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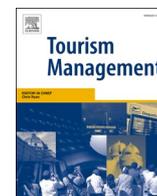
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# Bringing the past to life: Co-creating tourism experiences in historic house tourist attractions

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## ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study concentrates on the co-creation of experiential value between the tourist and tour guide in a single historic tourism site; Huntingdon Castle, Ireland. Built upon the principles of service dominant logic, the research explores how storytelling acts as an engagement platform and value enhancing strategic resource. In doing so, it impels the value co-creation journey and shapes the tourist's experience. Observation is coupled with qualitative interviews to capture the dual perspective of both guides and tourists. Findings exhibit the co-creation process through the performance of stories; how and when people derive pleasure (value); the influencing aspects of the environment or place; and guide/tourist perspectives on how they feel and think during the experience. The research contributes by taking a practical operational view of how co-creation occurs. It goes beyond the guide's perspective and exhibits the importance of co-creation of lived experience in the story enhanced tourism experience framework.

## 1. Introduction

Storytelling as an approach assumes that superior visitor experiences come from interactive encounters between a guide and tourist, where tales of people and place are a means to inform, educate and entertain tourists (Andrades & Dimanche, 2014). As the human memory is story-based, messages and meaning conveyed through stories increase memorability (Hodge, 2011; Kim, 2014), reinforcing loyalty to the destination in question (Bornhorst et al., 2010). Persuasive stories, told well, can connect people and place, touching them intellectually, physically and emotionally (Byron, 2012; Pera, 2017). These stories can immerse tourists and transport them to a special world or liminal place (Williams, 2013), essentially bringing the visited location 'to life'. Storytelling occurs in that specific moment 'when tourism consumption and tourism production meet' (Andersson, 2007, p. 46), creating the potential to engage in a co-creation process within that shared experience (Campos et al., 2018; Mathisen, 2014). However, little is known about how the process of storytelling co-creation of experience occurs (Io, 2013), the actors involved and the influencing dimensions therein (Mohammadi et al., 2021; Sugathan & Ranjan, 2019), propelling the need for the current study.

Informed by existing research and built upon the principles of service dominant logic (Blazquez-Resino et al., 2015; Islam & Kirillova, 2021), the research question asks, how are stories employed (*performance*) in the co-creation of the tourism experience (*process*)? When considering where and how to explore this question, we<sup>1</sup> were drawn to historic house tourism attractions (HHTA). There is a dearth of research on historic houses as visitor attractions (Mijnheer & Gamble, 2019), an interesting anomaly when one considers the fact that historians were the first storytellers (White, 1973), who captured moments in history as a sequence of events with plots, characters and a beginning, middle and end. Taking into consideration the study question, this study takes a practical operational view to help delineate how storytelling co-creation occurs (Io, 2013) in a single HHTA; Huntingdon Castle, located in Ireland's Ancient East.<sup>2</sup> The study amalgamates the concept of co-creation with the practice of interpretative storytelling to help conceptualise a new type of tourism experience, the Story Enhanced Tourism Experience (SETE).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows; we discuss storytelling co-creation literature, the storied tourism experience and the HHTA research context before presenting a single ethnographic study carried out at Huntingdon Castle. The findings concentrate on the story

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<sup>1</sup> The authors will refer to themselves in the first person throughout this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Established in 2015, Ireland's Ancient East is a heritage themed regional tourism cluster that includes a subtheme of HHTAs; Anglo Ireland the 'big house'.

co-creation process between the tourist and tour guide and aim to illuminate this process, the role of the actors involved and the influencing dimensions in a single case site. Following a critical discussion in light of the findings, we present a SETE management framework, alongside additional theoretical and practical contributions and avenues for further research.

## 2. Theoretical underpinnings

Heritage tourism is the presentation of history in tourism (Broomhall & Spinks, 2010), an experiential consumption that has become more visitor centric. Embedded in a sustainable culture ethos (Marinello, Butturi, Gamberini, & Martini, 2021; Pan et al., 2018) and under the auspices of Heritage Tourism, a distinguishing feature is HHTA's historiography in which all the principles of narrative history reside (Staiff, 2014). In the dialogic performance of stories at the HHTA, elaboration takes place in order to establish a connection with the original family, integrate the physicality of the house and estate and contextualise events in the socio-cultural and economic circumstances of the period - thus a meta-narrative is created, embedding the tourist in a lived experience. In this meta-narrative, the storyteller can elaborate and mould the available material to interpret and represent the historical context and events (Staiff, 2014), albeit with a varying degree of poetic license. They can maintain allegiance to the facts whilst also creating authenticity (Binkhorst & Den Dekker, 2009; Zhu, 2012) and simultaneously enriching the story context to produce a verisimilar and imaginative story. Treating the meta-narrative as story and discourse elevates the importance of the performance or telling of the story. This account assumes that stories are contextually embedded and the natural linguistic context and performance cannot be ignored (Huang, 2010), as they are two sides of the same coin. However, many HHTAs lack the requisite knowledge, skills and know-how to apply storytelling as an engagement platform and a co-creation tool, thus the storytelling role of the guide is a relatively new research topic that has received little attention to date (Mathisen, 2012; Ross, 2020; Weiler & Black, 2015).

