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Aggravated fragmentation: A case study of SME behaviour in two emerging heritage tourism regions

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The SME is conceptualised as an implementer within the heritage tourism supply chain.
- SMEs are dissatisfied with government level tourism activity.
- Entrepreneurial responses are evidenced and their motivations uncovered.
- The heritage tourism system contributes to industry fragmentation, in this context.
- The behaviour of the SME is central to destination competitiveness.

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the behaviour of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) within the heritage tourism supply chain (HTSC), in two emerging heritage regions. SMEs are conceptualised as implementers, working within the constraints of government level tourism structures and the heritage tourism supply chain. The research employs a case study approach, focusing on two emerging regions in Northern Ireland. In-depth interviews were carried out with small business owners and community associations operating within the regions. The research identifies SME dissatisfaction with the supply chain and the processes in place for the delivery of the tourism product. To overcome the perceived inadequacies of the heritage tourism supply chain SMEs engage in entrepreneurial behaviour by attempting to deliver specific products and services to meet the need of tourists. The challenge for tourism organisations is how they can integrate the entrepreneurial, innovative activities of SMEs into the heritage tourism system.

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1. Introduction

This paper contributes to the tourism literature by examining the behaviours of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in emerging heritage regions. The concept of fragmentation is investigated in the context of tourism industry structures and the heritage tourism supply chain (HTSC). The paper investigates the role of SMEs as both participants and competitors within the HTSC, and evaluates their decision making behaviour in this context. The study emanates from a tourism development perspective and is concerned with communities and heritage brokers and how they purposively interact to create a tourism offering, which comprises both human-made and natural heritage, rather than from the perspective of tourists.

Recent global advances in economic development, technological progress and political stability have encouraged many regions to emerge as tourist destinations, and have subsequently spurred a number of studies examining the specific issues which relate to such destinations (Ayikoru, 2015; Dwyer, Edwards, Mistilis, Roman, & Scott, 2009; Devine & Devine, 2011; Zhang, Song, & Huang, 2009). In such emerging regions, prior deficiencies, or the established status quo, may inhibit tourism development; regions may be dominated by partisan policies (Nunkoo, 2015) and possible social instability, all of which can negatively impact upon a

destination's competitiveness (Ayikoru, 2015; Dwyer et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2009). Furthermore, tourism development requires commitment from a range of stakeholders who must understand the requirements of tourism (Dwyer et al., 2009), something which can be problematic in non-traditional destinations (Ayikoru, 2015).

Emerging tourist regions which are dependent on heritage resources for their core tourist product (Korzay and Alvarez, 2011; Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2001; Aas, Ladkin, & Fletcher, 2005; Garrod & Fyall, 2000), present some challenges for heritage tourism management. The heritage dimension often entails a range of potentially difficult characteristics. The ownership of the resource can reside with multiple public sector bodies or charities (Gilmore, Carson, & Ascenção, 2007), which require complex processes of coordination (Panyik, Costa, & Rátz, 2011; Wray & Cox, 2011; Aas et al., 2005; Hall, 1999). Any developments such as capital investment will require a level of consensus, making integration with stakeholders vital to development (Clarkson, 1995; Gilmore et al., 2007; Vernon, Essex, Pinder, & Curry, 2005; Hankinson, 2009; Landorf, 2009; Rowley & Hanna, 2011; Wray & Cox, 2011). However, these processes are inherently difficult to achieve effectively (Okazaki, 2008; Wray & Cox, 2011). Coordination can be difficult to achieve given the numerous bodies involved (Panyik et al., 2011), while integration can be challenging as it requires achieving engagement with the range of stakeholders involved (Sautter & Leisen, 1999), through appropriate consultation (Wray & Cox, 2011). Inefficiencies in these processes are often manifested in high levels of fragmentation within the industry, such as a lack of strategic orientation, or duplicated promotional messages (Bornhorst, Brent Ritchie, & Sheehan, 2010). These challenges provide a rationale for conceptualising the heritage tourism industry as a supply chain (Zhang & Murphy, 2009) 'involving inter-firm relationships' (Zhang et al., 2009), as well as advancing integrative links between the suppliers of raw materials (heritage resources) and tourism providers (predominantly SMEs).

The competitiveness of SME tourism businesses is ultimately subject to how they operate and respond to their external environment, which includes the HTSC (Ayikoru, 2015; Dwyer et al., 2009; Ryals & Humphries, 2007; Smith & Xiao, 2008; Zhang et al., 2009), taking account of the infrastructure required to service a tourism region, such as product development (roads, signage, capital intensive products) and destination level promotion. SMEs are obliged to utilise and adapt to public sector provisions and leadership (Bramwell, 2011; Nunkoo, 2015) due to the structures

and characteristics of heritage tourism (Nuryanti, 1996; Su & Wall, 2014).

The SME plays a key role within the HTSC, as it engages directly with tourists, and is the final 'value adding' stage of the supply chain. Current literature continues to posit that heritage tourism is not presented to tourists in a way that relates to the full range of stakeholders involved in its development, including SMEs, local communities and other relevant stakeholders (Chhabra, 2015). Furthermore, local communities are often overlooked in the decision making process in relation to heritage tourism development; they are not involved in the negotiations within the HTSC (Smith & Xiao, 2008).

