

TV SERIES SHOOTING LOCATION IN THE SPOTLIGHT OF TOURISTS THROUGH THE CASE OF GIRONA, SPAIN

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Citation: Szöllős-Tóth, A., Bujdosó, Z., & Csapóné Riskó, T. (2024). TV SERIES SHOOTING LOCATION IN THE SPOTLIGHT OF TOURISTS THROUGH THE CASE OF GIRONA, SPAIN. *Geojournal of Tourism and Geosites*, 57(4spl), 1911–1917. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.574spl05-1358>

Abstract: Spain hosts the largest number of filming locations for Game of Thrones, with Girona being a prominent site. This paper explores the series' influence on tourism in Girona, highlighting the seasonal variations in tourism patterns across Catalonia. The recognizable filming sites have spurred the development of film tourism, adding a new dimension to Girona's tourism offerings. Following the series' publication, the local population began to express opposition, leading to a decline in tourism in 2018 due to the combined effects of resistance to mass tourism and strategic reorganization.

Keywords: film tourism, movie tourism, series shooting location, film location, Girona, Spain

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'movie-induced tourism' is typically defined as a form of tourism that is driven by the success of a film that was either made or set in a specific location. The advent of more contemporary formats led to the coinage of the term 'film-induced tourism', which encompassed not only television but also video and DVD. Nevertheless, these fundamental definitions do not fully illustrate the comprehensive nature and complexity of film-induced tourism (Beeton, 2005). In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, the work of numerous authors has been synthesised in Table 1.

Table 1. The definition of film tourism (Source: Author's own construction based on the mentioned sources)

Source	Definition
Zimmermann (2003:76)	"The term film tourism covers all forms of travelling to places that generally enable connections to the world, or reality, of films and allow access to the world of film."
Hudson and Ritchie (2006:387)	"Sometimes called movie-induced or film-induced tourism, film tourism is defined here as tourist visits to a destination or attraction as a result of the destination's being featured on television, video, or the cinema screen."
Cardoso et al. (2017:23)	"The 'film-induced tourism' concept serves for the study of tourism visits made to a destination or attraction resulting from its featuring in cinema films, television series or promotional videos."
Macionis (2004:87)	"This newly defined tourism niche refers to a post-modern experience of a place that has been depicted in some form of media representation. That is, an experience that is highly personalised and unique to each individual based on their own interpretation and consumption of media images."

In conclusion, it can be stated that film tourism, sometimes referred to as movie-induced or film-induced tourism, refers to locations featured in films, television series, videos or cinema screens as tourist destinations or attractions that provide the traveller an opportunity to connect with the world of film. In another of her works, Beeton (2006) notes that from the last third of the 20th century, films have been identified as a significant motivating factor in tourists' travel motivations. It is undisputed that, even before the 20th century, the arts played a role in the selection of a destination and the encouragement of travel. During the period of the Grand Tours (17th-19th centuries), British aristocratic youths in particular undertook a European tour of three to four years duration prior to the completion of their studies.

The objective of these journeys was to gain cultural understanding, artistic appreciation and historical insight through direct experience, while simultaneously establishing networks of contacts. The motivation for these journeys was primarily derived from the cities and landscapes that had been depicted in novels, poems and plays. These included destinations such

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as France, Italy and the Rhine (Michalkóş, 2007, Irimiás, 2015). This is also consistent with the link between fiction, dreams and tourism effects mentioned by Busby and Klug (2001), which has been known for a long time.

Additionally, there are a number of noteworthy studies that examine the impact of films and television series on the portrayal of a destination, both positively and negatively. These studies investigate how this portrayal affects the motivation of potential tourists to visit. The findings of (Azevedo et al., 2023) indicated that elevated levels of media violence have a marked effect on the perceived safety and image of a destination.