Tourism researchers highlight the need for further research on the role of tourists in the co-creation process (Buhalis & Sinarta, 2019; bib\_Eide et al\_2017Eide et al., 2017). We believe co-creation and customer engagement are inextricably linked. The process of customer engagement requires interaction and participation which facilitates co-creation by increasing attention, involvement, and memorability (Campos et al., 2018; Nangpiire et al., 2021; Tregua, D'Auria & Costin, 2020). This can lead to positive affective, behavioural and cognitive experiential outcomes (Malone et al., 2018). As such, co-creation is engagement in action and underpins the service dominant logic of marketing (Blazquez-Resino et al., 2015), which proposes an interactive, personal, relational and contextual process, where actors integrate resources and value is subjectively experienced and defined by the individual recipient (Vargo & Lusch, 2018). Accordingly, the process of engagement and co-creation of the experience need to be addressed simultaneously (Nangpiire et al., 2021) to activate and sustain value at heritage attractions (Bezova & Azara, 2021). To date, inadequate attention has been paid to the engagement and co-creation processes between guide and tourists to co-create the storytelling experience, resulting in research that considers the guide's perspective only (Chronis, 2012; Mathisen, 2014; Weiler & Black, 2015). In contrast, this study assumes that value creation always has two sides - the guide and the tourist, which we study concurrently, rather than in isolation (Chronis, 2012; O'Cass & Sok, 2015). Campos et al. (2018) extend this perspective to advocate further studies on the peak moments of enjoyment on-site experience settings, reinforcing the value of the current study.

Chronis' work on narrative co-construction (2012), and on imagination, materiality and embodiment at heritage sites (2015a, 2015b) informs the study. While we acknowledge the importance of storytelling co-creating experiences research in tourism and tour guiding, these

studies overlook the practical consideration of illuminating how this process actually occurs (Io, 2013; Mohammadi et al., 2021; Sugathan & Ranjan, 2019), a key element of the current study. Within this study framework, the importance of effective guide interpretation and performance in creating experiences is acknowledged and the role of the tourist as an active participant in the mutual co-construction of the experience is recognised (Buonincontri et al., 2017; Huang, 2010; Ross, 2020; Weiler & Black, 2015).

## 3. Method

Our goal was to study human and object interaction and how value is co-constructed through participation in a dynamic and evolving socio-cultural context. The research question asks, how are stories employed (*performance*) in the co-creation of the tourism experience (*process*)? This question points to a social constructionist epistemology and symbolic interactionism interpretation of how the social, cultural and material worlds relate and aggregate to culminate in the experience (Ross, 2020). Consumer Oriented Ethnography (COE), at the real-life case study setting, affords an emic and etic perspective through observation and tourist and guide interviews, requiring prolonged on-site presence to carry out the study in a natural setting. COE places a focus on the consumption practices of the tourist to explore meanings and processes in socio-cultural contexts, and therefore directly reflects the fields of inquiry outlined in this study (Arnould, 1998). Consequently, we applied an integrated qualitative approach to this single-site study (Kelliher, 2005) as it explores meanings and processes in socio-cultural contexts, which could directly reflect the field of inquiry.

### 3.1. HHTA selection and data collection

Having discussed the project with a number of HHTA owners, agreement was reached with the owners of Huntingdon Castle, Ireland and terms of research were agreed - that we would be present for a number of tours through the summer season of 2017/18 (June to August) and that we would have access to both tourists and guides. COE methods of story gathering, observation, field notes and interviews were the primary forms of data collected to help generate information relating to the story enhanced tourism experience, supported by our own reflections maintained throughout the study (Table 1).

Adapted from: Kelliher, 2005.

We were afforded the opportunity to observe selected tours and talk to tourists after each tour ended. Commencing with an exploratory pilot study, the research instruments were piloted and the resultant learning applied to improve the process for the main phase of data collection. In total, 22 tours were observed, 8 unstructured interviews with the tour guides and 24 semi-structured interviews were completed (I1-24), which captured the voices of 69 tourists as companions of those interviewed who contributed additional experiential insights (Table 2).

