

Capturing the effect of film production: A qualitative perspective on film tourism in Wellington, New Zealand

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Abstract: Film tourism as one of the Special Interest Tourism types has increasingly been noted in New Zealand since the success of *The Lord of The Rings* trilogy. By undertaking a case study of tour operators in Wellington, this paper aims at highlighting opportunities which film production can bring to local tourism businesses (tour operators), and how they are differed at different production stages. A Qualitative method involving in-depth interviews with several tour operators, i-SITEs and Regional Tourism Organization were employed. The case study demonstrates that film production brings various opportunities for tour operators including business establishment, product development and modification, and non-film tourism interest generation. The number of opportunities is also different at each production stage. A model that illustrates how opportunities for tour operators are created by film productions is developed as a result of this research.

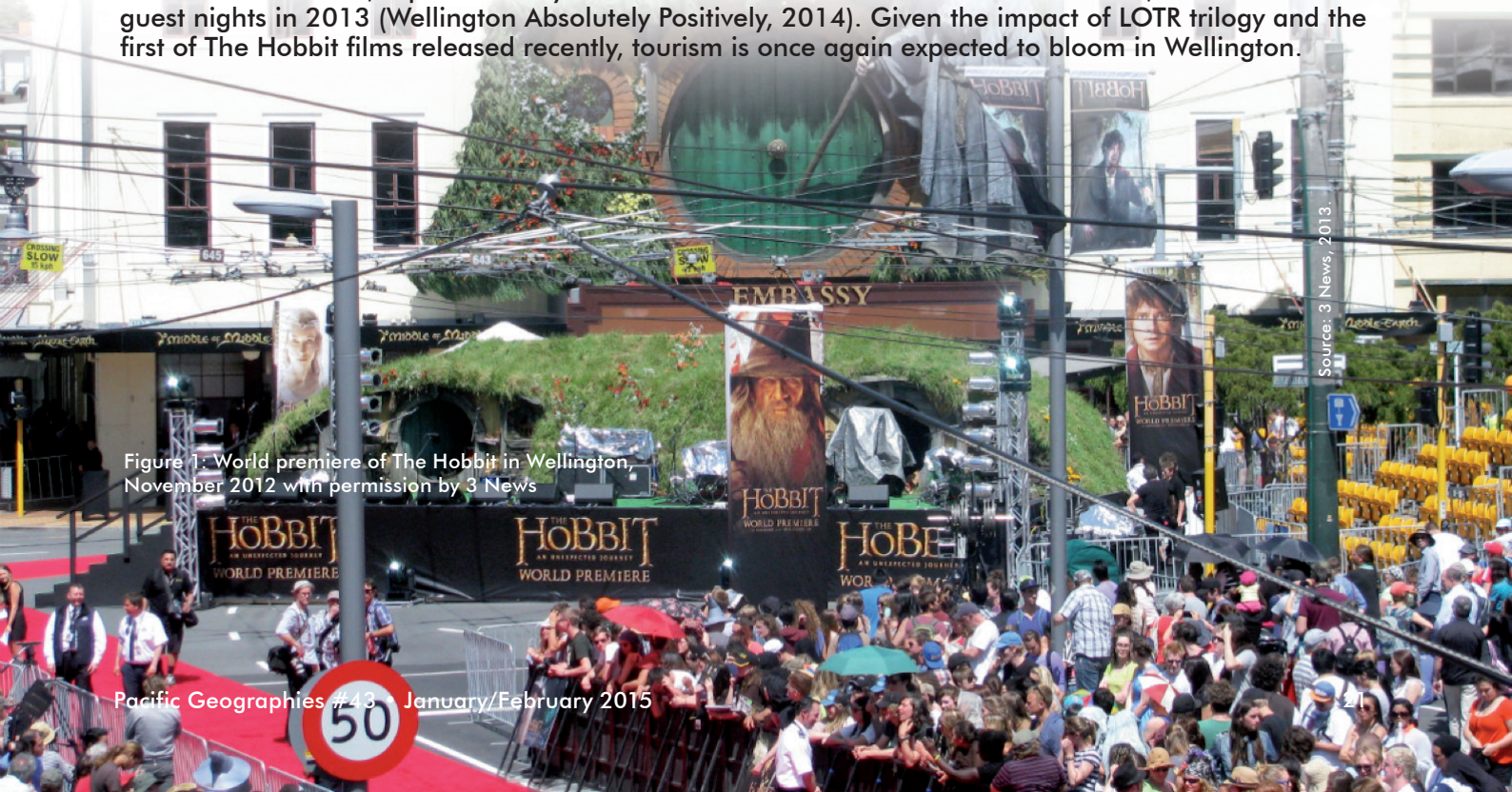
Keywords: Film tourism, business opportunities, film production, tour operator, Wellington.