Should the violence be incongruous with the viewer's hitherto positive image of the destination, this was found to result in a reduction in perceived safety and a diminution in travel motivation. One of the most significant expectations of visitors is the assurance of security (Purwoko et al., 2023). Furthermore, it can be substantiated that the perception of safety exerts a significant influence on the formation of destination images and the motivation to travel. In the context of the global pandemic, tourists have become aware of the potential health risks associated with travel and are more likely to visit destinations that can demonstrate visible and rigorous security measures. Prior to the advent of the pandemic, tourists were predominantly concerned with general security issues, including crime, health risks and political instability.

However, in the wake of the outbreak, tourists require robust health and safety measures to perceive a destination as safe and attractive (Hashemi et al., 2023). The study by Hudson and Ritchie (2006), based on principal component factor analysis to examines the impact of film tourism on destination marketing and identifies key marketing activities, that can attract film tourists, including proactive efforts, media promotion, post-production marketing and peripheral marketing opportunities. The majority of research conducted within the field of film tourism concentrates on the marketing and promotional activities of the locations in question (Tanskanen, 2012; Bolan and Williams, 2008), or alternatively, on destination management strategies (Croy, 2010). This study, however, focuses on a particular film tourism location, which is presented by the authors using a case study methodology.

Furthermore, this research concentrates on the development of tourism indicators that can anticipate the advent of the over-tourism phenomenon. In this way, the present research illuminates the case from the perspective of over-tourism. Subsequently, following the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the tourism industry has experienced a resurgence, giving rise to congestion-related challenges in certain municipalities (Šenková et al., 2022). The study thus makes a contribution to the existing literature on the sustainability of tourism in Europe (Bednárová et al., 2018). In addition to offering insights into the tourism industry in the location where a given series was filmed, this study also contributes to the existing academic literature on small and medium-sized city destinations (SMSCs), which has been relatively neglected thus far (Rua, 2020; Wagner and Growe, 2021). The authors (Hidalgo Giralt et al., 2023) of one of the few studies on SMSCs have demonstrated that over-tourism is not only a problem in large Spanish cities (e.g. Madrid, Barcelona, Palma de Mallorca) but also presents itself in smaller towns. The study demonstrated that a number of medium and small towns in Spain exhibit elevated levels of tourism activity, indicating that the tourism industry exerts a considerable influence on these municipalities, frequently to a degree that is comparable to or even greater than that observed in larger urban centres. The findings challenge the assumption that smaller cities are subject to less tourism pressure than larger ones.

Research questions

To help to define the scope of the research, some research questions have been summarized:

- 1) What specific elements of Girona's portrayal in films or series attract tourists to visit?
- 2) How has the character and identity of the location evolved with its growing reputation as a film tourism destination?
- 3) How has Girona's tourism infrastructure adapted to accommodate the growing number of film tourists?
- 4) What measures have been implemented to manage the environmental footprint of film tourism in the settlement?
- 5) What strategies have local authorities and businesses employed to manage the influx of film tourists?
- 6) What lessons can other potential film tourism destinations learn from the examined location's experience?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

One of the most frequently employed methodologies in qualitative social research is the case study. This approach is distinct from data collection methods, techniques, and processes, as it is a research strategy. A case study entails a comprehensive investigation of the unit of analysis within its natural context. As it is an in-depth study, case study research can be carried out using any data collection method that is deemed appropriate for the researcher's purpose. It is typical for a case study to employ a range of data collection techniques, with the aim of conducting an informed and objective investigation of the phenomenon under examination. The unit of analysis in a case study is any entity that can be subjected to investigation, including, for example, an individual, a household, a community, an organization, or a location (Priya, 2021). The methodology employed in this study is the case study, which encompasses a Spanish location.