Thus, there is potential for frustration and conflict within the supply chain system (Zhang et al., 2009). In the heritage tourism context, where there is strong dependence on the heritage product (Su & Wall, 2014; Aas et al., 2005; Nuryanti, 1996), the SME is restricted in its choices; it must either comply with the national or regional strategic planning framework despite dissatisfaction or find a way to work around it in order to engage in effective tourism delivery. However, SMEs are constrained by their limited capabilities (Cai, 2002; Saxena & Ilbery, 2008; Thomas & Wood, 2015) and operating outside of the prescribed supply chain may further aggravate an already heterogeneous and disparate industry (Panyik et al., 2011).

The HTSC can be viewed as a hierarchy of three levels of management, as depicted in Fig. 1. Public sector bodies exist at Level 1, and are tasked with a range of responsibilities including providing strategic direction (Kerr, 2003; Vernon et al, 2005; Wray & Cox, 2011), a range of facilities, and executing strategic marketing functions, including destination level promotion and product development (Greenley & Matcham, 1983; Korzay & Alvarez, 2011; Vernon et al., 2005). Tourism products and services are delivered largely by private sector businesses (Komppula, 2014) operating at Level 3, within the strategic framework set out by public sector bodies. These businesses provide the elements of operational visitor servicing required (Gilmore et al., 2007; Greenley & Matcham, 1983) and need to be interdependent and complementary (Komppula, 2014). The firms operating at Level 3 must operate in conjunction with the public sector in order to provide a viable, holistic and streamlined service product (Bornhorst et al., 2010). Operating between these two levels is the quasi-public/private sector level, Destination Marketing Organisations (DMO), that create a link between Level 1 and Level 3 and are recognised as

Fig. 1. Heritage tourism supply chain.

being crucial to destination competitiveness (d'Angella & Go, 2010), if they are effectively managed and, ultimately stakeholder orientated (Bornhorst et al., 2010; Sautter & Leisen, 1999).

2. Literature review

2.1. Heritage tourism marketing system

The heritage tourism marketing system is inherently complex, subtle and multi-faceted (Donohoe, 2012; Chhabra, 2009; Buhalis, 2000) with a range of often competing and contrasting views, opinions and priorities from multiple stakeholders (Dwyer et al., 2009). A central consideration in terms of heritage tourism development is in making a decision regarding whether to consciously market a heritage based region as a tourist attraction, which will require maintaining a balance between preserving the natural authenticity and integrity of the region's physical resource (Beeton & Hardy, 2001; Gilmore, Carson, Ascenção, & Fawcett, 2008; Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013; Wang, Huang, & Kim, 2015) and the generation of commercial activities to service the intended economic development.

An additional consideration relates to what is actually promoted as heritage, and what is prioritised, given that sustainable tourism marketing focuses on cultural, social, economic and environmental perspectives (Canavan, 2016; Chhabra, 2015). The focus should not solely be on promoting aspects of public heritage (Lunn, 2007); those which are attributed heritage status and classified as such by professional heritage elites (Conway, 2014; Poria et al., 2001). Indeed, heritage itself comprises both public and private dimensions (Chambers, 2009; Conway, 2014; Suntikul and Jachna, 2013). Public heritage has a formal dimension which encompasses regulation, maintenance and preservation. Private heritage is associated with what is experienced by local communities including ties to their past (Chambers, 2009; Conway, 2014), which is less formalized. Both aspects require attention in terms of their effective management, including appropriate recognition and representation of their respective forms.

Each type of heritage is linked with various stakeholder groups; public heritage is generally linked with heritage professionals as they actively 'manage it', and public bodies (Alvarez & Korzay, 2011; Chambers, 2009; Prideaux & Cooper, 2003). Public heritage resources are often owned by myriad bodies and institutions (Chhabra, 2015; Gilmore et al., 2007) ranging from government bodies to charities and individual, private entities. Private heritage is linked more closely with host communities or custodians (Chambers, 2009) which is a more organic, dynamic and fluid (Conway, 2014) heritage, and not formally classified (Chhabra, 2015).

From a strategic development perspective, the management of public heritage can be challenging in terms of how to utilise the resources, as there may be conflicting interest among owners. Government bodies can be insular and policy focused (Krutwaysho & Bramwell, 2010), and charities or private individuals may have their own motivations in terms of development, which do not align with the motivations of local communities or custodians. Their main priority will often be conservation and/or preservation of the authentic, potentially at the expense of stifling the private heritage. The interaction of the two aspects is a crucial concern; the two are ultimately interdependent, however Conway (2014) suggests that private, fluid heritage is a contestation or juxtaposition of the public heritage within which it co-exists.

