"Mind the scenery!" Landscape depiction and the travel intentions of Game of Thrones fans: some insights for DMOs

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Screen tourism is becoming increasingly popular. Successful feature films and television series can form, enhance or alter place image, and put filming locations on tourists' mental maps. Very little is known, however, about how the resonance of landscape depiction and place attachment may affect the gathering of information about different filming locations and, consequently, consumers' travel intentions. This study seeks to identify a nexus between landscape depiction and travel intention through an exploration of the fantasy television series Game of Thrones (GoT). The structured questionnaire survey carried out with 314 GoT fans reveals that different dimensions have had a scale-effect on travel intentions. Partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) - considered the most appropriate for this exploratory study - was applied for the data analysis. The results indicate that landscape depiction has a positive effect on place attachment, information gathering and travel intentions, thus providing destination management organisations (DMOs) with opportunities to interact with potential tourists to promote filming locations.

"We're in the business of creating addicts."

HBO CEO Richard Plepler

Introduction

Content producers and distributors like HBO are determined to capture people's imaginations and make them loyal consumers by broadcasting high quality entertainment using new media technologies and screens (Scharl et al. 2016). Game of Thrones (GoT) is an expensively produced and extremely popular HBO series based on the epic fantasy cycle A Song of Ice and Fire by George R. R. Martin. The series premiered in 2011 and its seventh season, which started in August 2017, was watched by 16.1 million HBO subscribers and about 21 million pirate viewers (www.independent.co.uk). The storyline follows two rival families waging war on each other in a twisted game for control of the Seven Kingdoms and its medievalstyle headquarters, the city of Kings' Landing. Tangled family weave through the struggle rich in intrigue, violence, sex and fights for political and royal power (Stanton 2015). The latest season and its extensive media coverage have further broadened the series' already highly active international fan base (Business Insider 2017). GoT has been popular with critics and viewers, and received more than 30 Emmy awards. The commitment of the series' fans is evidenced by their enthusiastic following of each episode, which they actively discuss and tweet about on social media, their creation of virtual communities, and by their producing and consuming (prosuming) of GoT news and stories (Beveridge-Shan 2016, Scharl et al. 2016).

All 70 GoT episodes have been distinguished by their expert characterisation and careful attention to detail in the presentation of the atmosphere in which landscape plays a key role. The complex relationships between the more than 30 vividly drawn, memorable, leading characters and the intricate plotlines keep audiences alert (Beveridge-Shan 2016). Historical and geographical notions, such as references to England's 15th century War of the Roses between the Houses of Lancaster and York, are embedded in both the novels and the series, endowing plotlines with some realism (Larrington 2016). The complex construction and communication of spatial knowledge of Westeros, the Lands of Always Winter, Iron Island, Bay of Dragons, etc. is reinforced by the 3D maps in the opening sequences of the show (Marshall 2015). GoT frequently uses long shots of cultural and natural landscapes and landscapes are rarely shown for their beauty alone: as an in-depth sentiment analysis has shown, their portrayal - often imbued with the emotions elicited by the film's characters – almost always serves a dramatic purpose (Scharl et al. 2016). Host cities are credited at the end of each episode, allowing keen-viewers to identify even digitally modified scenery as a particular geographical filming location. GoT has been filmed mainly in Europe, in six different countries (see Table 1) and in 42 locations, some of which are UNESCO World Heritage sites and thus bear strong cultural and heritage place identity (King-Halpenny 2014).

Key Game of Thrones filming locations

Table 1

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Country of filming	UNESCO World Heritage Site (fantasy location)	Game of Thrones fantasy location
Croatia	Old City of Dubrovnik (King's Landing) Diocletian's Palace, Split (Meereen) Historic City of Trogir (Qarth) The Cathedral of Saint James of Sibenik (Braavos)	King's Landing, King's Landing Pal- ace Gardens, Braavos, Red Keep, House of the Undying, Meereen, Qarth
Iceland	Thingvellir National Park (The Eyrie)	Arrowhead Mountain, Beyond the Wall, Jon and Ygritte's love cave, The Eyrie
Northern Ireland, United Kingdom	_	The Wall, Castle Black, Winterfell, Iron Islands, King's Road, Dragonstone, The Crownlands, Riverrun, The Stormlands
Scotland, United Kingdom		Winterfell, Slavers' Bay
Spain	Alcazar of Seville (Dorne, Sunspear) Historic Center of Cordoba (Volantis)	Tower of Joy, Dothraki Sea, Dragonstone, Dorne, High Garden, Meeren, Braavos, Volantis
Malta	City of Valletta (King's Landing)	Red Keep, King's Landing Gate, King's Landing, Pentos
Morocco	The city of Essaouira (Astapor)	Yunkai, Astapor, Pentos

Source. Own elaboration; the list of locations is not exhaustive.