Submitted as Scientific Paper: 28 July 2014, Acceptance of the revised manuscript: 03 November 2014]

Media coverage often has a significant impact on promoting a certain destination's image. Buchmann, Moore and Fisher (2010) state that film production places an emphasis on the supporting role of landscape and scenery to illustrate the story's elements. Many movies have contributed to making particular places become attractive tourist destinations such as New Zealand (*The Lord of the Rings*), or Anlwich Castle in Northumberland (*Harry Potter*).

Film industry in New Zealand has made a great contribution to the national economy. According to Statistics New Zealand (2011a), the number of businesses in the screen industry rose from around 2,250 in 2008 to just over 3,000 in 2010 with about 6,700 employees in total by 2010. More than 45 films and telefeatures were filmed in New Zealand between 2008 and 2011 (Statistics New Zealand, 2011b). Moreover, market research shows that 6% of visitors to New Zealand in 2004 cited *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) as being one of their main reasons for visiting (Tourism New Zealand, 2013). Wellington, for example, was chosen to film several scenes in LOTR and many other movies such as *King Kong* and *Avatar* (Film Wellington New Zealand, n.d). Wellington tourism has successfully attracted many domestic and international visitors, represented by 1.4 million commercial domestic and over 680,000 international guest nights in 2013 (Wellington Absolutely Positively, 2014). Given the impact of LOTR trilogy and the first of *The Hobbit* films released recently, tourism is once again expected to bloom in Wellington.

Figure 1: World premiere of *The Hobbit* in Wellington, November 2012 with permission by 3 News



Film tourism is often looked at from the demand perspective, whereas the supply side has not been explored widely. This study attempts to obtain a better understanding of film tourism's supply side by examining the three following questions:

- What opportunities does film production bring to tourism businesses?
- Do these opportunities change over time at different stages of the film production?
- How do the city tour operators perceive the potential opportunities of The Hobbit and how do they prepare for it?

The research employs a case study approach, which assesses film tourism in Wellington through the relationship between film production and its opportunities for tour operators. Film production is divided into different stages and its effects on the tourism industry can be varied from one stage to another. The case also intends to assist tour operators around Wellington in realising the benefits of film production and capturing them effectively.

Film Production Stages and Tourism Opportunities

Tourism opportunities brought by film production are associated with the increase in the number of visitors due to the influence of the film. Tooke and Baker (1996) state that film can attract more tourists, both domestic and international, to visit the screened locations. Especially, international movies have affected the demand flow of tourism worldwide because they offer a great advantage to promote the filmed locations among millions of people (Saltik, Cosar & Kozak, 2011). The growth of tourism demand benefits the local businesses across various sectors such as accommodation, restaurants, tour operators and retailers. For example, statistics show that since 2004 (after LOTR films), an average of 47,000 visitors each year have visited a film location in New Zealand (Tourism New Zealand, 2013).

