

Hobbit or “Kiwi:” *Lord of the Rings* Tourism, Sustainability, and National Identity

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Abstract:

Film tourism is becoming viewed as a sustainable, environmentally friendly form of tourism, a tool New Zealand has put to use like no other country through the filming of *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Many studies have been performed on the authenticity and economic benefits of the phenomenon. However, the effects of this style of tourism marketing on New Zealand national identity have remained largely unstudied. This research sought to evaluate the impacts this type of marketing has had on both New Zealand locals and tourist perceptions of the country as a result. Potential negative impacts could have been discovered and avoided in the future or provide groundwork for creating sustainable tourism that benefits national identity. Conducted through examining promotional materials, previous studies, and an interview with a local film tourist business, many unforeseen benefits to national identity were discovered. Examining flight safety videos and featurettes included with DVD releases of the movie revealed a respect for the land and activities, while previous studies found that tourist perceptions of the country remained focused on New Zealand. Rather than impeding on New Zealand national identity, the films and the following tourism market seemed to enhance visitor experiences as well as provide a source of pride for New Zealanders. Film tourism as a whole could benefit from New Zealand practices, creating sustainable income for the economy while protecting national identity.

Introduction:

When John Ronald Reuel Tolkien wrote his epic novels, the *Lord of the Rings* series and *The Hobbit*, he had never once visited New Zealand, the site of the Peter Jackson movie filming. However, the variety of New Zealand landscapes formed what critics considered a perfect setting

for the imagining for film. So much so that, combined with the success of the movies, New Zealand was able to launch a global “100% Pure New Zealand” campaign to brand New Zealand as the “Real Middle Earth.” Attempting to brand a nation on this large scale in alignment with a cultural phenomenon such as popular films was unprecedented, and the impacts are still being discovered. The implications of this type of tourism branding on the people and the stigma it presents to visitors remains largely overshadowed however, with leaders instead choosing to praise the economic benefits and increase in tourism. New Zealand has much more to offer tourists than simply as a global filming site. As a result, debate has ensued on the country over the question of outsourcing New Zealand as a global film location, or if it should produce New Zealand cultural films (Jones and Smith, 2005). Choosing to focus and promote a single aspect of tourism, one that does not necessarily reflect on the culture of New Zealand itself but rather as a fictional land, could have negative consequences on the lasting tourism industry in the country. The goal of this research is to examine the social effects of film tourism, such as *the Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, resulting promotional materials on the national identity, and the sustainability of film tourism in New Zealand.

Literature Review:

The concept of film tourism is a rather new one, although this does not mean it has not been studied by any means. Over the last 20 years, numerous studies have been done investigating the relationship between film tourist sites and the dynamic between authenticity and fiction. One of the first examples of a sociologist examining authenticity as a cultural phenomenon was Richard Peterson’s work investigating authenticity in country music in 1997 (Jones, et al, 2005). Later, he would use the term “fabricated authenticity” to describe the authenticity of country music both as a social construct agreed upon by both the producers and

the consumers (Peterson, 2005). Country music is not in actuality any more authentic than other genres. The persona of being authentic however is one of the industry's main claims to fame, giving the music additional meaning to consumers.

This study of authenticity came to be applied to tourist sites that create a “fabricated authenticity” dynamic, where sites were created on cultural phenomenon that either only exist in fiction or in the past. Many studies were performed examining the authenticity and commodification of these tourist sites, such as a study examining Viking museums and reenactments in Europe (Halewood and Hannam, 2001). *Lord of the Rings* film tourism studies begin to emerge after the premier of the movies. Tzanelli (2004) examined the signage of the New Zealand campaign, and called for a reexamination of the differentiation between cultural film industries and tourism industries. In the case of *Lord of the Rings*, filmmakers and New Zealand worked together to promote attractions.

Jones and Smith (2005) took the authenticity discussion a step further. In their study, they examined the divided states of authenticity for New Zealand, “creative authenticity” and “national authenticity.” “Creative authenticity” describes the authenticity of the filming companies’ artistic choices and changes for the sake of the film. “National authenticity” however, referred to the development of New Zealand’s tourism business alongside the film developments, as part of the country’s national identity.