A further issue in relation to heritage, is that of authenticity and significance (Chambers, 2009), where the authentic relates to a specific tangible entity, for example a World Heritage Site which is often managed by public sector stakeholders (Landorf, 2009) who

have ownership and thus control of the resource. Their main priority may be to maintain, protect and preserve the authenticity of the resource (Wang et al., 2015). In contrast, significance relates to the meanings attached to heritage resources by the stakeholders who claim ownership of them (host communities). This may vary according to stakeholder group, however the meaning communicated through the heritage tourism system will be that of the most powerful stakeholder (Reed, 1997). The danger is that without an effective strategic mechanism with which to incorporate all stakeholder views the authentic takes priority at the expense of the significant, thereby creating a commodified tourist product (Boccardi & Logan, 2008). Without the significance factor owned by community stakeholders (Chambers, 2009; Conway, 2014) the entities attributed to heritage become stale commodities rather than vibrant attractions (Chhabra, 2015), and local communities become distanced from the heritage tourism system. The HTSC provides a mechanism with which to integrate the full richness of public and private heritage.

2.2. Heritage tourism supply chain (HTSC)

An essential requirement of the HTSC is the active involvement of public and private sectors, each playing fundamental roles in the development and delivery of tourism. A concern in supply chain theory is the creation of strategies that support the efficient integration of the various links of the chain (Smith & Xiao, 2008) which in the case of heritage tourism concerns public and private sectors, including SMEs and community groups. Smith and Xiao (2008, p.291) define supply chain theory as relating to "the body of concepts, models, and relationships describing the linkages of producers and distributors in the context of the creation of a commodity." In this context, the principal linkage is between government and public sector bodies charged with tourism development (producers), and the SMEs who deliver the tourist experience to tourists (distributors/implementers).

The tourism supply chain is, "a network of tourism organisations engaged in different activities ranging from the supply of different components of tourism products/services … to the distribution and marketing of the final tourism product at a specific tourism destination" (Zhang et al., 2009, p. 347). There are multiple bodies involved in supplying a variety of products and services within the tourism system, with often confused or unclear recognition of roles and responsibilities (Wang & Ap, 2013). In effect, the public sector is foremost in the HTSC, providing the resources and the infrastructure vital to development, such as destination level promotion and product development. The multi-faceted nature of tourism (Panyik et al., 2011) and the demands of managing a heritage tourism region transcend individual bodies and thus a collaborative approach between stakeholders is required throughout the HTSC (Zhang et al., 2009).

Supply chain collaboration is "the ability to work across organizational boundaries to build and manage unique value-added processes" (Fawcett, Magnan, & McCarter, 2008, p. 93). Effective communications between 'boundaries', or in the case of the HTSC, between stakeholders are essential. Negotiation and communication between stakeholders are among key components of successful supply chain management. In the heritage tourism context, the supply chain is a series of interactions involving a network of different types of relationships (Smith & Xiao, 2008). These relationships include the range of stakeholders who are involved in creating and delivering the heritage tourism product, including public, private and community sector stakeholders. Ideally each of these contribute to the HTSC in terms of developing the composite tourist product. However local communities are often omitted from the decision-making process and as a result may not necessarily

agree with how their heritage is represented (Chhabra, 2015).

Fawcett, Webb, and Magnan (2015) identify the potential for sociological resistance and structural resistance within the supply chain. Sociological forces that contribute to resistance include the policies, processes and people which pervade channel relationships. Individual decision-makers often hinder change as collaboration exposes individual supply chain members to vulnerability. Therefore, they are unwilling to make investments or take the risks required to create a positive collaborative exchange environment. Structural resistance restricts individuals from adapting to external threats (Barnett & Carroll, 1995) as supply chains are often structured to facilitate specialisation and task mastery, therefore existing or long-standing structures are likely to impede collaboration (Barron, West, & Hannan, 1994).

2.3. The role of the SME

SMEs operating within a heritage tourism context often have "… a lack of sufficient financial resource, infrastructure and technical assistance" (Cai, 2002, p. 1354), and may rely upon a level of public sector intervention in order to maximise business potential and competitiveness (Ayikoru, 2015). Ritchie and Crouch (2005) contend that the high proportion of SMEs in the heritage tourism industry (Berg, Syrjälä and Laaksonen, 2014) means that there are many owner/managers who lack the skills and resources required to function efficiently and effectively, thereby calling for a level of intervention. Saxena and Ilbery (2008, p248.) point to a "… insufficient collaborative capacity to capitalise on cooperative marketing opportunities," in rural regions where many heritage sites exist, again highlighting the need for public sector intervention to provide the organizational and managerial infrastructure necessary for tourism activity.

In order to develop and deliver the composite tourist experience, a series of interactions which require processes of integration and coordination (Ryals and Humphries, 2007) are required within the HTSC. The coordination of relevant government bodies is an essential, yet challenging pre-requisite to tourism planning (Komppula, 2014). In order for government to provide a strong vision and direction for tourism development, involvement from local businesses is crucial to achieving a consensus-based development (Panyik et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2009; Aas et al., 2005). A precursor to the delivery of tourism is the development of the composite tourist product, which is ultimately the result of a series of interactions taking place within the HTSC.

