

(G)A(i)ming at the Throne: Social Media and the Use of Visitor-Generated Content in Destination Marketing

Setting the Scene

Popular culture's influence by way of increasing tourism visitations has long been debated (Beeton, 2005, 2010), with film-induced tourism placed at the forefront. Film-induced tourism is a unique form of tourism motivating visitors to experience on- and off-location sites featured in popular movies and TV series (Beeton, 2005; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006). In recent years, film-induced tourism has developed into a growing worldwide phenomenon and its benefits have increasingly been perceived because it "offers something for everyone" (Hudson & Ritchie, 2006, p. 387): film-induced tourism not only provides the tourist with a chance to experience unique sites featured in their favorite movies and/or TV series, but as a result these sites very often gain the status of an icon (Riley, Baker, & Van Doren, 1998), depending on their special qualities, characteristics, and their role in films, which can be further exploited in destination marketing strategies (Hahm & Wang, 2011; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006; O'Connor, Flanagan, & Gilbert, 2008). Larson, Lundberg, and Lexhagen (2013) showed that tourists' consumption of popular culture sites may be beneficial if destination management organizations (hereinafter DMOs) wish to capitalize on it in their tourism developmental strategies. However, these strategies are not only reserved for the real world where experiences of tourists' engagement with the attraction are created, but are nowadays transferred to the online world where the *world-of-mouth* (Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013; Qualman, 2009) is experienced with the help of social media.

Nowadays, social media are perceived as highly significant for tourists' destination choice due to their widespread, accessibility, and popularity (Chung & Buhalis, 2008; Gretzel, Yuan, & Fesenmaier, 2000; Gretzel, 2006; Hays et al., 2013). Moreover, it is user-generated content that is fundamental to social media, offering an additional glance at how places and landscapes are consumed by tourists. Therefore, with a little creativity and a well-thought-out social media strategy, DMOs can benefit from the user-generated content and exploit it to engage with their prospective tourists, increasing destination brand awareness and creating a positive destination image attitude (Hays et al., 2013; Tuten, 2008). However, limited attention has been paid to these practices in relation to popular culture, in particular to film-induced tourism. This chapter addresses this gap by examining DMOs' practices concerning Instagram activities in connection to the popular series *Game of Thrones*. The purpose of this study is to identify how the *Game of Thrones* phenomenon was embedded in Instagram activities of the national DMOs in countries where the filming took place, and to further report on Croatia which is argued to have excelled in the aforementioned practice. This chapter will start with a review of the relevant literature on the role of popular culture in destination marketing, describe the interrelatedness of social media and destination image, and then present an analysis of the influence of *Game of Thrones* on national DMOs' Instagram activities. The final section will discuss the implications for destination marketing in relation to social media and popular culture tourism.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Popular Culture Tourism and Destination Marketing

Popular culture has become an important topic of broad discussion in tourism and the related marketing field and, more recently, has attracted growing interest of those attempting to

understand the benefits of destination marketing activities in connection with literature and film tourism (Beeton, 2010; Larson et al., 2013). In this latter case, Bolan and Williams (2008) argue that when we talk about the benefits of film tourism we usually consider film as a medium with the potential to reach and touch markets that are unreachable through traditional marketing activities. First, a destination's exposure in a film, especially if it is a commercially successful movie or TV series, may generate a wider market reach otherwise unaffordable and unachievable for most tourism promotion bodies. In this sense, film generates awareness of a destination among those viewers who may not be addressed by other marketing tools. Second, film has been shown to play an important role in the process of forming a destination image, which on the other hand is acknowledged as the most important aspect of a tourist's decision-making process. In this case, film as an autonomous image-formation agent provides substantial information to people within a very limited time, while people are more likely to evaluate this information as more objective and unbiased since autonomous agents are considered as independent information sources (that is, not influenced by official destination representatives). Finally, film imagery, which includes on-screen virtual characters, an appealing storyline, memorable music and remarkable landscapes, helps to build relationships which may seem impersonal, intangible, and inaccessible until the destination is actually visited. In that sense, the bond imaginatively created between the audience and the film characters materializes itself at the moment tourists visit the destination and recreate similar experiences as those on-screen performances. For those tourists who consider themselves true fans of the film, these landscapes might represent the pull factors for film site visits (Riley & Van Doren, 1992). On the other hand, for general tourists these landscapes might influence the propensity to visit a destination, but its effect would be difficult to measure (Young & Young, 2008). This is because the majority of film tourism is incidental and the consumption is influenced by the place and time of what is to be consumed (Connell, 2012). However, it is undeniable that, to some extent, film emphasizes the extraordinariness of these authentic landscapes, places, and sites, which would otherwise be considered an 'ordinary' object of tourist consumption.