The authors endeavours to integrate the three principal types of case studies in order to elucidate the subject matter under investigation in descriptive, explanatory and exploratory modes. The descriptive case study, a widely utilised approach in sociology and anthropology, is designed to present a phenomenon in its original context. Among the characteristics of the explanatory case study is the search for causal factors to explain a given phenomenon. In this type of case study, the primary aim is to explain the 'why' and 'how' of certain circumstances, including why a certain sequence of events occurs or does not occur, and how the subject of the study has reached the present stage. The objective of exploratory case studies is to investigate a phenomenon with the intention of identifying new research questions that can be used extensively in subsequent research (Yin, 2014). In order to construct a comprehensive case study, a range of national and international databases were consulted, in addition to a review of the existing literature by other authors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The film and series tourism location included in this study has been selected according to professional criteria. Specifically, the selected location is not a capital city nor a coastal location, but is situated in close proximity to the coastline. A comparative analysis of a European and an Asian area revealed that the most promising region for tourism development is the zone within 1 km of the coast. However, the 10 km coastal zone was identified as having the highest tourism potential on a generalised basis (Mikhaylova et al., 2023). The authors of this research attempt to investigate a tourist destination that is associated with the 3S model of tourism, which encompasses sun, sand, and sea, and are characterised by their appeal to mass tourism (Carvache-Franco et al., 2018). The 3S tourism sector represents the most industrialised segment of the tourism industry. It has been characterised by the dominance of mass production and rigid forms of organisational structure (Kropinova et al., 2023). Mass tourism destinations are confronted with a number of specific challenges, including overcrowding and an increase in criminal activity (Ofem et al., 2024).

A further aspect of the selection is that the research is focused on a location that has appeared in films or television series produced in the 21st century. This ensures that the research is timely and relevant to contemporary contexts.

Girona's tourism

Girona is the capital of the Girona province, which is situated within the region of Catalonia. It is positioned approximately 100 kilometres from Barcelona, situated in the north-eastern region of Spain, in close proximity to the French border. Girona is a city with a rich historical and cultural heritage, as evidenced by its array of magnificent edifices and the architectural elements that adorn its streets and squares in the historic city centre. The historic centre of Girona is situated on an elevated position along the eastern bank of the Onyar river, while the more contemporary urban expansion of the city is located in the surrounding plains to the west (Espelt and Benito, 2005; Game of Thrones Spain, 2024). The findings of other researchers also indicate a significant correlation between the natural, historical and cultural environment and satisfaction with tourist destinations (Chau, 2023). Although the number of beds in the city's tourist accommodation facilities fluctuated during the study period (2010-2021), the total number of nights spent in the municipality initially increased until 2017, before declining during the pandemic caused by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) (Figure 1.).

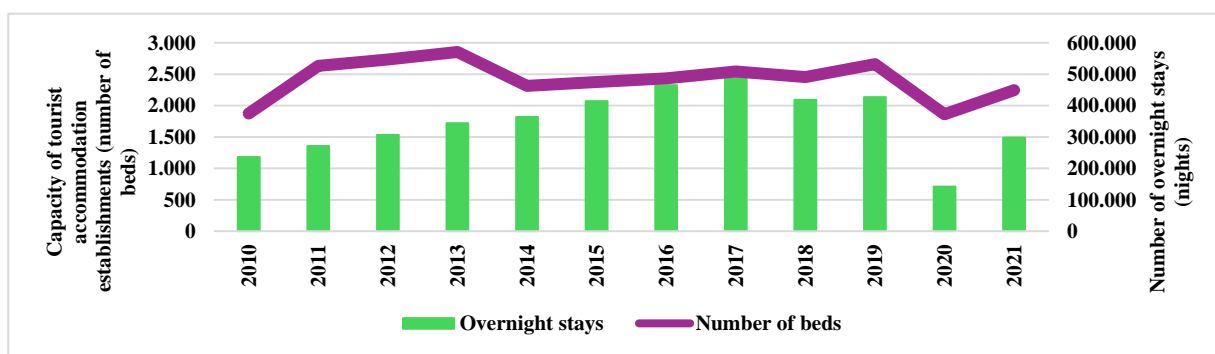


Figure 1. Capacity of tourist accommodation establishments (number of beds) and the number of overnight stays (nights) in Girona city (2010-2021) (Source: Authors' own construction based on INE Spain, 2024)