Beeton (2005, p.97) suggests that the effect of film tourism is a process and should be studied over time. Hudson (2011) divides film production into four main stages:

- Before the production
- During the production
- During the release of the film, and
- After the release

In the '*before the production*' stage, film producers start looking for potential locations to film. Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) and Regional Tourism Organisations (RTOs) should be aware of potential collaborations at this stage. According to Hudson (2011), films solely used for promoting tourism due to their profit-driven purpose do not contain much meaning and hence, might not create a considerable effect. Appropriate policies to attract film producers and early marketing strategies from the local government in this stage may help generate opportunities for local tourism businesses afterward.

'During the production' is the time when the film is actually shot. This period continuously generates publicity for the location itself. According to Busby and Klug (2001), filming not only provides short-term employment and publicity for the chosen location, but also long-term tourism opportunities. Film producers can be seen as long-stay visitors which means a potential market for the local tourism businesses (Ward and O'Regan, 2009; Young and Young, 2008). By considering film crews as business travellers, the business opportunities may go mostly to the hospitality enterprises.

'During the release' covers the period from the end of the filming until the launch of the final product worldwide. In this stage, marketing partnerships and advertising campaigns are implemented to attract public attention. One significant event in this stage is the movie premiere. Film premiere contributes considerably to the advertisement of the destination, yet has not been strongly noted by either tourism organisers or professionals (Beeton, 2005). In the case of LOTR, the premiere of the final part was held in Wellington and brought a considerable profit of NZ \$2 million to NZ-government (Beeton, 2005, p.182).

Finally, once the movie has finished being shown in the theatres, the production enters the '*after the release*' stage. In this period, local tourism organisations and businesses get involved in marketing activities designed to convert the audiences' interest in a film into commitments for future visits, and capitalise on additional visitors brought in through the film. Ward and O'Regan (2009) argue that effects of film production on tourism often happen after the making

of the production and during the initial release of the film. After the film is shown, more people are exposed to the scenes and motivated to visit the locations. Occasionally, a film that may not be a huge box office success can still be a significant boost for the tourism industry, such as the movie 'Australia'. Young and Young (2008) conclude that the likelihood of a tourist making a visit to a destination is only impacted to some degree by the result of the screen products. Accordingly, the echo of film production on tourism businesses after the release is different in terms of time and scope.

In general, the literature has showed that film production can generate a range of opportunities for many local businesses. These benefits have been examined mostly at the destination level. There is a need for further investigation of the opportunities for particular types of tourism businesses. The current research focuses on tour operators and examines the benefits of film production at its different stages.

Methodology

This research is a case study of The Wellington region that employs a qualitative method with in-depth interviews. Although the study was originally developed to examine tour operators, research participants were expanded to i-SITEs and RTOs. Pearce (2004, p.8) defines i-SITEs as "a clearly labelled, publicly accessible, physical space with personnel providing predominantly free of charge information to facilitate travellers' experience". The reason for including i-SITEs and RTOs in this research is primarily the limited number of tour operators in Wellington. However, it is also driven by the intention to achieve a more diverse perspective.

The structured interviewing questions were developed separately for tour operators, i-SITEs and RTOs. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes on average, was digitally recorded and manually transcribed. The main source of data is seven interviews with the managers or owners of three tour operators, three i-SITES and one RTO in Wellington. The research also utilises the information from secondary data such as tourism reports, periodicals and online webinars.

Data analysis

The collected information was analysed using theme coding system by

clustering the data into the themes related to the study (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1990). The analysis was also based on an analytical framework developed according to the research questions. In the first theme, the relationship between film production and tourism is examined. Within this theme, tourism benefits and opportunities resulting from film production are discussed. Secondly, tourism opportunities brought by film production are analysed according to different production stages. The third theme takes a more detailed approach to examine film tourism in The Wellington region in terms of scale, demand and the potential opportunities brought by The Hobbit premiere.