**Table 1**  
Data collection protocol.

Observation	Tourist Interview	Guide Interview	UOA
To understand what happens during the experience	To ascertain the tourist's perception of the process and performance	To ascertain the guides perception of the process and performance	<b>Performance Process Place</b>
To collate the heritage stories told during the tour	To ascertain how the tourists connect with the stories	To ascertain how the guides deliver or perform the stories to engage tourists	
To observe how the stories are told/received/co-constructed	To determine how tourists contribute to the co-construction of the story	To determine how guides view the tourist's role	
<b>Stories as data</b>	<b>Tourist stories</b>	<b>Guide stories</b>	<b>Structural analysis</b>

**Table 2**  
Data collection overview.

Method	Pilot study	Main study	Total
Observations	PS1 to PS5	O1–O17	22
Tourist Interviews	5 – PS1 to PS11 (11 voices)	19 – I1–I58 (58 voices)	24 (69 voices)
Tour Guide Interviews	G1-G2 (TG1 & 3)	G3- G8 (TG1 & 3)	8

\*PS: Pilot Study Participant, G/TG: Guide, O: Observation, I: Interviewee/tourist voice.

The gathered interpretative stories, observations and our own reflections dwell on the historiography of the property, recounting tales of people and place to situate, inform, educate and entertain visitors.

### 3.2. Data management

Adapting Riessman’s (2008) narrative approach, structural, thematic and interaction analysis are applied in this study as follows: *Narrative analysis* was applied to the findings to build a sequential story and provide meaning (Riessman, 2000). *Structural analysis* focused on how the stories were formed and performed in each tour. *Thematic analysis* focused on content to uncover similarities and divergences clustered into themes. We imported the completed observation templates and the tour/interview recordings into NVIVO where verbatim transcripts were recorded and observation notes and general reflections added in a later cycle (Table 3).

Following in-depth familiarisation and guided by the analytical process (Table 3), each observation/transcript was coded according to an initial coding hierarchy in order to clarify the themes and subthemes (see methods details document for further details). This data was then analysed to explore six identified units of analysis (*people, process, performance, place, perspective, pleasure*). As a consequence of the iterative coding process some subthemes were removed from the hierarchy and others were added, yet, the themes remained constant. Each cycle of analysis is described within the findings and this information provided a springboard from which *interactional analysis* examined the physical and dialogic interaction between actors (e.g., guide, tourist and others), as exhibited in Table 3. Data familiarisation identified moments of story co-creation, as expressed in extracts and vignettes gleaned from the

**Table 3**  
Analytical process.

Stage	Focus	Actors	Process	Data source
Narrative Analysis	Heritage stories told in the first person	Guide/ Tourist	Oral narratives	Observation Researcher reflection
Structural Analysis	Performance of stories	Guide	Disaggregation of the story structure and form	Observation
Thematic Analysis	Guides textual interpretation Tourists resource integration Psychological states Environmental influencers	Guide/ Tourist	Theme identification	Observation Interviews
Interactional Analysis	Stories as a platform of engagement Narrative Co-construction Social relations Psychological states Actor roles	Guide/ Tourist Other tourists Other Staff	How stories create connection, conversation and actor contribution	Observation Interviews

findings. The goal was to identify and understand pleasurable moments by examining the process of people interaction in the HHTA tour, isolating the pleasurable moments and exploring the performance of the actors at these crucial points of story co-creation. The overriding goal was to develop an operational framework for the Story Enhanced Tourism Experience (SETE).

### 4. Findings

The Huntingdon Castle tour covers 400 years of the Castle historiography incorporating many family characters which link to events and key figures of the day. The building and artefacts set the stage for the tour as visitors were guided through the Castle, with tour guides stopping along the way to tell stories relating to various locations and artefacts. The buildings and artefacts become the backdrop for the narrative or become centre stage when a story establishes a connection with a tourist. Thus, they are the substantive staging (Arnould et al., 1998) in the storyscape (Chronis, 2005). Janet (G1) relayed how communicating the authenticity of the stories of objects and the Castle are important and noted how Janet changed the tour for the 1916 centenary<sup>3</sup> to include the library and its meticulous records of that time.

Described as having a ‘lovely atmosphere’ and being ‘cosy’ (PS3) and ‘homely’ (I1) by the tourists, the Castle was seen as ‘quite an atmospheric house, because I think quite small and felt quite intimate’ (I53). In contrast, the basement was described as ‘a bit dreary ... a bit smelly and intimidating’ (PS1) by some tourists, while others believed it added to the authenticity of the experience,

‘I loved the darkness ... you got a real sense of what it was like ... but that kind of atmosphere, and then when you went downstairs, the damp smell - it hits you the minute you go in and that’s all part of it, authentic’ (I22).

Memory is also a factor in the storyscape; an Irish couple who had been at Huntingdon in 1982 remembered the basement ‘It brought back great memories ... there was beautiful carved oak doors, I remember them distinctly going down to the basement at the time’ (I37).