SMEs find themselves at the visitor servicing end of the HTSC, poised to deliver the final aspect of the composite tourist product. This paper conceptualises the SME as an implementer within this supply chain, given that the SME is confined from a strategic perspective (Zhang et al., 2009) by government policies and the tourism 'products' designed and developed by the industry and government (Nunkoo, 2015). The SME operates as an implementer of the policies and frameworks designed by these bodies, creating them into a tourism offering. Also the fluidity and adaptability provided by the private sector helps to maintain a dynamic, competitive tourism offering. A challenge to this system, is the potential conflict of interest between stakeholders, illustrated in the tension between heritage tourism development and the maintenance and conservation of the resource (Chhabra, 2015). This potential incongruence may lead to pressure and conflict within the HTSC, therefore negatively impacting upon competitiveness (Fawcett et al., 2015; Allred, Fawcett, & Wallin, 2011).

3. Research method

This research aimed to investigate the behaviour of small businesses (SMEs) operating in two emerging heritage regions in Northern Ireland, in the context of the broader strategic planning process, taking a holistic approach by examining a range of stakeholders across several levels. The empirical research was set within an interpretivist philosophical framework, considering the specific research issues which were set in the context of social realities and heritage characteristics (Carson, Gilmore, Perry & Gronhaug, 2001; Perry, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The research takes a relativistic ontological approach and a subjective epistemology, which aligns with the interpretivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Research was carried out using a qualitative case study approach (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Xiao & Smith, 2006). The case study approach allows a rich insight into tourism behaviour, taking account of the heterogeneous, diverse and complex (Nunkoo, 2015; Simpson, 2008) nature of tourism to be examined. Tourism practice is regionally specific and subject to the circumstantial and indigenous influences of the region, such as its existing tourism profile, the level of tourist activity already established in the region, and the unique administrative makeup of the region (Simpson, 1993). Given these specific nuances, the case study method allowed for a more intensive study.

3.1. Case study context

Northern Ireland is a small, regional economy which has, in recent years, emerged from a tumultuous, unstable and problematic era in which political and civil conflict prevailed (Devine & Devine, 2011). Following the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the region has enjoyed a period of sustained peace and resulting stability. This had led political powers to invest in tourism as a means of economic development; with government declaring a strategic focus on tourism development, and with several successful capital investment projects now in place (Titanic Belfast and Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre).

3.1.1. Causeway Coast and Glens region

The Causeway Coast and Glens (CCG) region has quite a well-developed tourism infrastructure including a dedicated Destination Marketing Organisation with a specific focus on marketing and promoting the area. The region is clearly sign-posted throughout the province with iconic tourist trail signage describing the 'Causeway Coastal Route'. This route is mapped using appropriate tourism signage which directs potential visitors to the region and which links the various localities throughout the region. The route is promoted in tourism literature and websites, which make references to various key attractions along the route. In addition, the Causeway Coast and Glens region has a very specific tourist attraction, the Giant's Causeway which is a recognised World Heritage Site. Aspects of the region are owned by various stakeholders including the Government Departments, Local Authorities, National Trust and the private sector.

3.1.2. Mourne region

The Mournes is a mountain range region which has been earmarked for development including a proposed National Park, and is included within the Northern Ireland's strategic plan for tourism. Development in the region has been restricted due to a number of reasons, including public resistance to the proposed National Park and so strategic plans have not come to fruition. In terms of tourism infrastructure, the region is relatively restricted, there is no marketing focused destination organisation, nor is there any level of coordinated regional tourism management. The Mourne region is situated between Dublin and Belfast (the two capital cities in Northern and Southern Ireland) and is well recognised for its

sprawling mountain range in County Down, in the South East of Northern Ireland. It includes the highest mountains in Northern Ireland and the province of Ulster. The region is partly owned by the National Trust and has a conservation-focused DMO in place. (A list of heritage attractions in both regions is provided in Table 1).

3.2. Data collection

The research was carried out over a two and half year period (February 2011 to October 2013), in which both regions were visited several times. The selection of the regions was purposive and criteria based (Wang & Ap, 2013); each represented a heritage-based tourist region in Northern Ireland. Given that the research sought to examine the behaviours of SMEs in the context of heritage tourism development, the cases needed to be both rich in terms of heritage and have a focus on tourism development. Furthermore, it was important that the case regions provided adequate scope for investigation in terms of administrative structures and private sector businesses. The boundaries of the cases are within municipal borders, thereby providing a distinguishable unit of analysis for each case.

This research examined the tourism industry across the three levels, which resulted in a three stage empirical approach, using different sources at each stage (Perry, 1998; Yin, 2014) and different data collection techniques as demonstrated in Fig. 2. Research subjects were identified by word of mouth, through exploiting local knowledge and by use of the snowballing technique (Canavan, 2016). In addition to this, the tourist board website was used as a basis for targeting SMEs. Emails were sent to a range of SMEs who were featured on the website in order to attempt to secure participation. This approach was successful on several occasions with SME owner/managers responding to the emails and agreeing to participate in the research following a brief description of and background to the research process. A profile of respondents is provided in Table 2. The researchers also attended several tourism industry events throughout the region over the course of the research period. These events provided a valuable source of information and network contacts for the study.