Limitations

There are several limitations which should be acknowledged in this research. First, it is time constraint that contributes to the difficulty of arranging interviews. Another shortcoming is the limited number of tour operators in Wellington. Some tour operators refused to participate in this research due to the perceived irrelevance when their businesses have no film tourism product. In addition, some information related to The Hobbit's premiere was purposefully not disclosed during the interviews due to its secrecy. Most of the previous film tourism studies were done after the release stage, whereas this research was conducted before that. While interviewees reveal their personal opinions on the topic, some of them either refused or were cognitively cautious talking about their preparation for The Hobbit's premiere.

Results: Film production & tourism opportunities

Results once again confirm the strong relationship between film production and tourism development, agreed by all interviewees.

Obviously, film is an amazing way to sell our country to the world. If you look at what Lord of The Rings has done for us. I think we can spend hundred thousands of dollars on brochures and printed materials might not be as effective as producing a film with New Zealand scenery in it. Also, films have a huge number of followers so if we can get more films out there, it would be incredible. (i-SITE C)

Film and tourism has a big and very

important relationship. It really puts Wellington and New Zealand on the map. (Tour Operator B)

Movies and their created stories have significant impacts on promoting the destinations to the tourism market (Riley, Baker & Van Doren, 1998; Hudson & Ritchie, 2006). They influence the potential market's decision making and encourage visitors to come. Increased demand would lead to a larger number of tourism opportunities. Croy (2011) agrees that films can make economic contributions to the destination, yet has not specified which opportunities in particular. This study identified several opportunities for the tour operators that are described as followed.

First, movies can create a call for the development of more film-related tourism businesses such as film tour operators.

I am sure someone would want to start up a business in film tourism. There are quite a few places that have been used in the films which people don't know about. So perhaps there is a potential opportunity for something like that. (i-SITE C)

The establishment of new film tour operators is important as it means a better ability to cater for the growing demand of tourists. Moreover, visitors' expectations are varied according to their availability of time, money and interest. Therefore, more tour operators mean more options for them to choose from.

In addition to creating the main theme for some tourism businesses, film production can also help develop more related products or expand the current business.

It [film tourism] created our core business, and allows us to expand. . . . If this [The Hobbit] movie is a series, we will definitely look at developing a separate tour to work on something like this. We know the opportunities are out there. It just depends on what are available. (Tour Operator A)

One film can be used to develop one or more related tour products. Accordingly, the more films there are, the more tours can be developed. Film tourism products also need to be renewed and modified to meet various

customer expectations.

Furthermore, tour operators other than those of the film tourism related businesses can also benefit from film production. Although the main motivation of film tourists is associated with the film, there are potential opportunities for the generation of other interests, as stated by Tour Operator B who does not have dedicated film tours:

I guess it brings more people to Wellington, so then it generates interest in any other tour. People come here, even if their main objective is to see the film sites, they will still want to do something else. So that means more tourism opportunities for us.

According to Maconis (2004), not all film tourists have primary motivations to visit film sites. Depending on their length of stay, they might participate in other tourism products such as scenic tours. This means a potential market for the tour operators that do not offer film tours.

In addition, the study found that the existence of film sites is very important to the tour operators. It is associated with the perceived opportunities from film production and certainly, influences their attempt to achieve the corresponding benefits. The more film locations there are, the more opportunities they can see. Some of them actually consider available film site as 'a must' for the generation of tourism opportunities. Tours of the Hobbiton Movie set that are based on a beautiful farmland transformed into The Shire in LOTR films is an example (Discover the Real Middle-Earth, n.d.). This finding suggests an implication for the public sector regarding their negotiation with the film producers in the pre-production stage. The destination may ask to be more involved in the film to have a higher chance of getting more benefits from it.

Overall, the results illustrate that film production creates different opportunities for the local tour operators including: business development, product development and modification and the generation of other tourism interests. By taking on these opportunities, the destination can enhance visitor satisfaction and improves its own image. Regional development such as building up the local capacity and infrastructure that primarily serve film

tourism should also be noted. Although the tour operators may not directly benefit from such development, it helps them achieve a better overall customer satisfaction. For example, more public transportation that connects the city central and different film sites may reduce some burden for film tour operators.

