

Let Tourists Hanker for the Good Old Days

Film-lovers' nostalgia can very effectively maintain the profile of destinations that have served as film locations, according to SHTM professors Sam Kim and Brian King. In a recently published study focusing on Taiwanese fans of Hong Kong films, the researchers highlight that there is increasing eagerness to step into the shoes of favourite film stars and visit places they have only witnessed on screen. However, film tourism of this kind brings both challenges and opportunities: with new blockbusters released every day, memories of older films can quickly fade. The researchers suggest that understanding just what drives nostalgia-based film tourism will help destinations overcome potential obstacles to this growing market segment.

Nostalgic Film Tourism

In recent decades, places featured in films – from restaurants and tower-blocks to coastlines and even whole cities – have become increasingly popular with tourists, who travel across the globe to visit the locations where their favourite films were made or shot. Films that represent past eras are especially good at evoking nostalgia for what the researchers describe as the “good old days”, leading fans to visit particular destinations to experience for themselves the worlds of the films they love.

This trend, known as nostalgia-driven film tourism, is becoming more and more noticeable. “Films”, explain the researchers, “are a window into the past, mirroring the ethos and interests of the everyday lives and experiences of earlier

times”. Audiences tend to miss old films and their associations, remembering them fondly over the years, and this sense of nostalgia may even motivate them to visit the places they have seen so often on screen.

As media technologies develop rapidly, audiences are exposed to these “pivotal nostalgia-generating media”, argue the researchers, through a growing number of channels – not only cinema and television, but also DVDs and Internet platforms such as YouTube. At the same time, the development of customised tour programmes and tourism facilities worldwide has made it ever easier to stand in the steps of our favourite actors, experiencing familiar film locations from the perspective of the characters themselves.

Yet studies have rarely examined nostalgia as a potential driver of film tourism. Most have focused on film tourist intentions to travel shortly after film releases; few have tested the influence of nostalgia on future tourism intentions. To fill this gap, the researchers set out to explore the mechanisms of film nostalgia and, most importantly, discover how this “window into the past” shapes film-goers' future travel decisions.

Hong Kong Films in Taiwan

Taiwan was considered the perfect setting for this exploration. Taiwanese cinema-goers are among the most passionate film tourists, travelling frequently to Hong Kong to step into the shoes of much-loved characters

and explore the backdrops of their favourite comedies or crime thrillers. This is hardly surprising given the phenomenal popularity of Hong Kong films in Taiwan – since the 1970s it has been their second largest inbound market after mainland China.

Not only have these films won Taiwan's most prestigious cinema awards, but they have also shaped the daily lives and hobbies of a whole generation of Taiwanese. The craze is particularly strong amongst those aged 40 and above, who, the researchers note, “may be influenced by nostalgic feelings, hankering back to the ‘good old days’ when they were exposed to Hong Kong films”.

As much of Hong Kong has been featured in film sets, international tourists have endless opportunities to indulge such nostalgia by personally experiencing film location attractions. Some explore the temples featured in Kung Fu films; others try authentic Hong Kong food in the cafés, bars and restaurants of Lan Kwai Fong; and others again imitate the martial arts pose of Bruce Lee's statue on the Avenue of Stars.

Based on these observations, the researchers hypothesised that film nostalgia encourages Taiwanese film tourists to engage in several tourism behaviours, from visiting Hong Kong film sets and museums to tasting Hong Kong food and buying film memorabilia. They identified various film characteristics likely to evoke nostalgia, such as the special effects used for explosions in Kung Fu films, and various ways of exhibiting this nostalgia, such as re-enacting dialogue or gossiping about characters.

Film Nostalgia Measured

The next step was to test these hypotheses. Based on preliminary interviews with Taiwanese tourists, students and film-lovers, the researchers painstakingly developed and pilot-tested a questionnaire that measured nostalgia for Hong Kong films, familiarity with film locations and future intentions to travel to Hong Kong for nostalgia-fuelled film tourism.

The researchers then surveyed 737 cinema-goers resident in Taiwan. Among numerous other questions, the respondents were asked how many Hong Kong “good old days” films that they had watched, what they felt about the films’ music and backdrops and whether they ever searched for news about Hong Kong film stars.

Only people who passed some important screening questions were allowed to participate in this part of the research. For example, they had to be at least 40 years old, and to be familiar with some Hong Kong films from the 1970s to the late 1990s. About half of the respondents were female, and most lived in cities. Interestingly, more than 90% recognised all 11 of the most famous Hong Kong film stars from the period.

Nostalgia Tourism

The researchers’ analysis of their findings “confirmed the potency of nostalgia as a film tourism motivation”, and suggested some paths for promoting nostalgia-driven film tourism for cultural as well as economic gain.

Of five main film nostalgia dimensions, one was particularly influential for tourism intentions: the respondents’ memories of film backdrops, which they

longed to experience “in the flesh”. Interpreting this finding, the researchers suggest that the nostalgia concept can play a significant role in “consolidating an association between branding destinations and a compelling narrative that relies on film locations”. Destination marketers can capitalise on the importance of film backdrops by featuring key locations and landmarks in their advertising and tour itineraries.

However, the researchers note that film sets should not be overly commercialised, because highly motivated film tourists want to view an authentic “world on screen”. This is an advantage from a sustainability perspective, as film-based nostalgia tourism “does not require large investments”. Instead, for example, local restaurants could simply encourage guests to reminisce by developing “good old days” menus and creating a nostalgic atmosphere with film props, photos and music.

Indeed, this kind of social and cultural exchange between tourists and residents may even promote longer-term market viability, “using the medium of film to understand community culture, traditions, and history”. To ensure the sustainable management of film destinations, destination managers should empower local communities as stakeholders in film tourism.

Future Film Tourism

Demonstrating that the emotional connections films evoke extend to film destinations, this study offers novel insights into the influence of film-related nostalgia on future travel intentions. The findings suggest that destination marketers and managers alike can effectively and sustainably promote local tourism through simple and creative ideas rather than making huge investments.

However, continued vigilance will be needed, because audiences’ memories of old films may fade as new fads emerge. “To plan, develop and manage film destinations”, warn the researchers, “will involve an ongoing commitment to understanding different film tourists’ expectations and perceptions of destination attributes”.

POINTS TO NOTE

- Film tourism, particularly nostalgia-driven film tourism, is becoming increasingly popular.
- Taiwanese fans of Hong Kong films are an especially passionate group of film tourists.
- Film-related nostalgia can be used as a vehicle for destination marketing and management.
- As film-goers’ memories fade, ongoing efforts must be made to understand and manage film tourists’ changing expectations of destinations.

Seongseop (Sam) Kim, Sangkyun (Sean) Kim and Brian King. (2019). “Nostalgia Film Tourism and Its Potential for Destination Development”. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 236-252.