As Bolan and Williams (2008) also note, many destination promotion activities in relation to the benefits of film are actively pursued by DMOs soon after the film is released and not before. In that sense, these early-stage benefits are most certainly lost and not exploited enough by destination marketers. Exceptions to this are the practices of New Zealand and its relationship with the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, and that of Forks, USA and the Italian towns Volterra and Montepulciano connected to the *Twilight Saga* phenomenon. With the former, as explored and reported by (Croy, 2010), tourism representatives and government officials were actively involved in developing and creating marketing activities through which the movie audience has been addressed and encouraged to pay a visit to the so-called Middle-earth. The Middle-earth is a challenging environment with a significant role in the movie since its landscapes and scenery strongly support the elements of the story. New Zealand tourism representatives were reported to have recognized the movie's important role in destination image and thus to have taken an active role in connecting the trilogy with stories about the country. In the case of the *Twilight Saga* phenomenon, Larson and colleagues (2013) reported that both Italian and US destination representatives also adopted an active role in developing *Twilight*-related tourism, but not all fully maximized the benefits. Here, it is interesting to note that both examples of 'good practice' relate to two popular culture franchises filmed and screened over several years and thus their influence on tourism-related activities is easier to examine and isolate. However,

The Lord of the Rings and the *Twilight Saga* are not the sole examples of commercially successful popular culture franchises in the interest of academic researchers, hence additional ones are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Selected franchised movies and TV series

Film franchise	Destination(s)	Author(s)
<i>Harry Potter</i> (7 movies; 2001–2011)	United Kingdom	Grihault (2003, 2007)
<i>The Lord of the Rings</i> (movie trilogy; 2001–2003) <i>The Hobbit</i> (movie trilogy, 2012–2014)	New Zealand	Beaton (2015); Buchmann (2006, 2010); Buchmann, Moore, & Fisher (2010); Carl, Kindon, & Smith (2007); Croy (2010); Li, Li, Song, Lundberg, & Shen (2017); Mitchell & Stewart (2012); Peaslee (2010); Piggott, Morgan, & Pritchard (2004); Singh & Best (2004)
<i>The Twilight Saga</i> (4 movies; 2009–2012)	USA, Italy, Canada	Larson et al. (2013); Lexhagen, Larson, & Lundberg (2014); Lundberg & Lexhagen (2012); Lundberg, Lexhagen, & Mattsson (2012)
<i>Mad Max</i> (4 movies; 1979, 1981, 1985, 2015)*	Australia	Frost (2010); Wray & Croy (2015)
<i>Downton Abbey</i> (6 seasons; 2011–2016)*	United Kingdom	Baena & Byker (2015); Bagnoli (2015)
<i>Game of Thrones</i> (6 seasons; 2011–2016)*	Croatia, Iceland, Malta, Morocco, Northern Ireland, Spain, USA	Murray (2017); Tzanelli (2016)