Tourism opportunities in different phases

a. Pre-production

Not many tourism opportunities were found for the tour operators in the pre-production stage. The opportunities that do exist often relate to the public sector.

I think there is not much in the pre-production stage, but there is quite a bit during the filming. (Tour Operator B)

In the pre-production stage, the Wellington region, including us, are trying to make it easy for the film producers to come by having plans and policies that encourage filming in the city. (i-SITE B)

Another observation is that the pre-production stage was often disregarded by the interviewees. When being asked about their perspective on tourism opportunities across different stages, they tended to talk more about 'during the release' and 'after the release'. Some of them did not even mention the first two stages until promoted by the researcher. The first stage is perceived more about the relationship between the public sector and film producers, where film-friendly policies come to play and potentially generate varied benefits in the future.

b. During the production

Opportunities for tour operators start appearing in this stage though not often. In fact, various opinions were found. One participant stated that there is no opportunity at all for tour operators in this stage.

I don't see much opportunity for tourism businesses in the first two stages mainly because of the secrecy. There is significant control of released information. Although the preparation is huge, it is really difficult to capture any money, or may do anything in the earlier stages. (Tour Operator A)

Some other interviewees believe that tourism opportunities do exist during the filming process, maybe not for the tour operators but other tourism businesses such as accommodation providers and restaurants.

I think they [film crews] still generate benefits for local tourism businesses in some ways. They still need to eat and do things such as entertainment. (Tour Operator B)

There are two main reasons which explain the limited benefits in this period. First, it is the confidentiality of the production. The restricted accessibility to the information leads to little attention from the public and thus, only a small influence on visitor numbers is made. Second, it is the tight schedule of the production team that gives them no time to undertake local tours. However, Tour Operator B provided a different view on this matter. Ward and O'Regan (2009) consider film producers as long-stay business travellers. As long as the film crews are at the place, they would need to have some kind of entertainment and that creates a market opportunity for the local tour operators to capture. The tour operators who have film related products do not see much opportunity during this stage, whereas the ones without any film tours do.

One thing mentioned by an RTO officer was the effect of celebrities on the destination:

Those stories of celebrities about their tourism experience here in Wellington or New Zealand can have an impact on the destination. The impacts have been both economically and socially positive. (RTO)

The actors and actresses during the filming may not have time to undertake many tourism activities or entertainment. However, their stories and experiences at the destination are often noticed by the public and can attract people to come. As Hudson and Ritchie (2006) indicate, publicity can be generated around the activities of the actors while being on the location. That is why information about where they are, what they do and what they think about the place may have an indirect impact on its tourism industry.

c. During the release

The period between the actual completion of the film and its release is the time when the destination increasingly receives public attention. As a result, out-of-town tourists start arriving more often, which leads to various opportunities discussed previously. There is a difference between the views of tour operators and i-SITEs.

The economic benefits can happen during the premiere and afterward, and that really depends on how the film is received. (Tour operator A)

The reality is that I don't believe the movie premiere is there for people to make money. On that day, there isn't gonna be many tours operated. As I said, the operators have had their tours and we don't have any filming location [of *The Hobbit*]. (i-SITE A)

Both groups agree that this period will draw a lot of people to the region. For tour operators, this is the opportunity for them to take advantage of the bigger marketing campaigns such as "100% Middle-earth, 100% Pure New Zealand" (Tourism New Zealand, 2012). In other words, they may not need to do a lot of advertising but still get considerable exposure. The tour operators seem to be convinced that economic benefits will be achieved through the overall promotion of the location. Differently, the i-SITEs think that tour operators would not be able to have much business during the release. Instead, the market's attention would likely be centered on the movie itself and the premiere related events.