In-depth interviews were carried out with SMEs and local community associations to elicit opinions and experiences of providing tourism products and services within the context of a heritage site region (Wilson, Nielsen and Buultjens, 2009). Participants were asked a range of open-ended questions concerning their views on tourism development in the area and the extent of interactions with stakeholders in the area, including government bodies and other key providers. Participants were also asked questions regarding requirements for effective tourism delivery, to describe any potential barriers to tourism development and were asked to comment on their own approaches to tourism development.

Table 1
Heritage Attractions in the two regions.

Causeway Coast and Glens	Mourne
Giant's Causeway World Heritage Site	Mourne AONB
Carrick-a-rede Rope Bridge	Silent Valley
Dunluce Castle	Slieve Donard
Mussenden Temple	St Patrick's Trail Downpatrick
Dunseverick Castle	
Kinbane Castle	
Bushmills village	
Antrim Coast and Glens AONB	
Causeway Coast AONB	
Binevenagh AONB	

Key: AONB = Area of Natural Beauty.

In total, 9 SMEs and 3 community associations (representing SMEs) were investigated. Interviews were carried out with owner-managers, or chair persons of organisations (as outlined in Table 2), and lasted between 60 and 120 min each. Each respondent was interviewed at their own place of business. Follow up interviews continued in each region until saturation was reached.

3.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was based on a thematic literature framework developed for this paper (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994, pp. 173–194). Interviews were recorded and then transcribed within 48 h of the interview taking place. The systematic framework developed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994, pp. 173–194) was implemented (Yuksel, Yuksel, & Bramwell, 1999). Data was analysed using an iterative (Perry, 1998; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003), thematic approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994, pp. 173–194) whereby transcripts were coded according to a thematic framework, allowing themes and sub-themes to emerge, in line with the literature reviewed.

Transcripts were analysed using NVIVO software, specifically for evidence of SME decision making behaviour and activities which were essentially a reaction to inadequate or limited activity by other members of the supply chain, including government bodies. The motivations for such behaviours were also examined. In this manner, sub-themes emerged which explain the behaviour on a conceptual level, essentially merging two theoretical approaches; heritage tourism marketing and SME decision making in the context of a conventional supply chain. The coding framework applied is provided in Table 3.

The interpretivist paradigm is criticised for weaknesses in relation to external validity, research rigor and the ability to generalise (Stokes & Perry, 2007). These issues were addressed through rigorous data analysis, including cross-referencing themes between data sets and through the interview process. Furthermore, following the completion of data collection and analysis, the key themes identified from the findings were presented to several participants from each region for their consideration (Yin, 2003). This allowed participants to provide feedback and to elaborate on findings, enriching the case study approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wang & Ap, 2013; Yin, 2014), and addressing some of its limitations. Representatives from 3 business associations were involved at this stage. Thus there were 15 in-depth interviews in total taking account of the 9 SMEs, 3 community associations and 3 verification interviews.

4. Findings

From the SME perspective, a range of difficulties emerged in relation to the HTSC. SMEs expressed dissatisfaction with the processes in place for tourism delivery and the outcomes of such processes, across several dimensions. They reacted by working outside the HTSC in what could be described as lower level resistant behaviour. Typically, SMEs aspire to improve the overall tourist product within their immediate and surrounding areas, engaging in 'entrepreneurial' behaviour due to perceived failures in the HTSC. Such deficiencies led tourism providers to engage in independent tourism marketing activities, including the formation of tourism collaborations between SMEs and community groups, with the intention of developing promotional materials and tourism products, such as events and festivals. These activities can be described as 'aggravated fragmentation' whereby the heterogeneity already evident in the tourism industry is exacerbated by the activities of members of the industry supply chain.

Data analysis indicates four interrelated themes of aggravated fragmentation in terms of motivations for this type of behaviour

Fig. 2. Research design.

Table 2
Profile of respondents.

Name	Organisation	Region	Duration
OMA1	Owner/manager Accommodation 1	Causeway	2 h
OMA2	Owner/manager Accommodation 2	Causeway	1 h
OMVA3	Owner/manager Visitor Attraction 1	Causeway	1 h
OMA4	Marketing Manager Accommodation 3	Causeway	1.5 h
CPCA1	Chair Person Community Association 1	Causeway	2 h
CPCA2	Chair Person Community Association 2	Causeway	2 h
OMA3	Owner/manager Accommodation	Causeway	2 h
CP3	Chair Person Community Association 3	Mourne	2 h
OMA4	Owner/manager Accommodation 4	Mournes	1.5 h
OMA5	Owner/manager Accommodation 5	Mournes	1 h
OMVA2	Owner/manager Visitor Attraction 2	Mournes	1 h
VA3	Business Development manager Visitor Attraction 3	Mournes	1 h
Verification			
OMA3	Owner/manager Accommodation 5	Causeway	1 h
CP2	Chair Person Community Association 2	Causeway	2 h
CP3	Chair Person Community Association 2	Mourne	2 h

Table 3
Data coding framework.