This study increases our knowledge of how the portrayal of natural and urban landscapes has influenced GoT viewers' information gathering on various locations, and subsequently their travel intentions vis a vis filming locations.

Landscape depiction and trips to fantasy worlds

Film and screen experiences are undeniably powerful image creators that can give symbolic meaning to cultural products and experiences (Kim 2010, Lundberg et al. 2017, Urry 1994). According to Chris Rojek (1997), tourists have concrete ideas of particular places because they have seen them in pictures, films and television programmes or have read books or magazines in which the places were featured. Media-generated perceived familiarity with places gives meaning to locations (Bódi 2008). This is particularly true for fantasy movies linked to distinct landscapes and

locations, such as the *Lord of the Rings* movies (Beeton 2016) or the numerous *Star Wars* movie series (Escher et al. 2008). It has been widely acknowledged that – through storytelling and landscape depiction – films and television series can influence viewers' perceptions of places and increase visitor numbers to filming locations (Busby–Klug 2001, Busby–Haines 2013, Im–Chon 2008, Iwashita 2008, O'Connor et al. 2008, Reijnders 2010a).

Recently, screen tourism, i.e. visits to the filming locations of television series/films, has received considerable attention from both academics and the tourism industry (Beeton 2016, Connell 2012). In fact, the phenomenon was also widely studied in the 1990s (Tooke–Baker 1996, Riley–Van Doren 1992). Our assumption is therefore that the importance that viewers attribute to landscape depiction raises their interest in, and attachment to, the screened landscape of a particular destination. Based on the previous literature, the following hypotheses can be formulated:

H1: Resonance of landscape depiction strengthens place attachment.

H2: Resonance of landscape depiction affects viewers' information gathering about locations.

Busby and Haines (2013) have claimed that the British television comedy drama *Doc Martin* was one of the primary motivations leading visitors to go to the depicted locality, the fishing village of Port Isaac in Cornwall, in 2011. Screen tourism is not just a Western phenomenon. Internationally distributed Turkish soap operas have attracted record-breaking audiences and significantly raised in-bound tourism to Turkey (Balli et al. 2013). The endorsement of leading actors, such as Kivanç Tatlituğ, played a key role in branding Turkey and creating place attachment among fans and tourists (Busby et al. 2013). Regular watching of television dramas creates emotional bonds not only with the characters but also with the featured background and cultural landscape (Irimiás 2015). The stronger the viewer's emotional involvement with a storyline, and the more meaningful to them the landscape, the more likely they will be to travel to locations, as the popularity of South Korean television series with Japanese tourists has shown (Kim 2012). It can therefore be assumed that visual landscape narratives are likely to increase visitor numbers to filming locations:

H3: Resonance of landscape depiction has a positive effect on travel intentions.

Locations familiar to drama viewers, such as the privately owned heritage location of Highclere castle in the British series *Downton Abbey*, are associated with engaging storylines and stimulate fans to gather information on, and even visit, the site itself (Lundberg et al. 2017). Reijnders (2010b) argued that information gathering on James Bond filming sites, such as locating the secret door leading to the MI6 headquarters on Westminster Bridge in London, is essential for fans to link physical places to those in a fantasy world. Based on this evidence, we have formulated the following hypotheses:

- H4: Place attachment has a positive effect on information gathering about locations.
- H5: Place attachment has a positive effect on travel intentions.
- H6: Information gathering about locations has a positive effect on travel intentions.

Iconic places are not the only pull factors for film tourists (Macionis 2004). Even intentionally undistinctive streets and built environments in sci-fi television series, such as *Smallville* and *X-files* set in Vancouver, are attracting viewers. Apparently characterless 'non-places' (Augè 1995) can be extremely rich in symbols and signs for sci-fi fans and weave a web of urban mystery that only those "in the know" can decode (Brooker 2007). Fans' geographical reading of a symbolic on-location Vancouver thus creates a meaningful experience through place attachment and information gathering about locations.