The initial release of the film plays an important role in the future success of the film because it is when much of the excitement is generated. Ward and O'Regan (2009) suggest that effects of films on the local tourism industry occur after the completion of the production and the initial release. An increased number of tourists can be expected during the release. The publicity of the destination may reach its highest during the premiere due to a huge amount of both national and international media. The city tour operators can definitely benefit from such marketing activities.

d. After the release

Among the four stages of film production, 'after the release' seems to

be the most promising period for city tour operators. All participants agree that many benefits come after at this stage.

After the release, there is a noticeable increase of visitor numbers. For “The Hobbit”, I think it will increase pretty highly for a few months around December, January and Feb. There will be people out here that are interested. They want to see the site, and so may go on some tours. However, after that it slowly flattens down. (Tour Operator B)

People are often motivated to see the film sites and know more about other relevant information such as stories from behind the scenes. The echo of the initial release still remains for a few months afterward and is then gradually lessened.

Within the post-release stage, DVD release is considered an important phase by an RTO officer. However, it does not receive much attention from other interviewees.

I think there are a lot of opportunities that we underestimate around the post-production stage and DVD release time as well. (RTO)

The DVDs bring the movie to a wider range of audiences and consequently, the potential market of film tourism is increased. Different from the box offices, DVDs often have extra features about the film making process such as the box set and the cast commentary. They provide the audiences with more information about the movie and therefore, can generate a strong interest in film tourism. Unfortunately, the importance of this phase has not been evaluated thoroughly by both the industry and the literature. A better examination of DVD release period is needed and may help discover more tourism opportunities in the last stage of film production.

Overall, the number of opportunities which film production brings to tour operators can be described through the diagram in Figure 2. It shows how the scale of tourism opportunities for tour operators as a result of film production differs from one stage to another.

Figure 2 resembles the Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) model by Butler (1980). The curve represents

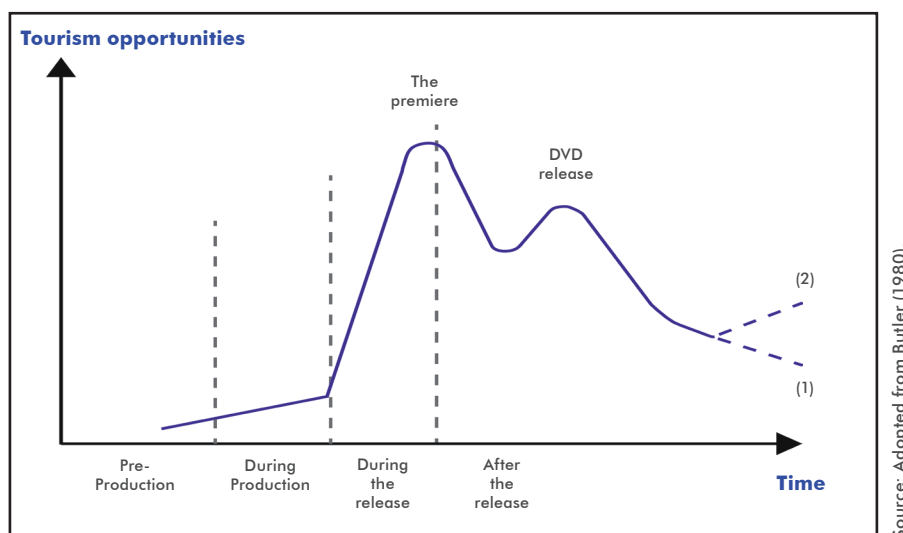


Figure 2: Film production and opportunities for tour operators

Source: Adopted from Butler (1980).

one film production. As it illustrates, in the pre-production stage, there are very few opportunities found for city tour operators. The potential opportunities start emerging, yet remain unclear during the filming period. After the completion of the film and during the initial release, they begin to increase quickly as the premiere approaches. Finally, they bloom and reach the peak right after the release, then gradually decline. That is until the DVDs release, when tourism opportunities rise up again and slowly decrease afterward. If there is no other movie, the opportunities for tour operators might progressively drop as displayed through the dotted line (1). If there are more new films, the relationship between film production and tourism could be refreshed and the opportunities might start over, illustrated by the dotted line (2).