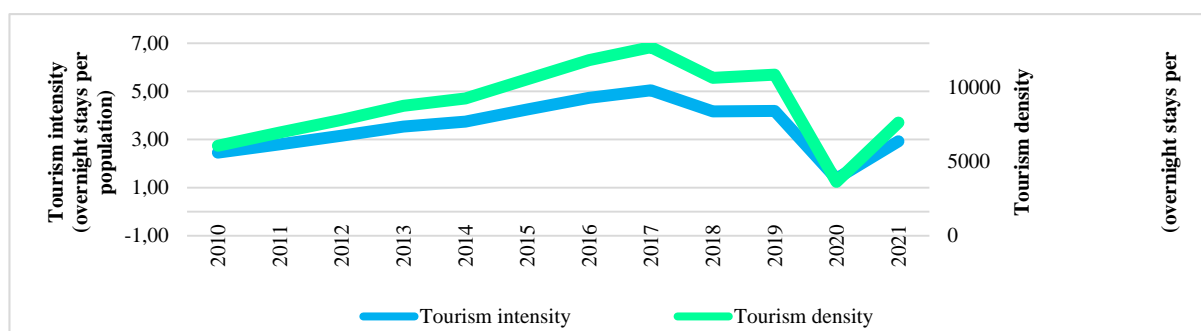


Figure 2. Tourism intensity and tourism density of Girona City (2010-2021) (Source: Authors' own construction based on the INE Spain, 2024)

The latest research methods in the field of tourism place a significant emphasis on the well-being of the local population. Consequently, it may be of value to examine the intensity and density of tourism in order to gain a deeper understanding of its impact on the local community. The concept of tourism intensity enables the estimation of the theoretical multiplication of the population during periods of tourist flow through the comparison of the number of tourist beds with the resident population of a given territory (Gauche, 2017). The concept of tourism density is used to assess the level of tourist pressure on a given region and the impact this has on the local community. This is achieved by calculating the ratio between the number of overnight stays in tourist accommodation establishments and the total area of the region, expressed in square kilometres (INE Portugal, 2024). The intensity and density of tourism demonstrated a marked increase until 2017, after which a precipitous decline was observed as a consequence of the pandemic (Figure 2).

Following years of growth, the decrease in tourism in Girona in 2018 can be assigned to a variety of factors, including local resistance to mass tourism and strategic reorganization of tourism management. In the latter half of 2017, the initial cautionary statements regarding tourism in Girona emerged, concentrating on Airbnb rentals and concerns about the potential deterioration of the historic ambience of the region's traditional urban core (Vidal Rua, 2020; Carreras and Pastells, 2017; Pastells, 2017). Residents of Girona mounted a notable counter-movement in 2018, protesting against the growing influx of tourists. A considerable number of locals perceived that the tourism boom was exerting a detrimental impact on their quality of life, resulting in elevated living costs and the displacement of local residents. This discontent resulted in the formation of the “Plataforma pel decreixement turístic Girona”, a platform that advocates for the limitation of tourism and the introduction of regulations to address the issue of illegal tourist accommodations and more effectively manage the growth of tourist numbers (Catalan News, 2024). Prior to 2018, there were effectively no anti-tourist demonstrations or protests in Girona. In 2018, Girona was promoted on several online platforms (Responsible Travel, 2018; Huxham, 2018) as a responsible travel destination, as it was perceived as a viable alternative to Barcelona, which had already become susceptible to the adverse effects of overtourism. It is also notable that the Catalan regions display a considerable degree of heterogeneity in their seasonal patterns. Despite its inland location, Girona benefits from a coastal proximity that attracts tourists engaged in coastal tourism, with the highest demand occurring in July and August. In contrast, the demand for accommodation in Barcelona is distributed throughout the year (Plan Estratégico, 2020).