DMO initiatives to leverage screen tourism

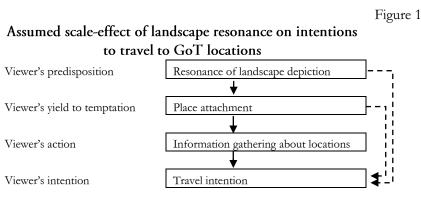
Various tourism-marketing initiatives implemented by destinations to increase the potential of films and television series to attract film tourists to destinations have been described in the literature (Beeton 2016, Buchmann et al. 2010, Hahm–Wand 2011, Iwashita 2008, Lin–Huang 2008). Iconic films are often identified with their geographical locations. Although cultural products such as films are not created with the intention of attracting tourists to their locations, functional site placement (similar to product placement) enhances the attractiveness of locations and forms, reinforces or alters destination image (Croy 2010, O'Connor 2011, Papp-Váry 2015). The unprecedented popularity by the screen sets different challenges to featured locations and especially to historic cities and urban settlements (Puczkó–Rátz 2003). There is evidence that Forks in the US and the Italian city of Volterra, depicted in the *Twilight* novels and movies, have become popular destinations among vampire story fans (Larson et al. 2013): these fans represent a new tourist segment for the destinations, and the DMOs have had to respond to the challenge of meeting their needs.

DMOs can implement several strategies to leverage on the popularity of films to raise tourist awareness and reinforce brand building (Hudson–Ritchie 2006, Volo–Irimiás 2016). The producers of the *Lord of the Rings* saga (Buchmann 2010, Jones–Smith 2005) and of *The Hobbit* (Li et al. 2017, Lundberg et al. 2017) worked with New Zealand's DMOs in a joint marketing campaign to relabel and brand the country as "100% Middle-Earth" to explore New Zealand (Lundberget al. 2017).

Hudson and Ritchie (2006) elaborated a detailed model on pre- and post-release marketing initiatives that destinations could exploit. The focus is on film-specific factors and the film locations need to be identifiable and accessible and have an emotional resonance and a physical icon that fans can identify. DMOs can partici-

pate in the pre- and post-release periods, creating marketing initiatives that target film-tourists. As Frost (2010) has shown, investing in a promotional campaign constructed around a film, as was done by Tourism Australia in 2008 to leverage on the film *Australia*, while not uncommon, is potentially risky, because no film's success is guaranteed. The new 'Victoria's Island' Trail was launched in 2017, long before the release of the film *Victoria and Abdul*, to promote Osborne, the seaside residence of the Queen. The Isle of Wight DMO invested more than £200,000 in the campaign, on thematic tours and movie maps, and interactive guides to the island's heritage sites (visitwightpro.com).

Other marketing initiatives involve built attractions such as theme parks or film related museums/exhibitions. In South Korea, a highly successful theme park reproduces the royal kitchen and hospital of the cooking maid Daejanggeum, and received more than 180,000 visitors in the two years after its opening, it has been proposed that this popularity is due to the fact that viewers are responding to the emotional appeal of the screen stories linked to the place (Kim 2012, Kim et al. 2008). Specific products and services need to be developed to meet screen tourists' needs: when on location, fans want to imitate film characters and re-enact their favourite scenes, as both James Bond and South Korean drama fans have demonstrated (Reijnders 2010b, Kim 2010). Experiential events celebrating the Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit, or the fan event inspired by the television series Supernatural filmed in Vancouver, are created to facilitate place recognition and to allow fans to have memorable film-based on-location experiences (Lundberg et al. 2017; Hudson-Ritchie 2006, Connell 2012). Previous studies have shown that DMOs implement a variety of marketing strategies based on film or television series releases (Volo-Irimiás 2016). No in-depth study of interactions with potential tourists investigating viewers' place attachment, information gathering and travel intention has yet been done, however. Game of Thrones is deemed particularly interesting in the study of landscape depiction and travel intentions. The series are mainly set in Europe and some film locations are within UNESCO World Heritage sites (see Table 1); the urban and natural landscape is closely interwoven into the fantasy storyline. Memorable characters and violent and adult content influence the destination image of film locations. The interrelations of our hypotheses constitute the theoretical framework of this study, summarised in Figure 1.