1	Heritage tourism marketing 'issue'
2	Evidence of dissatisfaction with 'supply chain'
3	Reference to specific strategic functions (product development/destination promotions/strategic orientation)
4	Reference to specific stakeholder group/body (level)
5	Motivations for decision making/implementation behaviour
6	Output of behaviour
7	Collective actions (did organisations work collaboratively or independently)

within the tourism system. These are: ineffective system, neglected areas, planning at government level (1) and engagement at SME level (3). The findings of this research are presented in relation to each of these themes and followed by a discussion of key issues.

4.1. Ineffective system

The key motivation behind SME entrepreneurial behaviour within the channel is the perceived gap in provision of government level strategic management by SMEs operating in both regions. The SMEs and private organisations who are involved in delivering tourism products and services to consumers perceive that there is insufficient execution of strategic marketing functions from central and local government. SMEs criticise the public sector for failing to implement marketing activities sufficiently in the heritage site regions. They react by engaging in independent marketing collaborations, which focus on product service development and tourism promotion. It should be noted that this behaviour is considered to be a stopgap, given no alternative, rather than as the ideal way forward and it occurs because the level of strategic leadership expected is not in place. The following comments from respondents indicate their frustration with the current system.

"It's a case of 'innovation through necessity'. You can't change the system, so the private and community sector are taking small, incremental steps, little by little because they can't change the system and nothing ever seems to change. So they develop new products and attractions to meet the needs of visitors." (Chair Person, Business Association 3)

"The inspiration for starting this centre was really borne out of desperation." (Chair Person, Business Association 2)

As the current system is not working it forces SMEs to proactively fill the gaps where the public sector fails. The SMEs develop their own collaborative activities in order to attempt to promote their heritage regions in terms of tourism, and indeed to help businesses survive.

"I was getting more from my own pro-activeness, dealing with organisations who don't charge me anything, rather than the government bodies, who do charge me. I don't know what they are doing [DMO]. I honestly have no idea what they are there for." (Owner/Manager Visitor Attraction 1)

"If the DMO was doing what it should be doing then we wouldn't have to do anything else because we would all be feeding into the same forum … everybody got so frustrated because it [DMO] wasn't doing anything. So we said, 'well we are the industry so we are going to get on and do something ourselves'. Now you've multiple organisations springing up because no one else is doing anything." (Chair Person Community Association 3)

While this is a positive contribution to the overall market, the negative element of this relates to the structure of the tourism industry and the fact that this type of behaviour creates further fragmentation. DMOs operating in both regions are not fully engaged with SMEs, and so withdraw from this relationship.

4.2. Neglected regions

Several regions were identified and described by respondents as being outside the focus of the tourism marketing system. These occurred in both regions. In the Causeway Coast and Glens region, SME entrepreneurial behaviour occurred on a localised scale, in several areas peripheral to the World Heritage Site. The problem is that the main focus of tourist development, from the public sector, is on the areas immediate to the WHS, to the detriment of more peripheral areas, which are consequently overlooked.

The Mournes region is deemed to be 'neglected' on a more regional scale. Local SMEs indicated that the area does not receive the same level of development and help from the public sector as other regions within Northern Ireland. This judgement is reinforced by a lack of investment and publicity from government level bodies with tourism responsibilities. This results in the use of generic promotional activity at destination level and limited product development.

Despite the behaviour occurring on different scales, similarities can be drawn in terms of the motivating factors. As a collective group of actors within the tourism system, SMEs display levels of dissatisfaction with the extent of marketing activity directed at their areas as it results in poor destination level marketing activity. SMEs are not benefitting from the same level of attention as other areas within the region and this has a negative impact on business. The following comments illustrate SME opinions in relation to being neglected by public sector organisations.

"Generally speaking we feel that Castlerock is overlooked, that's our experience of all the tourist literature for this region. If you go onto the website and look for the North Coast, you'll find that it mentions Portstewart, Coleraine, it doesn't mention us." (Chair Person, Business Association 2)

"The Tourist Board has been focusing on the Signature Projects [major tourism investment projects]. As a result of that, a lot of other worthwhile areas have fallen through the cracks, and there now needs to be a serious look at those places, in the interests of those businesses who do not live within five or ten miles of the Signature Projects." (Chair Person, Business Association 1)

As a result, SMEs within these areas engage in entrepreneurial behaviour through collective action. In these neglected areas, promotion is an issue; therefore organisations are working together in order to promote their immediate areas so that they benefit from tourism.

4.3. Engagement of SMEs (level 3)

Overall, SMEs discussed their negative experiences in relation to government consultation exercises. SME owner/managers indicated that consultation meetings were time consuming, and that SME opinions do not influence strategic planning outcomes. These two factors create a vicious cycle of barriers; if the consultation exercises resulted in more consensual, action-orientated plans, SMEs may be more willing to get involved on a continuous basis.

From an SME perspective, the government planning process is heavily criticised for failing to be action-orientated and for failing to comprehensively acknowledge and involve stakeholders. Therefore, SME owner managers become unwilling to engage in government level strategic planning as the following comments illustrate.

