall, the participants showed interest in being involved in activities when visiting sites associated with films/TV series; older participants were content with film tours provided they were properly signalled and interpreted, the younger generation showed interest in more immersive activities.

## 5.3 Management challenges, marketing opportunities and co-operation between sites

All three heritage sites acknowledged the monetary benefits of allowing filming to take place as an important benefit which would be used for conservation projects. The revenue earning benefit is considered in relation to whether they are too much of a risk to the property itself or too disruptive to tourists. Castle Ward, when faced with scenes from *Game of Thrones* that involved the burning down of buildings, decided not to allow the continuation of filming. In a similar manner, Giant’s Causeway’s management declared that closing the site to allow for filming was impossible due to its high profile and the large number of annual tourists. Solutions include filming only on certain areas which would keep the site opened, during off season when visitor numbers are lowest and also involving conservation specialists who would ensure the integrity of the sites.

As identified in the literature (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006) destinations realise the benefit that film and TV exposure brings to the overall economy. The site managers were in agreement that



more effort should be put into marketing, however their views differ in relation to where the focus should be. Giant's Causeway markets itself and the focus is mainly on international markets. The importance of film tourism was however recognised at the time *Dracula Untold* was released with pop up banners placed at the site and around other properties to raise awareness. Mount Stewart also promoted the filming of *Dracula Untold* at the site, but the promotion was short term. Castle Ward's marketing appears to be limited due to restrictions imposed by the production company, in this case, HBO, because the *Game of Thrones* series is still taking place. It intends to expand their promotional products, however, to include maps and leaflets promoting *Game of Thrones*. The Assistant Visitor Service Manager at Mount Stewart commented that: "...we are doing bits and pieces in little pockets, we should be gathering together and do things as a whole". This reveals a lack of collaboration between sites and various approaches to management and marketing although all three are part of the same NGO, National Trust.

## 6. Conclusion

Overall, this pilot research indicates that tourists welcome film related activities designed to offer extraordinary experiences and a chance to discover and feel as part of the whole filming experience. Heritage tourists were just as interested in being made aware that filming had taken place at the site as their film tourists' counterparts, indicating a possible overlap of these markets that were previously perceived to be distinct. The two types of visitors meet in the same space, and their experiences could be enriched by their mutual contact. This is illustrated in Figure 1 and it can only be achieved in the context of a two way communication and also interaction through co-creation.

There is also a perceived need for attractions

to acknowledge the phenomenon of film tourism at their sites by proper signage, more guides and more technology. As it stands, the heritage sites that were involved in this pilot research leave tourists more or less to their own devices to engage and interpret the sites used in films. These findings support the conceptual model's (Figure 1) recommendation for the use of signage and interpretation to enhance the visitors' experiences and also as a management strategy for conservation of the site.

Although the heritage site managers acknowledged that film tourism brings additional economic benefit, they do not have a long-term plan in place that would create a sustainable product, and there is a clear demand from tourists. There is also need for a more coherent, overarching policy that should involve not just the tourist organisations, but also the organisations involved in film tourism, both NGOs and private. Although the three sites in this study were part of the same charity (the National Trust) they did not collaborate among themselves to create a movie trail or other linked activities.

This pilot study would benefit from further research that would include the identification of other stakeholders (SMEs) involved in providing additional film themed services around the sites, or to and from the sites. Also, empirical research at other heritage sites situated in England or Scotland would provide a comparison that would ultimately lead to the creation of a framework (building on the conceptual model presented here in Figure 1) for successful marketing and management of heritage sites in the context of film tourism.

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