

Thematic guided tours to co-create film tourism experiences: The case of the *Game of Thrones*

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Objectives | Recently, tourism induced by blockbuster films and television series has been increasing in several destinations where film productions were hosted (Beeton, 2015; Rittichainuwat & Rattanaphinanchai, 2015). Macionis (2004) defined the push and pull factors of film tourism. Push factors might be fantasy, escape, status, prestige or ego-enhancement, while attributes of a destination, film characters, film genre might function as pull factors for film tourists to visit a film location (Kim, 2010). Creating memorable experiences is considered to be the quintessence of the tourism industry (Pizam, 2010; Tung & Ritchie, 2011). The process of service innovation, such as alternative guiding services along with co-creation (Rätz, 2016), and destination development must be managed accordingly (Pine & Gilmore 1998). The successful *Game of Thrones* TV series, broadcasted by HBO since 2011, was filmed in well-known European destinations such as Belfast (Northern-Ireland) and Dubrovnik (Croatia) among others. The TV series popularity was used to create memorable tourism experiences targeting the *Game of Thrones* fans in which co-creation has a significant role. Domains of memorable experiences were identified as entertainment, educational, aesthetic and escapist (Pine & Gilmore 1998). The purpose of the study is to investigate how and at what extent *Game of Thrones* tourists' experiences are memorable and how their positive and negative experiences were influenced by co-creation during thematic guided tours in Belfast and Dubrovnik.

Methodology | Netnography was the qualitative research method applied in this study (Kozinets, 2012; Volo, 2012). Data was gathered from the TripAdvisor website between May and September 2016. Tourists' reviews on the thematic guided tours in Belfast (Ireland) and Dubrovnik (Croatia) related to the popular TV series, *Game of Thrones*, were investigated. A total of 451 reviews on Belfast, and 253

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reviews on Dubrovnik were collected. The NVivo software was used for data analysis. In data analysis codes were created to investigate the link between the different domains of memorable experiences, the perception about the location and the purpose to return tourism in the studied destinations.

Main Results and Contributions | The results show that the so called *Game of Thrones* tourists arrive in the filming location with a wide and detailed knowledge on the TV series. To be part of the fantasy world depicted on the small screen to which George R.R. Martin's fantasy novels were adopted, functioned as a pull factor to visit the destinations where the filming took place. The aesthetic experience of natural landscape (Belfast) and the historic World Heritage Site (Dubrovnik) was one of the most frequently mentioned domain. The tour guides' role in providing memorable tourism experiences through co-creation was stronger than the destination's unique landscape attributes. The majority of tour guides has been also casted in one of the seasons of *Game of Thrones* and were able to offer backstage information on filming. Results show that tourists who evaluate their experience as memorable in a positive way, that is they had a pleasant experience, recommend not only the thematic tour but the visit of the destination as well. In more, memorable tourism experiences increased a good propensity to return to the destination either with the same or with different travel companions.

Research implications and limitations | The research provides some theoretical implications on the domains of memorable experiences considering that experiences might be memorable because of their negative implications that caused disappointment. Managerial implications on a destination level are also discussed. The exploratory research has several limitations because it is based on the reviews published by consumers on TripAdvisor. Film tourists who did not share their opinion on the social network site could not be involved in the research. Further limitation is due to limited scope of data gathering because in this phase only two thematic guided tours (one in Belfast and one in Dubrovnik) were selected for scrutiny. A questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews with *Game of Thrones* tourists would be needed to better explore memorable experiences linked to the filming locations.

Conclusions | The paper advances knowledge on film tourists' memorable experiences in the tourism scholarship. Previous viewing experiences of a television series elicit emotional attachment and personalised memories with the filming locations. The touristic spaces experienced through the lens of a fantasy world are imbued with a meaning and value for fans. The *Game of Thrones* locations attract and inspire visitors with the promise that their fantasy nurtured experience oriented holidays will take place in the authentic locations. The emotional attachment to the TV series, however, might generate great expectations that are difficult to meet. Results suggest that film tourists' disappointments should be managed not only by service providers but on a destination management level as well.

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