

# Exploring film tourism potential in Ireland: from Game of Thrones to Star Wars

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**Abstract** | Film as a medium can exert a powerful influence on its audience. A growing body of literature provides evidence that cinematic film and television drama productions can influence people's travel decisions and entice them to visit particular destinations they have seen on screen. This paper applies the concept of film-induced tourism to Ireland, from the context of early productions of the 1950's through to a particular focus on more recent high profile examples such as Game of Thrones and Star Wars: The Force Awakens. Global online research (netnography) was undertaken with the fan-base of Game of Thrones, further supplemented with analysis of social media content relating to the 2015 Star Wars film and the Irish island location of Skellig Michael. Findings reveal very strong fan bases with respect to each case and a strong interest in the Ireland based locations. Awareness appears to be high and growing in each case which highlights enormous potential for Ireland to grow as a film tourism destination.

**Keywords** | Film tourism, star wars, game of thrones, netnography, social media

## 1. Introduction

A new growth phenomenon in tourism destination branding these days is the increasing trend to associate a destination with popular cinematic film or television drama programmes. This began to gain more prominence and recognition in the

modern era following the 'Lord of the Rings' trilogy (2001-2003) and how New Zealand successfully branded itself as the home of 'Middle Earth' (Beeton, 2005). Arguably however, the concept of film attracting tourists to visit particular places has been happening much longer. Indeed Ireland can lay claim to some of the earliest examples of the

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phenomenon. The John Ford 1952 film 'The Quiet Man' starring John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara is one such example. A film for which Ford picked up the 'Best Director' Oscar. The movie (shot largely in the region of Cong in Co. Mayo) struck a chord with American audiences in particular and to this day still attracts American tourists to this rural region of Ireland (over 60 years later).

Film tourism or screen tourism can be defined as '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, 256). In the modern era we can add to this the formats of blu-ray and digital download as additional ways in which people consume their film and television drama shows. A growing body of research and evidence from authors such as Busby and Haines (2013), Hudson (2011), Heitmann (2010), Hudson and Ritchie (2006), Beeton (2005), Tzanelli (2004), Grihault (2003), Riley, Baker and Van Doren (1998), Tooke and Baker (1996) and Butler (1990) support this phenomenon of tourists visiting particular destinations because of their association with particular films and television shows.

This form of tourism has become a very powerful phenomenon. It can provide a destination with a prime opportunity to change its media image and people's perceptions of the country whilst at the same time harnessing a globally recognised and developing form of tourism which can significantly boost their economy. Research has shown that movies and television shows do strongly influence tourists in their choice of destination (Riley et al. 1998; Beeton, 2005; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Butler, 2011; Connell, 2013). Other early examples beyond 'The Quiet Man' for Ireland, include the likes of the 1949 spy thriller 'The Third Man' (set in Vienna) and the 1965 movie of 'The Sound of Music' (set in Salzburg). All of these are credited with developing and boosting tourism to their respective locations and indeed the effect still continues today, many decades later (Bolan, Boyd &

Bell 2011).

New Zealand and the 'Lord of the Rings' film trilogy has become one of the most researched and written about examples of film tourism. The country saw a direct tourism expenditure increase of NZ\$32.8 million within 3 years purely from the effect of the films with the impact said to be more than ten times that in the decade that followed (Buchmann, 2010). In New Mexico film tourism is estimated to be worth \$124 million (thanks largely to the hit show 'Breaking Bad'), whilst in Sweden, thanks to the 'Millennium' films and the 'Wallander' television series, it has been estimated at €106 million to date (Connell, 2013; Tzanelli & Majid 2014). With strong growth in film and television production in Ireland (north and south) in recent years (Oxford Economics, 2012), the destination now has a chance to grab a larger slice of this lucrative film tourism market.

In Ireland, a real game changer in more recent times has been the television show 'Game of Thrones' (GOT) which is filmed mostly in Northern Ireland (NI). It has become one of the most watched and most popular television shows ever on a global basis and the opportunity to leverage tourism from this is enormous for the future of the NI economy. In addition, another recent high profile example occurred when Disney films and director J.J. Abrams decided to film scenes for the long awaited new Star Wars movie – 'The Force Awakens' in Ireland, therefore bringing Irish scenery to an enormous fan-base and potential source of new tourists.

The aim of this paper was to investigate the potential for film tourism in Ireland through tapping into two hugely successful film and television phenomenon's in the form of Game of Thrones and Star Wars. More specifically the research sought to investigate the fan bases for these respective media productions as a new form of tourist for Ireland. Online research (netnography) was undertaken with the fan-base of Game of Thrones, further supplemented with analysis of social media

content around the new Star Wars movie and its connection with Ireland.

