

Chapter 1

GoT Belfast?

How a Television Epic about a War-Torn Land was Employed to Rebrand Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the role of cine-tourism in destination marketing. Specifically, it analyses the strategic alliance between the Northern Ireland Tourist Board and HBO, producers of the popular television series Games of Thrones. A narrative analysis is performed on several examples of campaign creative, and traces how the GoT Belfast campaign reimagines Northern Ireland as a tourist destination. The digital and social media campaign of the NITB is evaluated using both qualitative and quantitative performance metrics. The overall success of the GoT Belfast campaign is weighed in terms of economic inducements to attract the filming to Northern Ireland versus the economic impact on the region. Recommendations are offered for future research and for implementation of best practices in cine-tourism management.

INTRODUCTION

Game of Thrones (GoT), the HBO produced television fantasy series has become a popular culture sensation (Barney, 2015). The epic chronicles a war among dynasties for an Iron Throne in the fictitious land of Westeros. Intrigue, sex and evocative, other-worldly landscapes suffuse the series. Most of the location shooting, and almost all the interior production, occur in, or around Belfast city, Northern Ireland. *GoT* is turning Belfast city and Northern Ireland into a pilgrimage destination for fans who want to witness personally the show's iconic locations, such as the Dark Hedges (King's Road), Ballintoy (Iron Islands), Castle Ward (Winterfell), Downhill Strand (Dragonstone), or Cushendun Caves (birth place of the Shadow Baby).

The Northern Ireland Tourist Board (Ireland.com), whose primary objective is to promote Northern Ireland as a tourist destination, has co-opted *GoT* into the centerpiece of its marketing strategy. Web

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site viewers are invited to a four-day, twelve stop, *GoT* itinerary. Fans are dared “to walk the spooky Dark Hedges (Dark Hedges, Co. Antrim, Figure 4) or get sea-sprayed at the coastal nook of Ballintoy Harbor, where Theon Greyjoy landed on his return to the Iron Islands.” The success of *GoT*, which finished airing its fifth season in the U.S. in June 2015, is especially welcome and poignant in Belfast, which for decades has been synonymous with the euphemistically labelled “The Troubles”. During the “Troubles,” between 1969 and 1998, more than 3,500 people died in sectarian violence between British loyalists and Irish nationalists (Rosenbloom, 2013). Thirty feet walls still separate loyalist and nationalist neighborhoods within the city of Belfast. Though the violence has largely ended, hot spots still flare occasionally, as in 2013, when sectarian passions ignited over the flying of the Union Jack. When it comes to overseas tourism, Northern Ireland has traditionally been an afterthought for those visiting the politically separate, Republic of Ireland. Alternatively, a visit to Northern Ireland attracted only the most adventurous itineraries, such as those including war tourism.

The challenge for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board (NITB) was to change the perception of Northern Ireland, within the constraints of a modest promotional budget. This paper critically evaluates the performance of the NITB in rebranding Northern Ireland and the successfulness of its co-branding strategy with HBO’s *GoT*. The analysis evaluates the destination marketing campaign from the perspective of whether it represents a case of best practices, and can serve as a model for other destination marketing organizations (DMOs) charged with leveraging cine-marketing opportunities. The paper reviews the literature on cine-tourism and evaluates the merits of the strategic alliance between the NITB and *GoT*’s producers, HBO. The analysis reviews several elements of the destination marketing campaign, including the digital, publicity, public relations and traditional and online advertising. The paper offers a narrative analysis of the fantastical props campaign and of the print and online advertising. The research presents performance metrics to evaluate the overall success of the campaign in rebranding Northern Ireland into an iconic tourist brand. Lastly, the paper offers recommendations for DMOs on how best to leverage cine-tourism opportunities.

CINE-TOURISM

Cine-tourism constitutes a comparatively new subfield of tourism research (Shani, Youcheng, Hudson, & Gil, 2008). Cine-tourism is a situation whereby a tourist visits a destination, being motivated in part, or in whole, by an experience of seeing the destination featured in a movie or television series. There are a number of benefits to cine-tourism. First, it appeals to a diverse audience across demographic segments, thus broadening the base of the visitor market (Hudson & Richie, 2005). Tourism Competitive

Intelligence estimates that 40 million international tourists chose a destination primarily based on a film or television show filmed in country (Henry-Biabaud, 2002). Second, if a companion book accompanies the film, or television series, there is increased opportunity for tourist involvement in the destination. Third, co-marketing opportunities during movie release dates offer increased public relations exposure opportunities. Piggyback exposure of high profile celebrity stars, effectively expands media budgets for city destination marketing, allowing campaigns to cut through competitive clutter (Sax, 2015). Fourth, movie stars, with their built-in fan base appeal, may offer opportunities for celebrity endorsements (Gluckman, 2011). Film stars who hail from the destination location often offer to do this work

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