Note: *Filming is said to be continuing

Many authors also argue that destination managers and those responsible for tourism promotion have not completely capitalized on the positive influence film has on destination image and on generating higher visitor numbers to destinations (Bolan & Williams, 2008; Croy, 2010; Larson et al., 2013; Wray & Croy, 2015). In most cases, film-induced tourism benefits were not maximally utilized because destination managers assessed that the already established destination image, place authenticity or place qualities would be challenged by this particular form of tourism. In this context, pre-established place identities generate distinctiveness and uniqueness of how a “resident from a specific place (such as a city or town) has an association with this place, and this bond enables the resident to differentiate himself/herself from people from other places” (Chen & Šegota, 2015, p. 148). And it is these that are challenged by the film imagery, especially if the destination is negatively portrayed in the film (Beeton, 2005; Larson et al., 2013; Light, 2007). As Beeton (2005, p. 163) suggested, when residents are dissatisfied with how film-induced tourism imposes meanings and an identity of the place they live in, DMOs ought to address the issue by “re-imaging the destination by demarketing”, which could be a lengthy and costly process. Therefore, in some cases, there is simply no strategy that would tie the destination’s marketing activities to a

particular popular culture phenomenon, and hence those activities continue 'as usual'. Accordingly, the literature shows that tourism destinations have developed various strategies in order to preserve, manage, or re-establish place identity and authenticity in relation to popular culture phenomena.

Strategies on film-induced tourism

What then are these strategies for managing film-induced tourism? Larson and colleagues (2013) define them as: fabricating place authenticity, guarding place authenticity, and no strategy.

First, fabricating place authenticity strategy is all about subalterning, in the majority, tourism development of the destination to experiences related to a popular culture phenomenon, that is to fictionally constructed realities (Larson et al., 2013). A film's key role in creating images of a place, and consequently its memorability, awareness, familiarity, and expectations, is perceived as crucial for enhancing the influx to a destination tourism (Croy, 2010). However, this subalterning is not only reserved for the development of tourism products and services, but also stretches to destinations' marketing activities. As previously mentioned, a consumer's sensitivity to destination image can be influenced by a film, which "can therefore help to make intangible tangible and /.../ can further aid in promotion destinations to the tourist in a more accessible and unbiased way" (Bolan & Williams, 2008, p. 388).

Second, the strategy on guarding place authenticity, on the other hand, involves the DMOs' interest to develop tourism related to the popular culture phenomenon, although the latter is kept to a minimum. Therefore, the guarding place authenticity strategy refers to prioritizing tourism development so as to give prominence to the qualities of the place and its authenticity with very little emphasis on the popular culture phenomenon (Larson et al., 2013). In this context, attributes associated with popular culture may be integrated into the destination's existing marketing activities in order to stimulate the influx of tourists to a destination without disrupting the destination's core values and existing experiences (Bolan & Williams, 2008; Croy, 2010; Neville, 2014).

Finally, no strategy for the case where destination representatives have shown no interest in the popular culture phenomenon and that priority is given to the established place identity and authenticity over the (potential) benefits of this type of tourism (Larson et al., 2013). In this case, it has been evaluated that tourism development connected to satisfying the needs of film-induced market segments would only bring short-term or no benefits to the existing tourism and/or that the destination's unique character is 'better off' not creating experiences that would distort the identity of the place and its community.

All these strategies therefore underpin destinations' development directions with a particular emphasis given to destination marketing activities and on-location experiences in order to attract tourists and satisfy their needs. As noted in the introduction, this chapter is especially concerned with how these strategies on place authenticity in relation to popular culture phenomena have been pursued by DMOs in their communication with (prospective) tourists on social media, with a focus on Instagram. To better explore these practices, it is necessary to understand the general role of social media and why it is important for destination marketing.

The Role of Social Media in Co-creating Destination Image

When social media are mentioned, one cannot but think about what not long ago were unimaginable, whole new experiences and developments of different forms of communications brought by technological advancements. According to Safko and Brake (2009, p. 6):

social media refers to activities, practices, and behaviours among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media. Conversational media are Web-based applications that make it possible to create and easily transmit content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios.