Reference was made to the uniqueness of the building as it reflected the continuity of ownership through the ‘different additions and the different time periods’ (I1), a trajectory applauded by the tourists, ‘I was totally surprised and delighted to see the castle in its current state. I had not expected that – it is so well kept and they have brought out their treasures for us to see’ (PS8). The ‘eclectic mix’ of treasures were of great interest and fascination to tourists, ‘I think it was such an interesting house, full of so many interesting things’ (I53); ‘I didn’t expect to see so much intact inside, all the tapestries and the beautiful porcelain’ (I10); ‘for me it was the tapestries, the paintings and the mural that were of great interest – all a great surprise’ (PS8). The modern touches did not go unnoticed and reference was made to the ‘photographs of their [the current inhabitants] family and recent weddings’ (I13), the presence of a radio and more recent paintings, such as, the one Harry [one of this generation’s inhabitants of the castle and a tour guide (G2)] did of his nephew, ‘it didn’t all stop in 1850, it kept going with more recent stuff in there, which is good, again it made it feel like a family home’ (I53). As summed up by one tourist, ‘it is real, it is old, it is modern, above all it is authentic – this is the real McCoy’ (I9). The generally held view was that ‘most of these places are impersonal or museum like’ (I4-5), in contrast to the Huntingdon Castle experience, ‘I thought it was splendid ... a real Irish castle that was not contrived for the tourist ... their home and they said come in and have a look’ (I57). Tourists viewed objects they were ‘unlikely to see anywhere else’ and concluded it was ‘a unique spot with so much originality ... and one of the best in this country’ (PS6).

<sup>3</sup> 2016 marks the centenary of the 1916 Irish uprising against British occupancy.

#### 4.1. Step one – the structural analysis of stories told at Huntingdon Castle

On initial analysis, it appeared that there were 78 stories told during the tour. However, when visitors were asked what they remembered about the tour, 11 stories came to prominence, which are ranked in ascending order of popularity in Exhibit 1.

#### 4.2. Exhibit 1 most remembered stories and tour sketch

We adopted a structural approach to analyse these 11 stories and found that each fit the structure of; introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, evaluation and life links (Labov & Waletzky, 1967), which can be applied to any storyline using universal themes. For example, when asked to consider why these stories were prominent in visitor memory, there was a 'love/hate' relationship with the basement and the Temple<sup>4</sup> and while as many tourists liked it as didn't like it, it was the only story that got a negative reaction. For the remaining stories (exhibit 1), tourists liked interesting stories that provided explanations of some of the objects, reinforcing the value of a structural approach to storytelling.

#### 4.3. Step two – story co-creation analysis

There are two actors in the co-creation process, the guide as enabler and tourist as reactor.

#### 4.4. Role of guide

Alex (G3) takes the view that the role of the guide incorporates three main things– good communication skills without which the story would 'fall flat', the use of physical props and connecting or relating with a dash of humour. He advises that everyone needs to be 'able to hear and see what we are doing, quite easily' and of the need to be 'loud and clear' and 'relatively concise and punchy'. He abhors the 'monotone or the school thing' and recommends that guides need to have 'way more interaction and hold their [tourists] attention' and offers the example 'I would always say to school kids - did you learn that in school or this in school'. Physical props focus the audience attention and stirs the tourist's imagination, 'if you say 'if you look now at that picture' rather than say the lady who was called ... they can look at it, then they can admire ... and they are off thinking their own thoughts ... imagining'. Alex is committed to ensuring the stories told on tours ensure that tourists 'can relate to it to some degree'. On tour he offers great explanations which he relates to the present day; for instance, he talks of childbirth in the 19th century as being the 'most dangerous thing a woman could do' (O16), and what a feat it was, without the benefits of modern medicine, for the lady of the house to have 11 children and live to old age. He relates things with humorous quips, for instance, when talking about the thickness of the walls in the drawing room – he extends his arms to show the depth of the wall at the window and explains 'great for security if you are at war, but a nightmare if you want Wi-Fi' (O16), which tourists responded to with laughter.

#### 4.5. Role of tourists

Some tourists perceived that they were merely passive listeners, 'I wasn't doing anything really, only listening', 'processing what he was saying', and 'following the stories'. However, we found signs of active listening – attentive body posture, facing the guide, maintaining eye contact, nodding and both verbal and non-verbal cues of agreement and smiling (Islam & Kirillova, 2021). While the word listening was used 9 times in the interviews, the word 'think' was used 185 times (sometimes

by ourselves) and 'thought' 51 times, serving to illustrate that much of the tourists' active participation in the process was cognitive. They connected the stories to people, places and the historical narrative that they already knew, 'throughout the tour though, I was fitting the stories into the history of Ireland' (PS9). They were reminded of other places and they related and compared the castle 'to the other grand houses and castles that we have visited' (I57), as they sought to understand and create meaning by looking for similarities and differences. They also expressed a motivation to look up things like the St. Ledger and Pennsylvania connection as referred to in the castle history (Stories 4 and 11), 'all those things that you know about from another context, so where you were today had a connection with them' (I4).