The Gini index, also known as the Gini coefficient, is typically employed as a metric for income inequality. However, it is also frequently utilized by tourism professionals to assess seasonal fluctuations in tourism. The Gini coefficient quantifies the extent of inequality between the values of a frequency distribution (Marton et al., 2017), rendering it an appropriate tool for evaluating seasonality in tourism. As the data on hotel occupancy was available from the National Institute of Statistics for a longer period, it was possible to analyse a much longer interval, covering almost 25 years. Given that Girona is situated within Catalonia, which is comprised of four provinces (Barcelona, Girona, Lleida and Tarragona), an analysis of the entire autonomous community of Catalonia has been conducted, encompassing all four provinces. The travel restrictions introduced in 2020 and 2021 due to the global pandemic of coronavirus disease (Covid-19) have resulted in a highly concentrated influx of tourists in Catalonia. However, apart from this period, it is evident that Tarragona is the most susceptible to seasonal fluctuations. It boasts the longest coastline of the four provinces and, as a result, plays an active role in the 3S tourism. Next in line is Girona, which is also engaged in coastal tourism. Although the province of Barcelona also has a significant length of coastline, the second most populous city in Spain is less affected by seasonality due to the existence of alternative attractions and the performance of other leading roles (Figure 3).

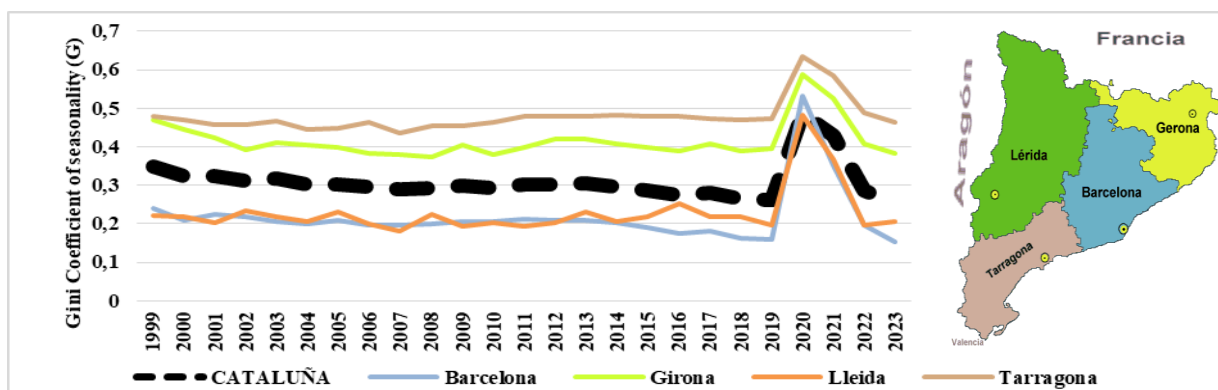


Figure 3. Gini Coefficient of seasonality calculated on overnight stays by provinces of Cataluña (1999-2023) (Source: Authors' own construction based on the INE Spain (2024) presented alongside an illustration of a map from EcuRed, 2011)

‘The Game of Thrones influence’

In August 2017, following the release of the seventh season, ABC, the longest-running national newspaper in Spain, published an overview of the total number of filming locations used in Game of Thrones by country. The data revealed that Spain is the country with the highest number of filming locations, with 39 different places being utilised for the show. Croatia is the next country with 30 locations, followed by the United Kingdom with 25 filming sites. Additionally, Malta (11), Iceland (3) and Morocco (2) were also used for filming the series (Gail, 2017).