It is the content of social media and its creators that both have a significant role in the destination image formation process. First, it is pictures and videos posted on social media that make the 'intangible tangible': that is, they transform intangible, perishable, and variable places of the tourist gaze into "graspable objects" (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 180) by eternalizing and materializing their *in situ* experiences, memories, and emotions with the destination in pictures or video. Second, when shared online, these pictures and videos of one's gaze have the propensity to be instantly consumed (i.e. generate attraction and reaction) by others and thus ignite their desires for the same-like experiences, memories, and emotions. Moreover, it is about pictures and videos having the ultimate power to give evidence of a destination's unique characteristics that are passed from person to person. Thus, tourists become creators and consequently advocates of the destination's image independently of tourism officials, for whom social media are perceived as a trustworthy and independent information medium. And it is the latter that gives credibility to social media in shaping tourism-related choices and decisions (Cox, Burgess, Sellitto, & Buultjens, 2009; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

In this context, for Hays and colleagues (2013) social media are all about the participation, conversation, and fluidity of online communities that create the content and rely on it for their tourism-related decisions. According to Daugherty, Eastin and Bright (2008, p. 16), "user-generated content refers to media content created or produced by the general public rather than by paid professionals and primarily distributed on the Internet." Such tourist-to-tourist communication makes DMOs "no longer the unrivalled experts on the attributes or quality of /destinations and tourism services and/ products" (Hudson & Thal, 2013, p. 157). However, DMOs can benefit from the visitor-generated content¹ and exploit it in order to increase awareness of and develop loyalty to destinations (Hays et al., 2013; Hidalgo Alcazar, Silicila Pinero, & Ruiz de Maya, 2014; Tuten, 2008). In addition, visitor-generated content can be used to reassure the authenticity of a destination with DMOs' role as an intermediary in tourist-to-tourist communication. In this sense, DMOs usually have a large number of social media followers that, most of the time, willingly share their experiences in the form of pictures or videos with the place for various purposes. When given permission, DMOs can repost some of this content to engage in this 'peer-to-peer' interaction and hence create a much stronger sense of co-creation of the destination image.

¹ For the purpose of this chapter, user-generated content will be called visitor-generated content to emphasize the role of the tourist prior to that of the social media user.

This co-creation of destination image is even more important in the context of popular culture tourism. Social media not only enable a variety of word-of-mouth activities to take place, but its content guarantees that, to some extent, the 'popular culture tourist gaze' will be authentic, unique, and real, especially for those who consider themselves true fans and are eager to re-experience the authenticity of the destination where the filming happened. In search for this film-induced authenticity of the destination, tourists are nowadays much more present in the online world because their information search is more efficient in terms of both time and scope (Gretzel et al., 2000; Gretzel, 2006; Hays et al., 2013). However, the literature suggests that many DMOs struggle to keep up with new communication trends (Croy, 2010) and that very few national DMOs recognize social media as “a vital tool in marketing strategies” (Hays et al., 2013, p. 236).

Methodology

The general interest of the study presented in this chapter is in DMOs' utilization of the benefits of both popular culture-induced tourism and social media in destination image formation activities. More specifically, the purpose is to examine the complex relationship between: (1) the popular culture phenomenon of the Game of Thrones; (2) Instagram as a social media marketing tool; and (3) the destination marketing activities of official DMOs of destinations where the TV series was filmed.

Illustrations in this chapter draw upon the HBO TV series Game of Thrones, which became highly successful immediately after its first screening on April 17, 2011. The original series is based on George R.R. Martin's bestseller series of fantasy novels *A Song of Ice and Fire* that portray chronicles of violent dynastic struggles among noble families for the Iron Throne while more threats emerge from the north of the continent and from distant eastern lands. This record-setting TV series can command with a production budget of up to US\$ 10 million per episode (there are 10 episodes per season), an average of 20 million viewers per episode, and won a total of 38 Emmy awards, making it the most successful TV series in film history (HBO, 2016). In order to confirm these appraisals, it is noted that Game of Thrones is the Guinness two-times record holder for the most Emmy awards for a fictional series and a drama (Guinness World Records, 2016).