Note. The direct arrows indicate direct effects; the dotted arrows denote indirect effects. *Source.* Own elaboration.

The suggestive, iconic GoT filming locations quickly became fan pilgrimage sites, boosting tourism to destinations that have acquired new layers of meaning through the storylines (Beeton 2016). GoT-tourists have flocked to the Adriatic Sea, and above all to Dubrovnik (Croatia), the GoT Kings' Landing. According to Tkalec et al. (2017), tourist arrivals increased by 37.9% between 2011 and 2015 and about 1 million tickets were sold to the city's walls in 2016. Similarly, Gozo (Malta) and Belfast (Northern Ireland) saw a dramatic increase in international tourism arrivals in the first seven months of 2017. Future GoT seasons are very likely to increase audience share, thus stimulating interest in filming locations among different consumer segments, and challenging DMOs' ability to communicate with GoT-tourists.

Methodology

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the nexus between landscape depiction, place attachment and travel intentions. Our research focused on the GoT HBO television series, and investigated the landscape depiction of the series' filming locations. Table 1 includes the most important GoT filming locations.

Research instrument and data collection

The research instrument used was a structured questionnaire survey, the items of which were based on the literature on film-induced tourism, within which we identified those items that could be used or modified to develop appropriate scales. The pilot survey and main data collection were done in Budapest, Hungary – the former in August 2016, the latter between September and November 2016.

Sample

Hungarian GoT fans were contacted through a snowball sample of students from the Corvinus University of Budapest. The chosen respondents had to have watched at least three of the six GoT seasons. The convenience sample consisted of 314 Hungarian respondents aged 18 to 35 years who were willing to fill out the questionnaire. 84.1% of the survey participants had watched all six GoT seasons, and 19.7% had already visited at least one GoT filming location, while most (80.3%) had only indirect experience of the filming locations.

Data analysis

Variance-based PLS-SEM was applied to test the model. Data analysis was conducted with ADANCO software (Dijkstra–Henseler 2015). The exploratory nature of the research justified the use of PLS-SEM (see e.g. Hair et al. 2012).

Measures and the quality criteria of the measurement model

As there are no internationally pre-tested scales, newly developed scales were used in this study (see Appendix). Each item was measured on a seven-point Likert scale, ranked from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Landscape resonance is a self-developed scale with two statements intended to measure how important natural and urban landscape depiction is to GoT viewers. The scale validity is good (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.86$). The place attachment scale was also developed for this study, three statements measure the strength of viewers' attraction to the depicted landscapes. The scale validity is good (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.77$). An information gathering about locations scale, too, was developed for the study, it includes three statements to measure how actively viewers search visual and textual information about GoT locations. The scale validity is good (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.77$). To measure travel intention, a three-item scale by Shani et al. (2009) was adopted. The scale validity is good (Cronbach $\alpha = 0.79$).

The three self-developed scales and the adopted scale required the use of PLS-SEM.

It is possible to test convergent validity with standardized factor loadings more than 0.5 (0.4 in exploratory research), but, ideally, 0.7 should be reached (Hair et al. 2012). The Appendix indicates Dijkstra–Henseler's ρA values – the index of internal consistency reliability measure of constructs, which is well above the favourable 0.7 value in each case (Dijkstra–Henseler 2015). The index applied to measure convergent validity is average variance extracted (AVE), where values should be more than 0.5 in each construct (Hair et al. 2006). AVE can be found on the diagonal of Table 2. The data meet the required criteria.

Table 2

Discriminant validity was measured by Fornell and Larcker's test (1981), where, in all cases, the AVE measure is larger than the squared latent variable correlations of all the other constructs. As Table 1 demonstrates, this requirement has been met.

Discriminant validity: Fornell-Larcker criterion

Construct	Travel intention	Information gathering about locations	Resonance of landscape depiction	Place attachment
Travel intention	0.7041			
Information gathering about locations	0.3032	0.6823		
Resonance of landscape depiction	0.0985	0.0989	0.8806	
Place attachment	0.2513	0.3096	0.2096	0.6901

Note: AVE values can be found on the diagonal; values under the diagonal are the squared latent variable correlations of each construct.

Source: Own calculation.

Discriminant validity was measured by the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT)1, where each pair of constructs must be significantly lower than 1; this criterion is met in our study (see Table 3).