The Hobbit stirs up Wellington

Most of the interviewees state that film tourism in Wellington is an important sector. Movies such as the LOTR trilogy have put New Zealand and Wellington on the world map. Though it has been almost 15 years since the first movie came out, tourists still come and ask for LOTR tours.

I think it's a real growing thing here, because Peter Jackson is based here, his studio is here. That means that we have the huge amount of opportunities here for films. And James Cameron just moved here... I think of going forward, there are a the huge amount of opportunities for the council and everyone as we can see from The Hobbit. (Tour Operator A)

It appeared that The Hobbit has no filming location in The Wellington region. However, this shortage is made up by the movie's world premiere. Various opinions regarding its tourism opportunities are obtained.

The premiere will bring many people to Wellington which is great. The unfortunate thing is that we have absolutely no new Hobbit locations to show passengers. (Tour Operator C)

We will be able to approach that market obviously. Hopefully, there will be thousands of people here and then, give us the opportunity to market ourselves, probably not specifically related to film tourism but something you can do while you are here. (Tour Operator B)

According to Aldermand, Benjamin and Schneider (2012), one place can be transformed into another by the effect of films. With the release of The Hobbit, the city renamed itself as Middle of Middle-Earth and spent approximately NZ \$1.1 million to decorate the city for the premiere event (Huff Post, 2012). That enriched the capital's image and helped promote Wellington to the global market.

Since there is no filming location within the region, city tour operators have nothing particularly related to the movie that excites people. Also, as i-SITE A indicates in the earlier quote, people come mainly for the premiere and so, they would probably be involved in the premiere related activities instead of taking tours around the city. Nevertheless, some others perceive the premiere as a chance to approach

the potential market and try to encourage visitors to participate in their existing tours.

Conclusion

In general, the connection between film production and tourism is demonstrated through this research. Film production brings various opportunities to tour operators, and each production stage contains a different number of opportunities. Very little tourism opportunity is found in the first two stages. The argument of seeing the film production team as a potential tourism market is arguable. Tourism opportunities resulted from film production for tour operators emerge more obviously 'during the release' and increase rapidly through the 'after the release' stage. The premiere is a great film event which can increase publicity of the destination and draw in a significant number of visitors. The release of DVDs also plays an important role after the initial release. Furthermore, the relationship between film and tourism should be refreshed by more film productions to maintain the relevant positive outcomes.

Through the case of film tourism in Wellington, it is clear that the development of film-friendly policies and available film sites should be encouraged to maximise the opportunities generated by film productions. Although "The Hobbit" has no filming location in Wellington, the city was still able to capture the benefits of the movie by establishing the image of "Middle of Middle-Earth". Moreover, Alderman, Benjamin and Schneider (2012) state that local business owners in the film destination often create special film themed attractions and tours to capture the film tourism market. The idea of developing film museums in Wellington would contribute to diversify the local film related tourism products and suit the growing demand of film tourism.

Given the importance of film tourism nowadays, there is a need to have more research on this area. Some potential directions for further studies could be to focus on the early stages of film production, or the significance of DVDs release phase, or the role of celebrities. While this paper only focuses on tour operators, an examination

of other stakeholders would be very useful to obtain a better understanding of the topic. Nevertheless, future studies can build upon this research and continue to explore the relationship between film production and tourism.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to the interviewees for their participation in this study; my supervisor, Dr. Karen Smith, who constantly provided me with guidance in conducting this research; my lecturer, Dr Julia Albrecht, who has always supported and given me helpful advices for my academic growth; the New Zealand Aid program who gave me a scholarship to undertake the Master of Tourism Management course; Victoria University of Wellington who facilitated this research to be carried out; and my friends who helped me proof-read this paper.

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