The primary reason for choosing Instagram as a social media platform to analyze for this study lies in its classification as a photo-sharing tool (Oliveira & Panyik, 2015). Instagram has more than 500 million active users who capture and share over 95 million photos every day (Instagram, 2016). Moreover, Instagram users can capture, edit, share, like, comment, and tag pictures and videos. It also enables the following of other Instagram users and/or user-generated content that are hashtagged (for example, @croatiafulloflife, #lovecroatia), which increases the visibility of posts.

Further, this study is exploratory in nature and both qualitative and quantitative research methods were utilized to examine in which ways DMOs employ Instagram as an image-focused social medium to complement their destinations' image with the commercially successful TV series Game of Thrones. First, Larson and her colleagues' (2013) proposition of a three-strategy framework underpinned the research for this study. Therefore, three categories – fabricating destination image authenticity, guarding destination image authenticity and no strategy – were set as the basis for further analysis. Second, data were collected from official Instagram profiles of DMOs where filming took place, with strong emphasis on allocating pictures accompanied by specific hashtags referencing the Game of

Thrones (e.g., #gameofthrones, #got, #GOTterritory etc.). This quantitative approach helped in benchmarking the social media activities across the three strategies for all destinations associated with the TV series from season one onwards. Here the emphasis is on all destinations, regardless of the number of screening seasons they featured in. Lastly, complementary to this analysis, we performed an interview with a representative of a national tourism organization in charge of social media marketing activities of the destination, for which it was shown to have capitalized the most from the visitor-generated content related to the TV series.

Instagraming for the Rise on the Throne

From the data analyzed from the DMOs' posts on Instagram, it is evident that the DMOs differ in their destination marketing strategies of associating their social media activities to the popular TV series Game of Thrones (see Table 2). For example, Malta, Morocco, and Spain, which were featured in a few seasons, or even without any screening series in respect of Scotland, have shown no interest in linking their destination image to the TV show through their Instagram profiles. The same goes for Iceland, with the exception that it has been an on-location setting for almost all filming and screenings of the series (the exception is season one). However, this, what Larson and colleagues (2013) refer to as no strategy, is surely an indication that these five DMOs opted to create visual imagery that emphasized the destination's unique character. It could be argued that with this 'no strategy' approach DMOs focused on existing tourism segments rather than attracting film-induced tourists.

Table 2: Instagram statistics for the analyzed DMOs, data collected 22 August 2016

Country	Instagram profile	Official hashtags	First post	Followers (total)	Posts (total)	GoT filming seasons	GoT posts	GoT reposts
Croatia	@croatiafulloflife	#CroatiaFullOfLife; #Croatia; #lovecroatia	Dec. 12, 2012	108,000	5,268	2–5	189	157
Iceland	@inspiredbyiceland	#IcelandAcademy	Aug. 13, 2013	45,800	342	2–6	1	1
Malta	@visitmalta	#VisitMalta	Jun. 11, 2013	27,000	216	1	1	1
Morocco	@wehavethisthingwithmorocco	/	Dec. 9, 2015	33,300	156	pilot, 3	0	0
Northern Ireland	@discoverni	#DiscoverNI	Jun. 12, 2012	20,500	599	1–6	37	7
Scotland	@visitscotland	#ScotSpirit; #LoveScotland; #VisitScotland	Oct. 25, 2012	215,000	2,198	pilot	0	0
Spain	@spain	#visitspain	May 7, 2014	141,000	1,004	5–6	1	1

Note: GoT = Game of Thrones

In relation to popular culture phenomena, guarding place authenticity in social media activities can be observed for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland was chosen for both on- and off-location filming and therefore holds huge potential for generating an influx of film-induced tourism. However, contrary to that presumption, Northern Ireland's DMO has been very cautious in aligning the destination's image with the commercially successful TV series. In most cases, Instagram pictures portrayed a natural environment accompanied by the hashtag #GOTterritory that indicates landscape and scenery (with the potential of) being featured in the TV series. Interestingly, a series of six postal stamps inspired by season 6 (i.e. the latter was screened in 2016) was issued. In this case, Instagram was used as an additional

medium to advertise and market the stamp collection with the captions like “*Send a postcard from Winterfell with a limited edition #GOTterritory stamp. Be quick, a limited number is available at @visitbelfast. #NorthernIreland.*” On average, these ads generated 234 likes. In conclusion, the @DiscoverNI Instagram account showed that the official Northern Ireland DMOs guarded the authenticity of the place and thus decided to not fully exploit the benefits of Game of Thrones-induced tourism in their online marketing activities.