Ann Buchmann (2012) built on previous studies and, with her increased resources of studies on sustainability, wrote her recommendations for the future of film tourism in New Zealand by amassing previous studies done and interviewing New Zealand officials involved in the tourism market. She, along with Kevin Moore and David Fisher, also published a study on tourism authenticity by interviewing several official *Lord of the Rings* tour attendees (2010). The

research of this paper will be similar to the methods of their work, analyzing data from multiple studies and combining qualitative data from other studies published through the lens of national identity and sustainability.

Research:

Methods:

Several different methods were employed for this study. Some examples from the campaign from New Zealand were observed, through varying mediums such as flight safety videos and New Zealand *Lord of the Rings* tourist websites, as well as an interview with Hobbiton, a film site recreation. Other qualitative data was observed through re-examining data from other studies as well as data from market reports on film tourism in New Zealand.

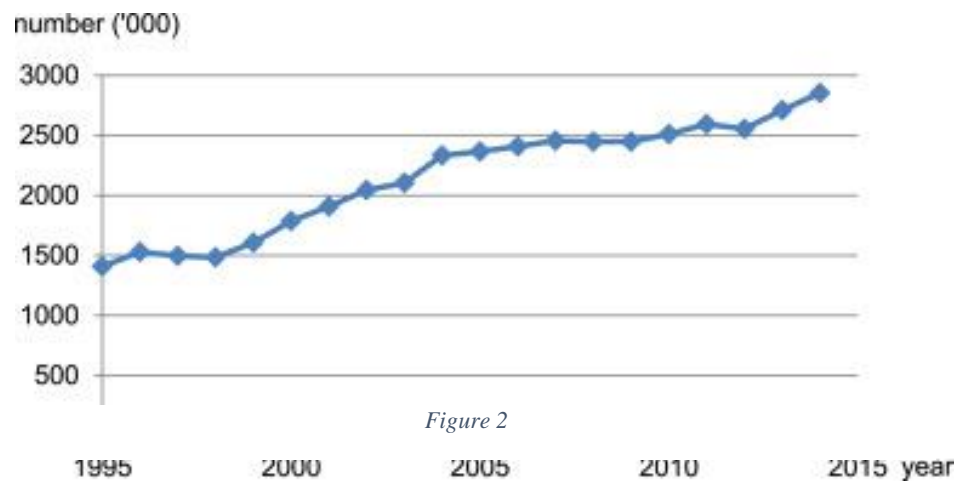
The Transformation of New Zealand:

With the success of the first *Lord of the Rings* movie, New Zealand began to work closely with film developers and publishers in order to attract more film tourists to New Zealand, a process that was even more closely repeated with *The Hobbit*. The natural landscape seemed to perfectly fit the described world of the books, with mountain ranges like what is shown in Figure 1. This provided increased tourism income for the country as well as establishing businesses as a result. This proved to have large economic success. Inbound tourism in New Zealand increased by 50 percent following the release of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Li, et al, 2017). Figure 2 is from a study on the economic impact showing how the annual inbound tourist numbers have been increasing (Li, et al, 2017).



Figure 1 New Zealand Mist (Tourism Holdings, n.d.)

As one can see, two periods of rapid growth are demonstrated. In the early 2000s, the original *Lord of the Rings* trilogy was being filmed. The second rise beginning around 2013 correlates with the filming of *The Hobbit*.