Some female tourists related the stories to themselves in the present day and took inspiration from them. Referring to Nora Parsons (Story 3) and Olivia Durdin Robertson (Story 2) as historical figures affiliate to the Castle, they acknowledged that these women, who were 'ahead of their time', made them think and 'they were inspiring, even for us women today ... they energized me to do more of what I want to do' (PS6). One gentleman sought to view the 16th century activities through a 21st century lens and likened the way soldiers policed the commercial activity of the valley from Huntingdon as the equivalent of the IDA,<sup>5</sup> he also pointed out the difficulty of doing business then, 'let's face it, back in the day, there was no M9<sup>6</sup> and no WiFi' (I29). These individual stories are representative of the data set and serve to illustrate how the tourists were actively engaged both physically and mentally in the co-creation process.

#### 4.5.1. Performance

This section focuses on the tourists' perception of the guide's performance and considers their views of the three guides (Janet as an employee and Harry and Alex as castle owner/inhabitant). The tour is largely standardised in route and topics (Exhibit 1), yet each guide made it their own by reading their audience and often including extra stories, explanations and surprises. Both Janet and Alex facilitated audience participation. Janet asked open questions about a topic, which in turn made the group feel more comfortable in asking questions of her. Harry extended the stories and provided his personal insights into things as a member of the family. Alex was relaxed 'in his own home' and related events and objects in a humorous way.

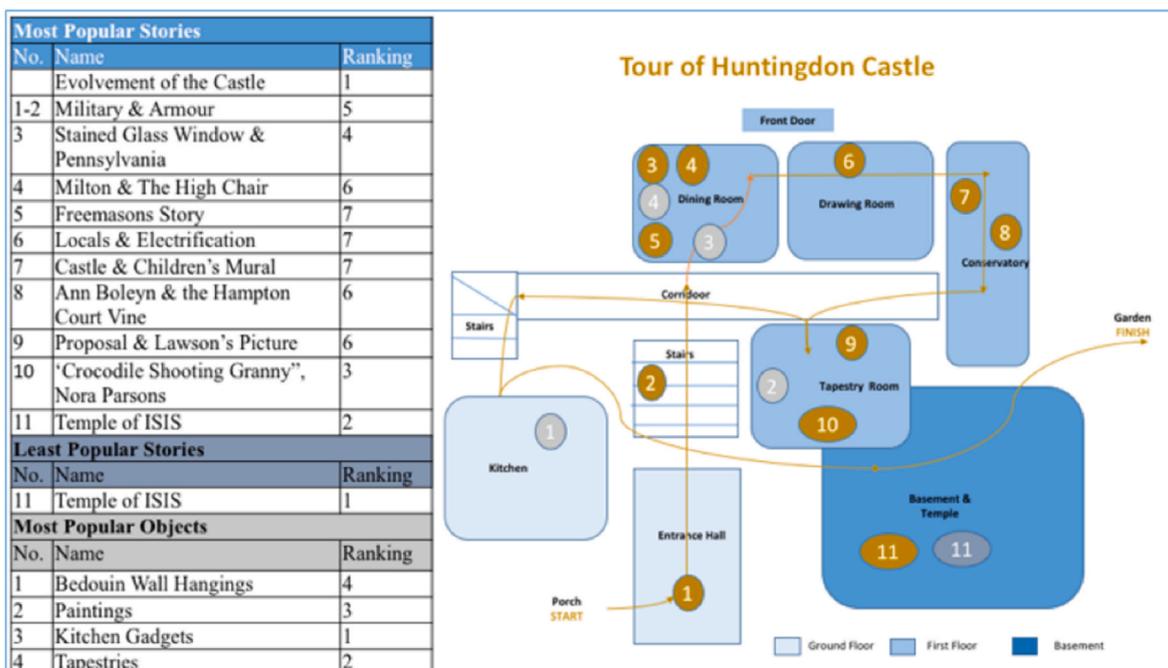
It was highlighted that the family connection 'makes it very interesting, special and personalised' and that 'personal touch ... made a difference'. Tourists particularly liked how Alex and Harry made the tour 'come alive, referring to his ancestors and talking about them in ancient history terms' (I39), 'It was good being that it is his family home, because there is slightly a different tone to what they say and how they say it, rather than if it is a tour guide, the owner is always nice and rare [to interact with]' (I53). This all added to the authenticity of the tour 'It felt very authentic and you felt privileged to be there with Harry and listen to all his tales' (I2). This serves to illustrate that the tours delivered by family members are valued by tourists and are a unique means to form a connection to underpin the co-creation process. Combining the authenticity of people and place one tourist summed up, 'It is very, very personal; articles, people, buildings' (I6).