Table 3 Discriminant validity: heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations

Construct	Travel intention	Information gathering about locations	Resonance of landscape depiction	Place attachment
Travel intention				
Information gathering about locations	0.7041			
Resonance of landscape depiction	0.3789	0.3833		
Place attachment	0.6343	0.7107	0.5539	

Source: Own calculation.

In sum, enough statistical evidence was found to verify the existence of the four constructs, and to verify that the measured variables are appropriate indicators of the related factors and that the constructs are different.

¹ The HTMT of the correlations, which is the average of the heterotrait-heteromethod correlations (i.e. the correlations of indicators across constructs measuring different phenomena), is relative to the average of the monotrait-heteromethod correlations (i.e. the correlations of indicators within the same construct).

Structural model and results

Only one model fit criterion, the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) is applied in PLS modelling, its cut-off value is 0.08 (Hu–Bentler 1999). The model delineated in this study has an appropriate model fit, because SRMR = 0.072. The results (see Table 4 and Figure 2) demonstrate that not every hypothesis was accepted.

Direct effects in the model

Table 4

	β	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
Resonance of landscape depiction → Place attachment (H1+)	0.4579	9.8086	0.0000
Resonance of landscape depiction → Information gathering about locations (H2+)	0.0755	1.4994	0.1341
Resonance of landscape depiction \rightarrow Travel intention (H3+)	0.0775	1.4758	0.1403
Place attachment \rightarrow Information gathering about locations (H4+)	0.5218	11.9429	0.0000
Place attachment → Travel intention (H5+)	0.2505	5.1369	0.0000
Information gathering about locations → Travel intention (H6+)	0.3869	6.9376	0.0000

Note: Unverified hypotheses are written in italics. + indicates positive effect. *Source*: Own calculation using ADANCO software.

Resonance of landscape depiction has a positive effect on place attachment ($\beta = 0.46$), which means that the more important natural and urban landscapes are for viewers, the stronger place attachment becomes, leading viewers to be more attracted to locations (the H1 hypothesis is accepted). It might seem surprising that landscape resonance does not have a positive effect on either information gathering or travel intentions (no significant correlation, the H2 and H3 hypotheses are rejected), although indirect effects are significant in both cases.

Resonance of landscape indirectly affects information gathering about locations through place attachment ($\beta = 0.24$; *t*-value = 7.74; *p*-value = 0.000), and – in a similarly indirect way (through place attachment and information gathering about locations) – has a positive effect on travel intentions ($\beta = 0.24$; *t*-value = 6.85; *p*-value = 0.000).

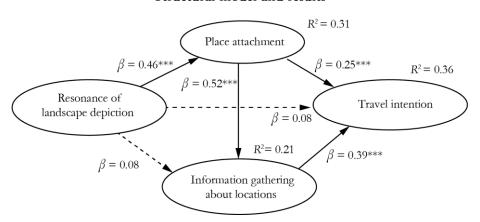
This means that the predisposition of viewers to find resonance in the landscapes depicted in GoT is just the first step in the formulation of travel intentions. Our research reveals a multilevel scale in which each step can potentially be managed by the destination or the supply side, to influence travel intentions. Landscape depiction does not directly determine travel intentions but does have an indirect impact on them.

Place attachment has a positive effect on information gathering about locations ($\beta = 0.52$): the more attractive and meaningful a film location is, the stronger the

interest in information gathering about that location becomes (the H4 hypothesis is accepted). Place attachment is mainly determined by the visual narrative of GoT.

Place attachment affects travel intentions positively both directly ($\beta = 0.25$; the H5 hypothesis is accepted) and indirectly through information gathering about locations ($\beta = 0.20$; t-value = 6.23; p-value = 0.000). This means that the more attractive a film location is, the stronger travel intentions become, which means that viewers' intentions to visit a location can be strengthened by simply increasing that location's on-screen attractiveness. Furthermore, strong place attachment motivates viewers to act and increases information search activity, leading to stronger commitment.

Figure 2
Structural model and results



Note: Every path coefficient is standardized (**** p < 0.001). The dotted lines represent the rejected hypotheses. *Source*: Own elaboration.