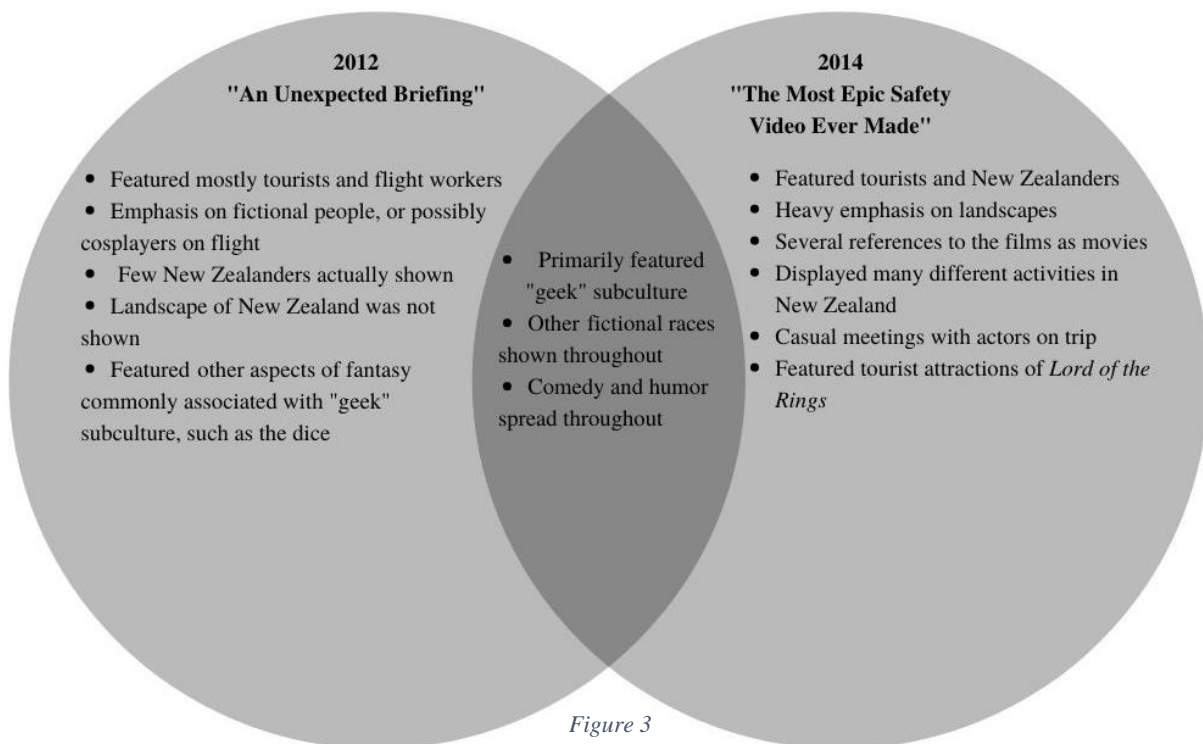
The numbers do little to show the extent of which *Lord of the Rings* permeated the New Zealand tourist industry and reveal only an economic success story. Such marketing could have negative implications for incoming tourist expectations and affect how the New Zealand national identity is perceived. New Zealand has a unique cultural identity, and it is possible that this form of marketing and branding could conflict with local values and the appreciation of the environment not simply as a fictional landscape.

The Campaigns:

Two different types of promotional materials regarding New Zealand as Middle-earth were examined. The first promotional material observed consisted of two New Zealand flight safety videos published by Air New Zealand. The videos featured elves and other figures from the movie series giving instructions on flight safety, with several references made to the original movie trilogies (Waititi). Figure 3 is a diagram of qualitative observations made while watching,

indicating a possible change in marketing goals that occurred between 2012 and 2014. Both clearly intended to make nods to the film franchise and poke fun at the idea of a New Zealand Middle-earth, but the different styles of filming had different implications. The 2012 version demonstrated less division between the fantasy world and reality. Wizards and goblins were portrayed sitting directly next to the few normal people on the flight (WETA). The video also represented little of New Zealand's actual landscapes, instead seeming to focus more directly on the fantasy aspect. However, the second video, from 2014, seemed to demonstrate two parallel landscapes, not as the same. Shots were either largely focused on reality, or on the fantasy realm of Middle-earth. Normal New Zealanders were also present as citizens, and the video featured several actors from the films as themselves, not as their movie personas.