While Janet did not have the advantage of being a family member, her tours were well received. She was described as being 'very knowledgeable and very professional, kept everyone engaged' (I26). One tourist observed 'I am not so sure whether she started out and it was all learned off and now she has put her own stamp on it and you know she is interactive with the people' (PS2). Others pointed out that 'she didn't come across like she had said this a thousand times before – but I bet she had - she had it all worked out and made sure that everyone was together

<sup>4</sup> The Temple Fellowship worships female gods at this temple, which is situated in the basement.

<sup>5</sup> IDA is the agency responsible for the attraction and development of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Ireland.

<sup>6</sup> Nearby motorway in Ireland.



and could hear her and was willing to answer questions – overall – very good’ (PS9); ‘She was very articulate, very well spoken, included people, extremely knowledgeable, there were some fantastic touches, like fitting on the shield and she had every single fact at her fingertips’ (I23).

4.5.2. Process

This section seeks to uncover the story based co-creation process between guide and tourist. It shows that stories are medium that enable the guides interpretation and performance to form a connection with the tourists and engender a reaction. The military armour story was disaggregated to show the enabling actions of the guide and the visible reactions of the tourist and serves to illustrate how both actors interact in the co-creation of the story experience. In this story, Alex employs key guiding skills and we observed additional competences such as his ability to manage the tour, convey understanding and meaning, and his natural capacity to interact and involve tourists in his explanation. He was very conscious of the layout of the group so that they could all hear and see him and choreographed the tour group to position them at the best possible vantage points. He was very relaxed and his voice was crisp, clear and audible. He used the words ‘you’ and ‘your’ frequently, to position the tourist in the story and make it personal. A relaxed style of drawing attention to objects ‘see here guys’ or choreographing the group ‘if you just come up here, I will show you’ were made to the group at large, yet interpreted as individual to each tourist. Tourists appeared to be actively listening, often showing agreement by nodding and through their facial expressions. The fact that tourists asked questions immediately after this story suggests that his delivery of the story was engaging enough to provoke them to think about the topic. The process of telling this story took less than 3 min and Alex advocates one of the keys to engagement is ‘not talking on the same thing for too long’.

This story introduced participation just 2 min into the tour, which appeared as a natural and unforced interaction that got the tourists ‘interested from the start’ (G6). Participants expressed that the story ‘held our attention throughout’ (PS9) and the ‘mind was permanently engaged’ (PS8), suggesting active listening and mental engagement. Tourists used their imagination to create, visualise and extend the story in their mind. One gentleman empathised with the plight of the soldiers, their heavy armour and how they had to carry all this steel and ‘then try and fight to stay alive’ and ‘I was just thinking on what he was saying

and trying to imagine what it was like throughout each era’ (I58) pointing out ‘I did learn a lot and felt good doing so’. The story, the guide’s performance and the props combined to enable the tourist to react through the mental processes of imagination and empathy to co-create an episodic pleasurable experience.

4.5.3. Perspective

The stories allowed the guide to access the hearts and minds of the individuals and enable the co-creation process. As discussed earlier, the cognitive connectedness of the tour is central to the co-creation process as from the tourists’ perspective, it ‘captured your interest’ and ‘kept you thinking’. This mental engagement can be attributed individual learning and the use of the tourists’ imagination, often encouraged by the guides who try to make the stories ‘come alive’. This approach revealed meaning and provoked thought, ‘I think we learned a lot in seeing it and all the things in it and hearing the stories. I think this is the way people really learn about our heritage, which is why I bring the children here’ (PS8). One woman acknowledged that she had seen a drawing on the conservatory wall depicting the castle and grounds as drawn by the four children of the house in 1928 before ‘on Lords and Ladles<sup>7</sup>’ actually, it was lovely to see it in reality’ (I18). The tourist’s historical perspective comes to the fore here as some were critical of the Anglo-Irish perspective as described in the stories and the issue of contested histories arose, ‘There could have been a little bit more of nod to the Irish history’ (I23).

The most profound affect is the imaginaries of tourists that transport them to a different time and place, or perspective, as one tourist explained, ‘I think as soon as you are in the house you feel that you are in that period’ (I28); ‘as you went through different rooms you got a different sense of what it would have been like’ (I53). Imagination was stimulated by the place and facilitated by the guide’s performance to a point of detachment from their own reality ‘with so much history in every room ... you can just feel like you have been transported’ (I29) to a point of immersion, ‘I was totally engrossed, enthralled by it all, kept imagining what it was like and the paintings of the women let you really

<sup>7</sup> ‘Lords and Ladles’ is an Irish television series (2017) about historic cookery in the ‘big houses’ of Ireland.

see what they looked like .... thinking as she told us their stories' (PS6). The stories themselves stirred the imagination. For example, the story of electrification created a scene that was readily imaginable, 'I love the story of the locals coming in to look through the windows [to see the electric lights] - you can imagine - the curiosity' (I18). Tourists also contemplated living in the castle in the present day, 'I think, seeing in the kitchen, the old Hoover and washing machine, that was really interesting, you could imagine the kitchen coming to life with all those things' (I8). Another commented 'I know, it is still somebody's home, there were beautiful photographs on the piano and a couple in wartime obviously, and I would love to know who they were?' (PS6). All agreed that it was difficult to gauge and meet everyone's expectations, 'a little bit more time, just to take in ... maybe 10 min ... I know they can't take all day about it, you are only paying your few bob [money]' (I41).