On the other hand, Croatia did just that: it seized the opportunities given by the filming of the Game of Thrones series in Dalmatia and decided to 'cash-in' on its worldwide popularity. In general, it was shown that Croatia's DMO has been very active in developing destination image and nurturing its presence on Instagram with a total of over 5,000 posts in less than 4 years. And with the changing of filming locations from Malta to Croatia in season one of the series, Croatia has become a synonym for King's Landing, the most crucial scenery of the series known for its Iron throne. The majority of the filming took place in Dubrovnik and at nearby tourist attractions (see Figure 1), giving Dubrovnik an additional reference to its unique attractiveness. Dubrovnik, included on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1979, was already an established tourist destination in Croatia, however soon after 2012 it “*represented the pilgrimage destination for those real fans of the Game of Thrones*” (Croatia tourism). That consequently meant that more and more pictures would emerge of destinations recognized as filming sites by those tourists that visited the site urged by the popular culture tourist gaze and those incidental tourists for whom the series represented an extra motivation to visit the place. Regardless of the driving mechanism, visitor-generated content testifying to the place's authenticity has been emerging on Instagram hashtagged #gameofthrones, #kingslanding, and #croatia. And it is these that have been perceived as “*a marketing niche based on the iconic TV series, and therefore beneficial to destination image*” (Croatia tourism). The @CroatiaFullOfLife Instagram account only has 3.5% of all its posts associated with the Game of Thrones, although it has by far the most posts hashtagged #gameofthrones compared to other countries. Moreover, the majority of these are reposted (83%), of which 73% portray the landscape and scenery of micro-destinations (i.e., Dubrovnik, Split, Lokrum etc.) whereas 17% also feature people recreating some scenes from the film. That is, these represent visitor-generated content that Croatia's DMO shared among its Instagram followers with the aim to “*enhance the destination's organic image, which on the one hand already existed*” (Croatia tourism), but which has the propensity to create a much stronger sense of co-creation of the destination image among visitors. And it is the latter that should have represented the greatest benefit of film-induced tourism in social media activities since a fictionally constructed reality has just been materialized in reality via the eternalization of someone's experience (i.e. picture). It is interesting to note that Croatian tourism officials do not perceive repostings and #gameofthrones associations as a social media activity that would enhance the authenticity of the posts or that of the macro- or micro-destination image. They are primarily interested in “*what interests their tourists, how active they are and how they have spent their holidays in Croatia.*” Regardless, Croatian DMO social media practices, intentional or accidental in their own right, embody the elements of fabricating place authenticity strategy.