While the short films were harmless and generally considered creative, they demonstrate a change in how New Zealand was being marketed. While the 2012 video blurred the differences



between reality and fiction, the 2014 video showed more respect toward New Zealand activities and landscapes as a nation. This trend would continue a few years later when *The Hobbit* was released on DVD. This second medium of promotion was a bonus feature included on the DVD release, where the actors reacted to the New Zealand landscape (Jackson). Rather than only discussing the land as part of the movie, the interviews instead focused on the amazement of the actors. These videos were later published as part of the 100% Pure New Zealand campaign, and demonstrated an almost jealousy of New Zealand land, that living in New Zealand was something to be proud of. The featurette and the second flight video are evidence of New Zealand's attempts to make film tourism sustainable and provide a reason for coming after the movies have lost attention. Refocusing on the resources and activities offered by New Zealand alongside the film tourism demonstrates an increased pride and respect for the country.

New Zealand Tourist Sites:

Several New Zealand tourist attractions exist, most notably the many film tours offered along with the major attraction that is Hobbiton. Such places are so intertwined with the New Zealand tourism offices that their website shows Hobbiton first under their "Things to do" category ("Home," n.d.). The Department of Conservation lists GPS coordinates for popular film sites on public land for tourists to explore, which are spread out over the whole island. When combined with other attractions like Hobbiton, sites exist all over New Zealand, as shown in Figure 4 (Buchmann et al, 2010).

Buchmann (2009) performed a series of interviews on tourist attendees on several of New Zealand's *Lord of the Rings* tours. She found that many of the tourist attendees came because of the featurettes on the DVDs, wanting to see the sites of New Zealand for themselves, but many

also came out of “a need to see Middle-earth” (Buchmann, 2009). This duality continued to prevail in her findings. Even a participant who placed himself between the two extremes claimed to have wanted “New Zealand as well as the location sites... I want to experience New Zealand, not only Middle-earth and that was extremely important” (Buchmann 2009). Buchmann goes on to write how neither of the

extremes seem to be disappointed by the tours, despite the varying expectations.



Figure 4

The approach of selling New Zealand as Middle-earth appears to excite not only the film fans, but also the tourists simply touring for the sights of New Zealand. This may be due to the similarities of what Tolkien described and the sheer landscapes of New Zealand. Imagining the New Zealand world as an imaginary, magical place does more than just attract fans of the series. It could also enhance the natural beauty of the islands by comparing them as something from a fantasy epic. Some of Buchmann’s (2008) other observations support this idea. Rather than seeing New Zealand’s flaws and struggle for sustainability, visitors continued to “interpret New Zealand as a green and friendly place.”

Buchmann (2009) also found in her work that most of the film tourists did not consider themselves as “geeks” of the film. This is directly in conflict with what was shown in the flight videos, where many of the tourists exemplified “nerd” or “geek” subculture. This furthers solidifies that selling New Zealand as a fantasy land accomplishes more than just attracting fans of the film, a demand for a larger audience.

A representative for Hobbiton, a tourist site based on a *Lord of the Rings* village and shown in Figure 6, has largely observed similar findings as Buchmann in her experience of her time at Hobbiton. Tourists, according to her interactions, reportedly have a very high opinion of New Zealand coming in (Nathan Walker, private email to Hobbiton, May 4, 2020). She described film tourism as a “huge part of our [New Zealand] identity.” While not willing to disclose exact figures, Hobbiton reaches around 650,000 visitors annually, and in the busiest periods around holidays can host up to 3500 visitors a day. Figure 5 demonstrates the countries of origin for tourists with data obtained from Hobbiton.

Based on the high visitation from New Zealand, Hobbiton is clearly not just a part of New Zealand’s foreign tourism market, but for domestic tourism as well. Due to the COVID-19 era, Hobbiton will actually be relying only on domestic tourism to remain open. Hobbiton is a part of New Zealand identity, just as much so as Hukka Falls or the Tongariro Alpine Crossing. Jones and Smith (2005) propose another reason for the interwovenness of Middle-earth into the