Coupled with the mindfulness of their experience are the tourists' affective responses, that is, how the tour made them feel. The unexpected Temple (Story 1) appealed to some tourists on a spiritual level. Overall, the effect of the castle and the stories was more akin to empathy and understanding than nostalgic emotion. This was unique and personal to each individual, as one tourist empathetically identified more with the hard early years as the soldiers than with the opulent days of the family, by saying, 'the soldiers, what it was like for them being in the garrison, rather than what it was like for the family' (PS7), when we saw 'the dungeon - thinking soldiers were probably flung in there, tortured or whatever' (I22). An aspect of emotion relates to personal identity with links to the pleasure or value derived from the experience, which is addressed in the next section.

#### 4.5.4. Pleasure

Tourist responses were overwhelmingly positive. Negativity only emerged in relation to the perceived Anglo-Irish historical imbalance and the desire for a longer tour and to see more of the house, particularly the bedrooms. When asked to sum up their experience in one word or sentence, tourists responded that they 'loved' and 'enjoyed' the 'fabulous', 'fascinating', 'delightful', 'incredible' and 'splendid' tour in a 'spectacular' and 'beautiful' place. Tourists heard 'interesting', 'enthraling' and 'amazing' 'personal stories', told by 'knowledgeable' and 'excellent' guides who were often a 'direct descendant' of the castle founder. The result was an 'extremely enjoyable learning experience' in 'an authentic Irish castle' with a 'rare and real history' and 'unusual and interesting antiques'. The tour was as 'good as you will get', 'one of the best' and 'worth a visit'. The source of this pleasure appears to stem from the stories of characters and authentic objects combined with the guide's performance to facilitate understanding of the place and act as a foundation of a pleasurable experience. In summary, the combination of the guide performance, stories told and the authentic place appear to empower the tourist to have a physical, mental and emotional reaction or more simply inviting a response from the hands, head and heart.

#### 4.6. Step three - interaction analysis

While tourists and guides have constant physical, social, and cognitive interaction with the place and people, the co-creation of the experience was individual and personal, '[The] personal story, for me, that's what I like and as well the very eclectic mix of the house itself and what's in it' (I29). Personal narratives of experience are ordered and sequenced and often described temporally ('about 5 min into the tour') and spatially ('when we were in the tapestry room'). In providing examples to support their points, stories were sometimes clustered thematically (grouping stories of the family or local history together) and episodically (identifying points of humour or participation). Tourists offered revelations regarding the identity of actors ('I am very interested in local history'; 'I have visited most of the houses in this region' (I12)) and their personal life narratives ('I would be the least patriotic person on the Island' (I22)). The resultant story was expressed through their individual agency ('I thought', 'I did', 'My reaction was'), incorporating

elements of imagination ('I could imagine', 'You could see yourself') and emotion ('I felt', 'I loved', 'I enjoyed', 'made my day'). The boundary was event-centric - as each tourist related to the tour.

#### 4.6.1. Physical - place and object interaction

When asked what people liked most about Huntingdon, Alex responded 'they like the fact that you can walk around, it is quite informal, sometimes they might sit down or pick something up or that, they like that there are no ropes anywhere ...' (G8). He was quite correct in this assessment as to the impact of having no areas cordoned off with ropes, no 'do not' touch, sit or lean on, signs, and no information/restriction panels which surprised tourists. One tourist referred to this as a special trust between the owners and the tourists which made it much more personal, 'it is lovely actually, going into the rooms and just being able to look right around you and just see everything' (I37). Tourists valued this trust and touched objects like the chain mail, the vine, and kitchen gadgets, they stopped to look at paintings and in particular the stained-glass window and marvelled at the visual difference of the two sides of the tapestries, whilst listening to the guide's story. This made the tour sensorial as tourists were pleased not to be 'looking through a glass panel' (PS6) but were free to touch and examine objects. In this way, the objects help the tourist to understand and comprehend what the story being told. The stained-glass window in the dining room (Story 4) provides a genealogy of the family and outlines the lines of inheritance. This is their 'family tree' and its visual nature allowed tourists to absorb the contents more easily than the guide reeling off a list of names and dates, 'I liked the window ... where they had all the names, so instead of someone just telling you, you could see, the way it came down through the generations ... it was there in front of you to see it' (I2).