## 2. Film Tourism in Ireland

Ireland and associations with the country have featured prominently in movies from the earliest times of the industry. 'Due to the importance of Irish-American audiences to the development of the film industry in America, representations of Ireland have not only been a constant feature of Hollywood films from the silent era onwards but these representations have been structured in ways which have reflected the demands and imaginative positioning of that Irish diasporic audience' (Rains, 2003, 196). Such is the case with one of the earliest examples of film tourism - the John Ford 1952 film 'The Quiet Man'. Another influential early film of this kind was 'Ryan's Daughter' (1970). Directed by David Lean the Oscar winning movie showcased the spectacular rugged scenery of the Dingle peninsula to global audiences and like Ford's film has played its part in helping to attract tourists to Ireland (Bolan et al. 2006).

Whilst film production in Ireland (north and south) has continued since such times, it has seen something of a major resurgence in the past decade. This has been particularly so in Northern Ireland, where the creation of new studio facilities in Belfast and securing itself as the main filming base for Game of Thrones has not only brought success in itself but has acted as a catalyst for further film and television productions in Northern Ireland and the Republic. Examples of film productions include 'The Honeyymooners', 'King Arthur', 'Laws of Attraction', 'Chasing the Dragon', 'Ella Enchanted', 'Intermission', 'Braveheart', 'Evelyn', 'Reign of Fire', 'Tailor of Panama', 'Agnes Browne', 'Saving Private Ryan', 'Angela's Ashes', 'Breakfast on Pluto', 'Mickey-Bo & Me', 'The General', 'Philomena', 'Dracula Untold' and most recently 'High

Rise'. On the television side, in addition to 'Game of Thrones', productions have included 'The Fall', 'Line of Duty', 'Vikings', 'Ripper Street' and 'The Frankenstein Chronicles'. Such high-profile and successful productions provide a clear and present opportunity to leverage tourism potential for Ireland from the viewers and fans of such movies and television shows.

The Game of Thrones television show began development in January 2007 with Northern Ireland chosen as the main filming base for the show (with the first season broadcast in 2010/11). Whilst some filming also takes place in Malta, Morocco, Croatia, Iceland and most recently Spain, Northern Ireland is home to the majority of the studio work; at the Titanic Studios in Belfast and the Linen Mill Studios in County Down. Key landscapes around Westeros (the fictional setting of the show) are also filmed in Northern Ireland featuring a range of countryside and coastal locations. The show has become one of the most popular television productions ever with global audiences and has also been critically acclaimed. In its first season, the show received 13 Emmy nominations and 2 Golden Globe nominations, winning a total of 11 awards that year (2011). Such critically acclaimed success has continued with Game of Thrones winning more major awards through each season of the show.

Tourism Ireland announced in April 2014 that HBO (the American producers of the show) had endorsed a new Game of Thrones marketing campaign to promote Northern Ireland as a tourism destination associated with the show. The marketing campaign focused strongly on social media as the distribution mechanism, concentrating specifically on twitter and Facebook. Getting the official agreement and endorsement of film/television production companies (in this case HBO) is vital to running successful film tourism marketing initiatives and adding authenticity to the experience for tourists (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; Buchmann, 2010; Bolan et al. 2011; Butler, 2011; Hudson,

2011).

This has helped result in the development of a number of GOT location maps which supports the work of authors such as Beeton (2005) and O'Connor, Flanagan and Gilbert (2008) on the importance and relevance of movie maps and film trails in both enticing film tourists and adding value to their experience when visiting such destinations. In this case for Northern Ireland, the maps identify locations used in the GOT television show and also clearly link these filming locations to key scenes and characters which add to the kind of authenticity that film tourists seek, as advocated by Butler (2011) and Bolan et al. (2011). As such the tourism authorities have taken the step to actually brand Northern Ireland as 'Game of Thrones Territory'. This is the first time such a proactive marketing approach has been taken with regard to film tourism in Ireland and can be likened to New Zealand branding itself as 'Middle-earth' in connection with 'LOTR' and 'The Hobbit' (Beeton, 2005; Jones & Smith, 2005).

The other high-profile case for Ireland has been the recent film *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015). The movie utilised the scenic island setting of Skellig Michael, situated some 12 km off the south-west coast of Ireland. Once a monastic site, the island was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1996. Already known for its spectacular landscape and setting it was described back in 1910 by the noted literary author George Bernard Shaw as an incredible place that was 'part of our dream world'. Qualities that attracted the makers of the recent *Star Wars* film to use it in the climactic final scenes of the movie as the spiritual home to the Jedi. Something which now brings huge potential tourism possibilities.