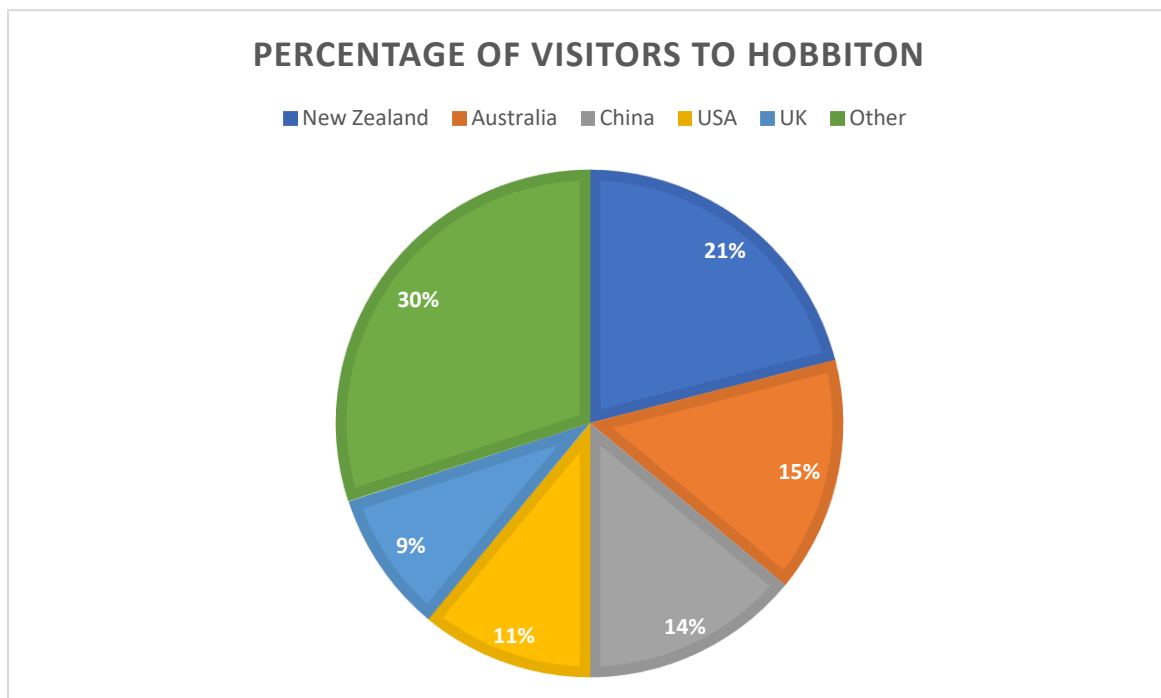


Figure 5

New Zealand national identity. The director of the films, Peter Jackson, is a well-known “kiwi,” and the study revealed that many New Zealanders appear to take pride in this fact, viewing him as a “ringleader” for film. As a result, the working of *Lord of the Rings* material into the tourism marketing of the country would be considered much more acceptable by locals.

Conclusions

Around the world, there are examples of tourism and corporations taking advantage of local provinces and culture, selling the experience with either harm or little benefit to local peoples. However, this proves not the case of New Zealand, with clear benefits for New Zealanders. This includes the effects on New Zealand national identity.



Figure 6 Hobbiton, Matamata (Orme, 2005)

New Zealand national identity seems to have benefited as a result of the *Lord of the Rings* film tourism market. The portrayal of the landscape as a magical land of fiction causes increased appreciation in both locals and tourists alike. This enhancement sets high expectations and meets them. The strive for authenticity in *Lord of the Rings* tourism does not detract from the overall experience, and the positive reactions of visiting become associated not only with the films, but the country as well. The production of the films and the following tourism market also formed a source of pride for local New Zealanders, being directed by a “kiwi” and improving the perception of New Zealand’s natural beauty.

This type of tourism becomes sustainable through marketing techniques demonstrated through the different flight videos. The second video established many more activities for

tourists after the movies have faded from the eyes of culture. This gives reasons for visiting New Zealand other than just the film tourism, a phenomenon experienced in the tourism audience observed by Buchmann.

Film tourism can provide sustainable income for the economy, but preparations must be made for when the inevitable occurs and the movies are no longer talked about commonly. New Zealand provides an example of how to weave film tourism into the economy in a sustainable manner, protecting national identity for locals and tourists alike.

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