Information gathering about locations has a positive effect on travel intentions ($\beta=0.39$). This means that information gathering leads to greater commitment: knowing more about a location inspires viewers to want to discover and experience that place themselves (the H6 hypothesis is accepted). Information gathering is a cognitive effort involving the examination of visual material about locations, comparing fictional images and photos, and discovering surprising and/or engaging information about destinations (see Table 5). From the marketing communication point of view, intervention at this point can be crucial to convincing viewers to actually visit a filming location. The quality of the information that viewers find, of course, partly depends on their own activities in selecting and distinguishing visual and textual content. However, if destinations can provide easy access to information, this will clearly be to their own advantage. The link between the real and fantasy world must be made evident in order to involve viewers in the discovery of a location.

Table 5
Direct and indirect effects in the model

Effect	Direct effect	Indirect effect β	Total effect	Cohen's
Information gathering about locations \rightarrow Travel intention	0.3869		0.3869	0.1612
Resonance of landscape depiction → Travel intention	0.0775	0.2364	0.3139	0.0074
Resonance of landscape depiction → Information gathering about locations	0.0755	0.2389	0.3144	0.0066
Resonance of landscape depiction -> Place attachment	0.4579		0.4579	0.2652
Place attachment → Travel intention	0.2505	0.2019	0.4524	0.0593
Place attachment \rightarrow Information gathering about locations	0.5218		0.5218	0.3137

Source: Own calculation using ADANCO software.

Conclusions

This research has several limitations, one of which is the limited sample size of Hungarian GoT fans. The constructs, moreover, were based on the perceptions of GoT viewers. Some conclusive marks have nevertheless emerged from our findings. The attraction of GoT filming locations acts like a magnet, drawing viewers to film locations in order to experience them personally. The point at which viewers' interest is first aroused, and they begin to gather information about locations, and wish to discover more about them, is key for tourism marketers. DMOs and marketers should implement several strategies to interact with potential tourists and to promote film locations as destinations. Destinations can leverage landscape depiction by highlighting their connections with GoT through short YouTube videos and promotional videos shared on interactive social media platforms and released simultaneously with GoT premieres. Information gathering about film locations requires cognitive efforts and may not be embarked upon immediately after watching a GoT episode. DMOs should therefore provide all the relevant information about film locations three to five weeks after the start of a new GoT season. DMOs should focus on viewers' travel intentions when the previous three steps on the scale-effect - resonance of landscape depiction, place attachment and information gathering - have been taken into consideration by marketers. The GoT film locations are extremely diverse: cold, inhospitable places, filmed in Iceland and the forests and moorlands of Northern Ireland; deserts, filmed in Spain, and stunning medieval cities in Croatia. Communication about the destination is always key to successful marketing. While Dubrovnik has been swamped by mass tourism and needs to implement strict rules to manage the site and the access to the medieval city centre, Belfast and the locations in the Northern Irish countryside should be more proactive in attracting media attention, organising events and festivals and involving celebrities to promote GoT film locations. An understanding of the scale-effect between landscape depiction, place attachment and information gathering, which determines travel intentions, is useful for DMOs who wish to structure promotional strategies and interact with potential tourists.

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APPENDIXMeasurement and reliability of constructs

Construct (Dijkstra–Henseler's $ ho$)	Item	Standardised factor loading	Mean	Standard deviation
Resonance of landscape	Natural landscape depiction	0.945	4.46	1.757
depiction ($A = 0.871$)	Urban landscape depiction	0.932	4.45	1.686
Place attachment $(\rho A = 0.784)$	I am amazed by the landscape in which GoT is set	0.851	3.65	1.824
	I am interested in GoT filming locations	0.890	5.15	1.656
	GoT filming locations are particularly significant for me	0.783	4.97	1.738
Information gathering about locations	I like checking pictures on GoT filming locations	0.862	3.04	1.809
$(\rho A = 0.779)$	I collect information on specific film- ing locations	0.824	1.75	1.152
	I like comparing film locations on screen and in reality	0.791	2.85	1.907
Travel intention $(\rho A = 0.790)$	I plan to travel to one of the GoT locations in the near future	0.859	2.65	1.803
	I strongly desire to travel to one of the GoT locations	0.800	2.21	1.498
	I am very likely to travel to one of the GoT locations in the near future	0.857	2.09	1.507

Note. Each item was measured on a seven-scale Likert-scale where 1 = not resonant at all, 7 = extremely resonant.

Source: Own calculation.