In relation to the recent film, according to Baran (2015, accessed at [www.travelweekly.com](http://www.travelweekly.com)) '... while *Star Wars* was nirvana for the film industry, breaking myriad box-office records, it also promised to be a holiday gift to the travel industry, having been shot on locations that are likely to

see a boost in visitor numbers thanks to the exposure'. The notion of *Star Wars* tourism is nothing new. The original movie was released in 1977 and destinations such as Tunisia in particular have been successful in attracting *Star Wars* fans over a number of decades to take tourist trips into the desert to visit the sets and locales that featured as the planet Tatooine and the home of Luke Skywalker (Beeton, 2005).

With the recent film being hotly anticipated, breaking box office records, and receiving enormous media attention, this presents another opportunity of tapping into a ready-made fan-base (similar to *Game of Thrones*) to attract tourists to Ireland. As such, this paper sought to analyse fan-base thoughts, views and opinions through a variety of online platforms and forums.

### 3. Methodology

The study took an interpretivist approach, employing qualitative methods of enquiry to examine critical factors at play; with regard to the *Game of Thrones* fan base and in examining social media content with regard to the film *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and the Irish island location of Skellig Michael. Netnography was employed as a key technique to obtain opinions and feelings of a qualitative nature from the fan-base of the television show. Specifically, the methodology utilised the online observation strand of netnography as discussed by Veer (2013), whereby data from publicly accessible, online forums was viewed and analysed.

A number of leading *Game of Thrones* forums were identified for netnographic analysis. The forums were chosen based on a number of factors including the frequency of posts by members, the number of posts on the forum, and the level of discussion amongst members. Online observation (Veer, 2013) of 10 forums then took place over a 10 month period in 2014. As key discussion themes

became apparent to the researchers, these were used for first-stage coding in grounded theory analysis. Following this, axial coding took place to establish links between the aforementioned themes, before further analysis eventually led to a theory of what Game of Thrones fans may want from a tourism experience. The approach was also iterative in nature, whereby particular forums, discussions, or posts were re-examined in light of new information that had become apparent through the coding process.

In addition to this particular netnographic strand of the research, analysis was also conducted (using analytics software) of online social media content relating to the recent Star Wars film and any connected mention of Ireland and Skellig Michael. Social media content was examined from August 2015 to February 2016. Such a period was chosen as it captured the proceeding months leading up to the film's release, the time around the release itself and a subsequent two month period afterwards. The findings from these two strands of research were then combined to offer a theory about the tourism possibilities of Game of Thrones and Star Wars fans, and the feasibility of harnessing this for Ireland.

#### 4. Research Findings

Netnographic analysis revealed that Game of Thrones captivates a broad spectrum of viewers. The television show appeals to males and females of all ages, as well as families who are keen to experience the unravelling of story lines together. Interestingly, the appeal of Game of Thrones has surpassed just the storylines or comparing elements between the novels and television adaptations. Specifically, some fans demonstrated, via their blog posts, a keen interest to discuss the set, costume or hair designs of the characters, as well as the food prepared and eaten and/or an inter-

est in discovering and philosophising about some of the overt and covert messages one could take away from the plots and character narratives.

Examples of the deep level of engagement in the show include "I've never cried so hard. I hate Game of Thrones right now. I don't know if I'll ever recover from this" (female, June 8, 2013, Blog 2). Similarly, another fan stated "I wanted to tweet five minutes ago about watching this week's game of thrones. BUT I COULDN'T BECAUSE I WAS SOBBING AN OCEAN OF TEARS" (female, June 5, 2013, Blog 2). The 'Red Wedding' episode caused so much shock that one fan confessed that she was "having a deep Game of Thrones-related depression and psychological distress (female, Blog 2). Whilst a male fan admitted, "NEVER FELT SO HEART BROKEN OVER A FICTIONAL FAMILY. GAME OF THRONES QUIT PLAYING GAMES WITH MY HEART, DAMN YOU!" (male, June 3rd, 2013, Blog 2). Consequently, all comments presented similar discourses by the fans and demonstrate that they are true fans, significantly affected by the storylines and continually shocked by some of the outcomes. Seemingly, they await the next disappointment. Interestingly, in the final depiction illustrated above, the fan explains that he is fully aware that Game of Thrones is fictional however this knowledge does not lessen the shock and emotive surprise. Clearly, what the comments highlighted above indicate is that there is an international *cult-like* following of Game of Thrones and harnessing this could create and strengthen a variety of Game of Thrones tourism products in Northern Ireland.

The interrogation of the meaning of the books and television series provides scope for creating strong products, activities and experience for GOT tourists. This could possibly be integrated into a tourism product via trivia and scattered puzzles on a Game of Thrones site trail, similar to the notion of geocaching. This approach would fit with what authors such as Carl, Kindon and Smith (2007),

Buchmann (2010) and Butler (2011) advocate we need more of to cater to the wants and needs of the film-induced tourist. This could bring a strong focused level of immersive tourist experience for fans.