"The industry [at grass roots level] have got to the stage where they are fed up, they're sitting there and they are saying there is nothing being done here and everyone's going, 'oh yeah but you know we've got our document and we're in the process of doing this', when in reality nothing is happening." (Chair Person, Business Association 3)

"You've wasted your time attending government planning meetings; no one is listening and every time I leave here I have to employ someone and take time out of my own personal life - neither of which I have a lot of, so I've better things to do." (Owner / manager Visitor Attraction 2)

In short, the consultation processes in place are unsuited to the requirements of the SME. Non-involvement in strategic planning is the foundation of SME behaviour as it is perceived to be a futile endeavour, resulting in a loss of momentum and a potential distancing from the strategic development process.

4.4. Planning at government level (level 1)

Respondents criticised government bodies because they are considered to be 'out of touch' with SMEs and fail to recognise that SMEs are the implementers of government plans. Public sector level activity is described by respondents as insular whereby they are only concerned with their own predetermined objectives and anything independent of this is deemed inconvenient for the organisation, implying an ivory tower scenario. Furthermore, the core interests of government bodies are described as being the 'major' tourist attractions, at the expense of less developed, 'underground' or grass roots level tourism activity which may have potential for the future of tourism. The following comments illustrate the problem.

"The Regional Tourist Board is critical of anything that is not their opinion … it is a generic body; it stands aloft and doesn't want to get its hands dirty. As far as we are concerned the Regional Tourist Board doesn't exist." (Chair Person, Business Association 2)

"Promotion in the region is not reflective of what we have to offer because the Regional Tourism Board and National tourism organisation aren't talking to the industry on the ground. This is the biggest problem for tourism in Northern Ireland, the industry and the public sector who are tasked with promoting tourism do not actually talk to the industry, on the ground, on a regional basis." (Chair Person, Business Association 3)

SMEs feel that the current marketing activity carried out at government level is non-reflective of regional identities, and results in insufficient and mismatched tourism delivery in heritage regions.

"The biggest problem with a lot of these projects is that they are planned by the public sector and the public sector do not communicate well with the private sector … the private sector are actually the tourism providers … the tourist board don't speak to the industry, no one speaks to the industry and everybody goes off and does their own thing and there's no interrelationship between them all." (Chair Person Community Association 3).

The SMEs that engage in entrepreneurial behaviour in order to achieve some collective marketing activity are not always viewed as making a positive contribution to the industry. In fact, they may be viewed negatively, from the perspective of government level organisations within the tourism marketing system. In relation to this, one respondent suggests that:

"Cohesion is lacking, everyone is protecting their own area and they [regional tourism body] resent any form of criticism … We are seen as whippersnappers." (Chair Person, Business Association 2)

As a result, 'grass-roots' level contributions, and localised, indigenous ideas fail to emerge, and local knowledge and expertise is not utilised to guide the strategic planning process. The impact of this type of behaviour is that the outputs of tourism marketing, such as promotional activity, are not reflective of the regions in question; the full spectrum of tourist products available is not promoted; and products developed may lack rich contributions from key stakeholders, such as residents and local experts who have an innate knowledge of the local area and history.

5. Discussion

This study has uncovered flaws in the HTSC, the result of which is at best entrepreneurial and sometimes ad hoc marketing activity carried out by SMEs. The behaviour detected is in response to the unsatisfactory execution of key strategic marketing functions (Vernon et al., 2005; Wray & Cox, 2011), such as strategic orientation, product development and destination promotion. The main reason for such behaviour is the lack of opportunity for effective collaboration and involvement from the private and community sectors in the HTSC, in which the public sector takes the lead.

From the SME perspective, destination promotion was consistently perceived to be unsatisfactory in the two regions as it did not present a localised version (Saxena & Ilbery, 2008) of the private heritage in the regions and instead related to public heritage at its expense (Conway, 2014). Indeed, the promotional activities in place were viewed as having an 'ivory tower' perspective and not actually communicating a true reflection of the region's heritage (Chambers, 2009; Conway, 2014). In addition, there was an apparent failure on behalf of the public sector to sufficiently promote the full entirety of regions, thereby effectively neglecting some areas.

Despite distancing themselves from the HTSC, SMEs in both heritage regions engaged in ad hoc entrepreneurial marketing on a collective basis; some SMEs formed development groups within regions, businesses and community associations collaborated on a shared strategic vision, collectively developing strategic plans and managing to gain funding for development projects. Dissatisfied businesses collaborated in an attempt to improve the competitiveness of their tourist offering and region. Collective activity was an essential element of this process, empowering SMEs by combining resources and contributing to the marketing system, albeit one that was outside of the conventional HTSC (Fawcett et al., 2008). Some examples of entrepreneurial behaviour are illustrated in Table 4. It included SME and community group collaboration to organise events such as food and music festivals, sport related events, opening new visitor information centres to showcase local activities, information on the historical value and cultural significance of the local heritage sites.

In practice, this entrepreneurial behaviour may in fact help to reinforce and deepen the gap between strategic level public sector government organisations (Level 1) and tactical, operationally focused SMEs (Level 3) in terms of the HTSC, or indeed between the public and private heritage. Government bodies may retreat and consequently shield themselves under the protection of the

Table 4
Examples of entrepreneurial activity.