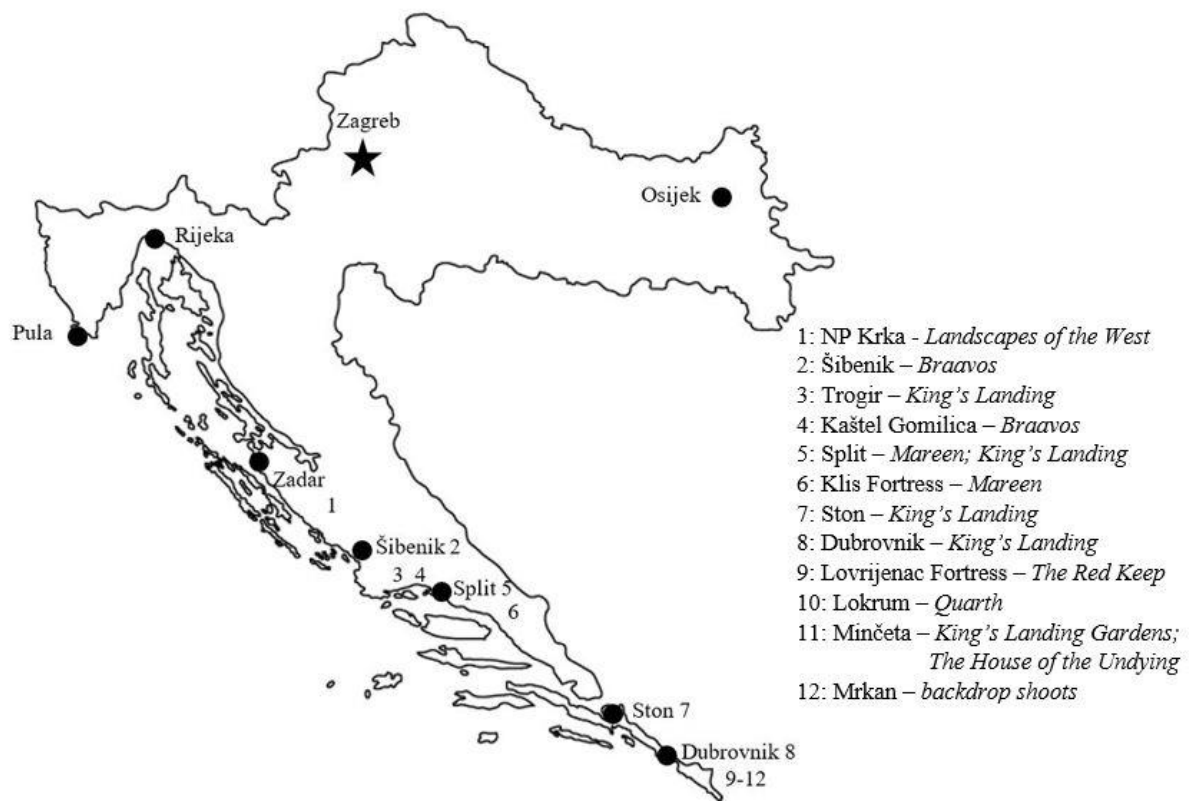


Figure 1: A map of Croatia showing selected *Game of Thrones* film locations
 Source: World Atlas (2016), with *Game of Thrones* film locations inserted by the author.

Implications for popular culture tourism

Tourism is a very competitive industry for destinations whose consumers look for the image and extraordinariness of their tourism-related decisions (Pirnar & Gunlu, 2012). This is even more evident in the tourism-related decisions of those people mesmerized by popular culture phenomena who pursue visits to destinations 'tipped' to be on- and off-location settings of their favorite film. As Jones (in Figueroa, 2015) said, "for the *Game of Thrones*' fans out there, it all comes live in Dubrovnik. You will walk the same paths, touch the same walls and soak up the views you see on the show." The tourist gaze Jones referred to is reinforced by popular culture and "has resulted in a massive upward shift in the level of what is *ordinary* and hence what people view as *extraordinary*" (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 116). It is in this context that DMOs have seen the benefits of an influx of tourism driven by the desire to experience the authenticity of on-screen fabricated realities. However, this film-induced tourism was shown not to be warmly welcomed by the DMOs and their tourism developmental strategies, both offline and online.

This chapter aims to assist those responsible for tourism destination marketing in understanding the benefits of popular culture tourism for destination image. More specifically, with the new technologies and *Web 2.0* tourists became co-creators of destination image by sharing, liking, and posting their experiences on social media. In particular they use Instagram, which is primarily based on the sharing of photos, which are known to be *worth a*

thousand words. It is these visitor practices that generate the content 'that is out there' for DMOs to freely incorporate in their social media activities in order to develop destination images and enhance the authenticity of the place. And, for what it is worth, isn't it better that DMOs participate in tourist-to-tourist communication on social media by reposting and thus invisibly imposing control over the destination image, which would take place regardless of DMOs' willingness to participate?

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