The series has been the recipient of numerous accolades and has achieved considerable commercial success, exerting a significant influence across a multitude of domains. It is important to acknowledge that the majority of research in this field has focused on Dubrovnik, followed by Northern Ireland and then Malta. A study was conducted by Tkalec and colleagues (2017) on the number of tourist arrivals in Dubrovnik, which revealed a robust and positive effect associated with the filming of the TV series. The authors highlight that the global popularity of the series has contributed to Dubrovnik becoming a world-renowned tourist destination, with the international tourist appeal of the Croatian city increasing significantly as a result. The long-term increase in visitor numbers and economic output has been discernible, and the attention and visibility generated by the series have resulted in the creation of a lasting tourist attraction for the sites in question (Contu and Pau, 2022). The case of Dubrovnik serves to illustrate Šegota's (2018) thesis that a successful series can engender a new heritage of tourism value, with attendant economic, cultural and community benefits. Waysdorf and Reijnders (2017) conducted in-depth interviews with Game of Thrones fans in Dubrovnik and Northern Ireland. Their

findings revealed that tourists engage in imaginative processes to connect real-life locations with scenes from the series. In a recent study (Gómez-Morales et al., 2023) identified three primary motivations among fans visiting the filming locations of the popular television series *Game of Thrones*. These include a need to identify with the characters, to explore the relationship between fiction and history, and to feel part of a collective identity.

The city of Girona was used extensively in the sixth season of the popular TV series *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). The sixth season of the fantasy drama television series *Game of Thrones*, created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss and distributed by Home Box Office (HBO), commenced on 24 April 2016 and concluded on 26 June. The historic and medieval areas of the old town of Girona are notable for their aesthetic appeal and well-preserved state. The medieval churches, labyrinthine cobbled streets and ancient fortresses with fortified walls and towers, collectively contribute to the settlement's suitability for the creation of the season with 10 episodes. The city served as a stand-in for several locations within the fictional world of Westeros. Notable scenes include the streets of Braavos and King's Landing, and the interior of the monastery was used as the Citadel in Oldtown. In season six, viewers of the *Game of Thrones* series were able to observe the medieval old town of Girona, which served as the primary setting for the city of Braavos (Gonzalez, 2024).

Following the series' popularity, tourists began to visit the locations where the scenes were filmed. The locations are more readily identifiable with the assistance of a local guide, which has led to the advent of film tours, or in this case, series tours. One of the largest websites offering programmes for tourists has compiled a series of tours of Girona in the summer of 2024, which take visitors to the locations depicted in the *Game of Thrones* series. A summary of these is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *Game of Thrones* related tours in Girona from the website of GetYourGuide (Source: Authors' own construction based on GetYourGuide)

Name of the tour	Duration (hour)	Price (€)	Activity provider	Rate	Available languages	From: Girona (G) / Barcelona (B)	Private (P) / group (G)
Girona: <i>Game of Thrones</i> Small Group Tour	2.5	35	Girona Experience	4.9	English, Spanish	G	G
Girona: <i>Game of Thrones</i> Walking Tour	2	28	Girona Explorers	5	English	G	G
From Barcelona: Girona, <i>Game of Thrones</i> Tour	6.5-9	49	Julia Travel Gray Line Spain	4.3	English, Spanish	B	G
Girona: Private History Tour	3	190	Girona Experience	4.9	English, Spanish	G	P
Barcelona: Girona <i>Game of Thrones</i> Private Tour with Pickup	5	230	In Out Barcelona Tours	5	English, Spanish	B	P

The website's collection of programmes includes five trips that introduce participants to the locations of the series. Several of these are available for departure from Barcelona, which makes them accessible to those staying in the capital and largest city of the autonomous community of Catalonia, the second-most populous municipality of Spain. It is also possible to take a private guided tour, which is offered at a significantly higher price than the group options.

The city's cultural heritage has been enhanced by its status as a filming location for major films and television series, including the widely acclaimed *Game of Thrones*. However, the fame acquired has also been accompanied by an increase in the number of visits, which has necessitated the development of infrastructure. In addition to improvements in transport infrastructure, there was a demand for more accommodation, restaurants and guided film tours. The economic recovery has allowed further investment in the conservation and promotion of Girona's historic sites and cultural heritage.