Specific examples of entrepreneurial activities	HTSC issue
Alive (Surf School) developed collaborations with other businesses in the region to offer local events and develop a promotional scheme (rather than engaging with DMO activities)	Lack of destination level promotion Lack of strategic leadership (Causeway Coast and Glens)
Soak (Seaweed Baths) collaborations with other businesses to develop promotional campaigns creating the Snooze company card which provides discounts and promotions to tourists when they visit multiple businesses	Lack of destination level promotion Lack of strategic leadership (Mourne)
Castlerock community association was created to develop tourist attractions and promote tourism locally. The organisation have set up a visitor centre which promotes the region, local events, crafts and provide tourist information	Lack of recognition by strategic bodies Lack of promotion Lack of product development
Antrim Glens Tourism, a community development group, created local events such as food and music festival, and developed promotional material specifically for the Antrim Glens area	Lack of recognition by strategic bodies Lack of promotion Lack of product development
Kilkeel development association created a visitor information centre to showcase local activities, sites and events	Lack of recognition by strategic bodies Lack of promotion Lack of product development

bureaucratic system, continuing to promote public heritage generically, while proceeding to operate within a vicious circle of non-engagement and non-implementation, yet assuming a central leadership role for tourism development in strategic terms (Nunkoo, 2015). In addition, Level 3 organisations become more engrossed in their entrepreneurial behaviours and consequently more distanced from Level 1, thus causing further fragmentation, while simultaneously developing a more vibrant and dynamic tourist product through their entrepreneurial response.

While the execution of independent and uncoordinated projects (such as independent marketing collaborations, promotional efforts and product development) contributes to fragmentation, it demonstrates a level of tenacity and perseverance by the SMEs as a reaction to on-going dissatisfaction with the HTSC. For the private sector, this is a way of enhancing tourist regions. The behaviour of SMEs can be described as entrepreneurial in the sense that managers have identified opportunities and responded by delivering a marketing offering to meet the needs of the marketplace (Gilmore, 2011). Sarasvathy (2001) used the term effectual reasoning or effectuation to encapsulate the way entrepreneurs engage in problem solving by developing business ideas. SMEs in this context are led by a sense of purpose or a desire to improve the situation they are in by creating necessary products and services for heritage tourism visitors. Despite the described weaknesses of the SME, their activities may act as a source of innovation for the industry, by providing grass roots, indigenous products and contributing to more reflective promotional campaigns, if such behaviours can be integrated into the overall heritage tourism marketing system.

6. Conclusion

This study illustrates the key role played by the private sector in maintaining and enhancing competitiveness (Komppula, 2014), in contrast with the presumed role of the public sector. The research conceptualises this phenomenon by relating it to SME decision making behaviour outside of the conventional supply chain system, particularly in terms of uncovering the challenges associated with achieving and maintaining an indigenous character within heritage regions, something which is crucial to the competitiveness of both the SME and the destination. The supply chain mechanism itself must be sympathetic to the mutually formative relationship (Long & Sweet, 2006) between public and private heritage. Private heritage initiatives should not be suppressed at the expense of public heritage plans which are attributed official classifications. Lack of involvement causes SMEs and community groups to operate on an individual basis, attempting to remedy flaws in the supply chain through entrepreneurial actions, such as promotional efforts and product development, in order to differentiate and enhance the competitiveness of their regions (Chhabra, 2015; Lyon, 2007). In doing so SMEs are the key drivers of destination competitiveness (Ayikoru, 2015; Komppula, 2014).

SMEs engaged in entrepreneurial activity and illustrated a strong sense of purpose by developing their own business ideas to solve local and immediate market problems. Despite the described resource limitations of the SMEs, their activities could act as a source of innovation for the industry. The outputs of the aggravated fragmentation detected within these regions potentially added value to the tourism offering by broadening the product base, producing regionally specific promotional campaigns and engaging in local and innovative practices outside the conventional HTSC. This behaviour has the potential to rejuvenate the market and introduce products, services and promotional campaigns from a grass roots level, which are reflective of the private heritage represented in the regions, moving away from the described commodification engendered by heritage status (Boccardi & Logan,

2008). In this sense, some of the issues associated with HTSC can be addressed; but the fragmentation which is instigating such behaviour remains. The key dilemma for tourism organisations is how to integrate the vibrant, nuanced heritage provided by indigenous communities into the tourism system, while minimising fragmentation and enhancing the effectiveness of the system and the overall tourism offering. However, the existence of smart technologies as a method of connecting stakeholders and enabling collaborative efforts (Chhabra, 2015) while reconciling conflicting approaches to heritage tourism development now exists and has considerable potential for heritage regions if they can embrace and acquire the competence to use such technology.

7. Future research

In this study SMEs have demonstrated innovativeness with their entrepreneurial behaviour in the heritage tourism marketing system. Future research will investigate how the behaviour detected can be more fully and organically integrated into the supply chain for tourism. It will examine how more appropriate structures and smart technologies can be developed that allow SMEs to maximise their potential value to the tourism industry and how to integrate their activity and its outputs into the HTSC.

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