A number of blogs were found to discuss the intricate costumes designed, the sophisticated hairstyles, authentic looking jewellery and the set designs. As such, some fans were keen to explore how the costumes assisted in the story development revealing 'devious' and 'demented' characters (Greenfield, 2014). Michele Clapton, the costume designer had the goal of presenting a 'fantasy reality' to fans (Greenfield, 2014). For example one blogger posted 'How fascinating! Clapton is clearly very good at her craft and takes great care to present these characters so thoroughly' (female, Blog 5, April 2014). This has already brought tourism potential to life as Glenarm (Co. Antrim) based jeweller 'Steensons', who make much of the jewellery worn in the show, have become a tourist stop on some tours, have had some of this jewellery and other props feature in major GOT exhibitions and now sell such replica pieces as well. Interest in seeing the costumes and jewellery worn by the characters on the television screen could create an opportunity for further product development of this kind in Northern Ireland.

Some online forums also highlighted the authenticity and creativity brought to the television series as a result of the food prepared and eaten by the characters. 'The Inn at the Crossroads' was widely referred to by bloggers as a significant reference in aiding with recipe ideas. As a result fans were keen to try the various medieval and contemporary recipes featured and inspired by the show. The interest in the food presented in Game of Thrones has resulted in two cookbooks written by the same author as the 'Inn at the Crossroads' website. The first was an ebook entitled Game of Thrones Party Planning Guide (Monroe-Cassel, 2013). The contents of the book prepared the reader to plan a medieval event providing ideas

and instructions for decorating, invitations, menus and activities. The second book was deemed the *official cook book* including a forward by the author of the Game of Thrones books George R.R. Martin (Monroe-Cassel and Lehrer, 2012).

At Castle Ward (Co. Down) which featured as 'Winterfell' in the television show, GOT medieval barbeques are now offered to tourists as part of an overall Game of Thrones experience which includes dressing in GOT style costumes and taking part in activities such as archery (in the very court by yard that featured some famous archery scenes in Season One). There is scope however to develop and expand this type of initiative on the food aspect to cater to what the show's fans seek. It was also evident from the online forums that fans wanted to enhance their experience of all things Game of Thrones by visiting the places depicted in the show. There was a growing awareness that Northern Ireland was the home of the show and many of their favourite outdoor locations. The desire to visit as tourists came through strongly amongst the online fans but equally the desire for an 'authentic' Game of Thrones experience.

With regard to the social media analysis between August 2015 and February 2016 there were 1896 mentions combining Star Wars, Ireland and Skellig Michael. Whilst there was some strong social media attention in late November 2015 (just a few weeks prior to the film release) the highest number of social media posts occurred in January 2016. The highest concentration of mentions was in North America (the USA in particular). Examples include:

'Skellig Michael's looking amazing in brand new Star Wars: Episode VIII footage' @keel3y

'Star Wars was so good & the last scene is shot at Skellig Michael in Ireland that I'm going to be seeing in May!' @JuBearz

'If you are a Star Wars fan, you'll be interested in the 6th century monastery of Skellig

### Michael in Ireland' @atozhistory

Within the first month of the film's release analysis clearly revealed a strong proliferation and 'buzz' on social media in relation to Ireland and Star Wars. This is something that previous modern and successful examples such as "The Lord of the Rings trilogy" (Beeton 2005) did not have the benefit of harnessing. In the current digital age, the marketing and PR value provided through social media can be enormous (Bolan 2015). Disney have also now been filming scenes for the next Star Wars movie around Ireland's Malin Head in Co. Donegal, so such potential will continue. Whilst it is still early days in relation to this Star Wars potential for Ireland compared to Game of Thrones (which is longer established), there is clearly interest from the fans and as such a huge opportunity for co-creation.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall the research findings indicate a very strong fan-base in relation to Game of Thrones who have the desire to visit the locations and engage in what they see as authentic GOT activities and experiences. Likewise, early additional findings from social media analysis relating to Ireland and the new Star Wars film indicate a strong interest amongst fans in the Irish island location of Skellig Michael. Film tourism is now a recognised and lucrative form of tourism on a global basis that can bring enormous opportunities in terms of destination image as well as economic impact and development (Connell, 2013; Buchmann, 2010; Beeton, 2005).

An overall film tourism strategy for Ireland is required to tap into the huge fan base interest from these respective productions. Tourism Ireland launching their GOT marketing campaign in March 2014 (with HBO endorsement) was an excellent start but it can't just be one-off campaigns which only focus on Game of Thrones. A full film

tourism strategy for the future is a must to achieve proper success in this arena in the way that VisitBritain have done for GB and that Tourism NZ have done for New Zealand. Star Wars provides a further alternative fan base for Ireland to capture as visiting tourists and a means to develop a wider film tourism strategy to bring more variety and scope in attracting and leveraging this growing and lucrative form of tourism.

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