The rise in tourist numbers, attributable to the city's growing popularity, has also had a deleterious effect on the urban environment in a number of ways. In the course of primary research, Fernandez and colleagues (Fernandez et al., 2022) discovered that, due to the city's popularity among tourists, the housing situation had become unsustainable, which had resulted in the emergence of various resident movements. Congestion is a persistent year-round issue, causing significant mobility challenges in the historical city centre, where streets are narrow. Survey results of Vidal Rua (2020) indicate a divided public opinion regarding the presence of tourists in Girona.

While some view tourists as beneficial contributors to the city's cultural landscape and a means of safeguarding its cultural and historical heritage, others express concerns about the impact of tourism on local communities and the environment. Conversely, a significant proportion of the local population is concerned about the impact of tourism on property prices and the behaviour of some tourists, with overcrowding representing a further concern.

CONCLUSION

Although film tourism can contribute to the phenomenon of overtourism and congestion in specific locations, it can also be an effective instrument for combating overtourism. One strategy for alleviating tourist overcrowding is to promote lesser known, less visited destinations in the public consciousness. The presence of visitors to unpopular destinations may serve to disperse crowds at destinations experiencing overtourism. It is the intention of the authors of this study to contribute to the ongoing efforts to combat the phenomenon of overtourism by raising awareness of the issue.

This article seeks to elucidate the considerable potential of film tourism as a marketing tool for destinations. By establishing strategic alliances with the film industry and exploiting film-related promotional activities, destinations can attract a considerable number of tourists, which can lead to economic benefits and increased visibility. However, it is of paramount importance to balance these efforts with sustainable practices to preserve the cultural and environmental integrity of the sites. Furthermore, this study aims to increase awareness of the potential of film tourism to influence

tourists' travel motivations and destination choices. Girona's well-preserved medieval architecture, the River Onyar, lined with brightly coloured houses and spectacular bridges, and the rich cultural heritage of the Jewish Quarter combine to make the settlement an attractive location for both film production and tourism. In light of the fact that the outbreak of COVID-19 occurred shortly after the release of the scenes filmed in Girona, it seems probable that the city's popularity will continue to grow significantly in the near future. The long-term impact of "Game of Thrones" tourism on Girona, particularly in the context of the reversal of the changes wrought by the pandemic and the subsequent restoration of tourism, will be determined by future research. A potential avenue for future research would be to examine the impact of tourism generated by Game of Thrones on Girona's capacity to attract other film and television productions as filming locations.

Furthermore, in the context of sustainable tourism, the authors deem it pertinent to conduct periodic assessments of the perceptions of local residents regarding their own city and cultural heritage, as well as the reception of tourists. Such monitoring could facilitate the prompt identification of any adverse impacts associated with tourism, enabling municipal authorities to devise and implement effective solutions, drawing upon the experiences of other municipalities facing comparable challenges. The integration of the findings presented in this study with the principles of sustainable tourism offers a valuable framework for decision-makers. Further research is required in order to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between film tourism and overtourism. A potentially valuable area for future research would be an examination of the growth of tourism and other indicators of tourism at all locations where Game of Thrones has been filmed.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.Sz.T., Z.B. and T.Cs.R.; methodology, A.Sz.T.; software, A.Sz.T., Z.B. and T.Cs.R.; validation, A.Sz.T., Z.B. and T.Cs.R.; formal analysis, A.Sz.T., Z.B. and T.Cs.R.; investigation, A.Sz.T., Z.B. and T.Cs.R.; data curation, A.Sz.T.; writing - original draft preparation, A.Sz.T.; writing - review and editing, Z.B. and T.Cs.R.; visualization, A.Sz.T.; supervision, Z.B. and T.Cs.R.; project administration, Z.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: Not applicable.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study may be obtained on request from the corresponding author.

Acknowledgements: Supported by the ÚNKP-23-3-II. New National Excellence Program of the Ministry for Culture and Innovation from the source of the National Research, Development and Innovation Fund. In order to enhance the readability and language of this work, the authors employed the DeepL Write tool (deepl.com). Following this, the authors conducted a comprehensive review and editing of the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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