#### 4.6.2. Interaction with other tourists

Tourists didn't feel the need to interact or converse with other tourists as there 'wasn't time or an opportunity to get into conversation on the various things we encountered' (I58) but 'if you go with someone, you are talking to them as you go along' (I5). One lady commented 'I don't think you needed it ... I think people take what they want - I hate when it is forced interaction on people, you know, people don't always like it' (I31) and another gentleman said 'No, it wasn't that type of tour' (PS7). The general feeling on interacting with other tourists can be summed up in the remark, 'The house is relatively small - it is jam packed with stuff and you have a great narrator, so there is no need for anyone else in it' (I4). Notably, this finding is in direct contrast to [Prebensen et al., 2013](#) study, which found that other visitors enhance the experienced value of a trip significantly.

#### 4.7. Tourist - guide interaction

The findings show how the guides interact verbally and physically with the tourists and section 4.2.2 shows how they engage with each other on a cognitive or intellectual level. Janet empathises with the tourists and says anyone can learn a script, but tries to give a little bit more 'because I know if I was going on a tour, I would like a little bit more'. She tries to make it as interesting as possible as 'there is nothing worse I think than standing there for half an hour or so, listening to someone rambling on'. Most people are there because they want to learn, 'I like to try to engage with them and make it interesting, because I enjoy showing people around there, I love Huntingdon Castle and I hope that they do ... try and put it across as best I can so that they enjoy it because I enjoy telling it'. Questions were never solicited but always answered.

#### 4.7.1. Experience integration through personal stories

Tourists were eager to engage in the research interviews and as one lady enthusiastically put it, 'I would like to talk forever about it, fantastic' (I47). One tourist told the story of how her grandmother told

her of how the castle family sustained the village with food by selling their valuables during the famine (I46) and another compared the early electrification story at Huntingdon to a similar story in Rathfarnham in Dublin (I30).

## 5. Discussion

In this study, stories became the central thread that stitched the story enhanced tourism experience together. The guide's role was to enable or facilitate co-creation through their actions and activities (Mathisen, 2014) to help make the story 'come alive', while the tourist's role was to actively participate and engage with the story and guide where their contribution and pleasure is evinced through their responses or reactions (Islam & Kirillova, 2021). Through well-crafted stories, anchored in the materiality of the castle, the guides propelled the co-construction journey onward to engage and often alter tourists' emotional, cognitive and personal states (Andrades & Dimanche, 2014). In doing so, tourists appeared to take on board the guide's story and re-created their own version, integrating their prior knowledge into these mental processes. In addition, stories established an emotional connection, inspiring the tourist's imagination and accelerated immersion, transporting them to a special world or liminal place, thus intensifying their connection and deepening their internal contribution (Cox, 2015; Williams, 2013). Accordingly, guides mediate a connection, broker conversation and offer a catalyst for both co-creation and co-contribution thus responding to the research question posed in this study.

The eclectic mix of stories, often explaining objects, were Huntingdon specific and therefore new to almost all tourists, creating mindful enjoyment and learning. Through structural analysis, this study identified a link between these SETE episodes and the structure of the story. Stories that adhered to the story arc structure (Labov & Waletzky, 1967) were deemed pleasurable and the most remembered (Exhibit 1). The resultant storied experience was socially, temporally and contextually situated, exhibiting a guide: tourist co-dependency, where pleasure was determined by the tourist through personal reflection on how the experience altered their thoughts and feelings (Calver & Page, 2013). This process did not span the entire tour, it occurred in story specific scenes, suggesting that meaning and pleasure come from the experiential outcome of specific interactive co-creative moments (Buonincontri et al., 2017; Prebensen et al., 2015).

Finally, experiences are embedded in the physical and social context and that co-creation contributes to cognitive and affective outcomes (Zhu, 2012); the castle's authenticity, coupled with the rarity of the guide being a family member, not only created engaging and memorable stories (Campos et al., 2018; Hodge, 2011; Kim, 2014), but also deepened the personal connection between people and place. Tourists felt privileged to be on the tour with a family guide and spoke as if they had a personal relationship with them, even though the tour largely constituted a continuous mental conversation. Tourists observed there was little time for interaction with other tourists and they didn't need it, reinforcing the view that social interaction primarily occurred between tourist and guide with the guide influencing the co-creation process and shaping the tourist experience. This social, embodied and sensorial interaction observed in this study facilitated tourist involvement which merged with their mental absorption to intensify engagement, thereby advancing co-creation of a highly contextual experience (Chronis, 2015a; 2015b).

### 5.1. Framework for the design and management of the story enhanced tourism experience

Structural analysis found that structured stories regardless of genre have impact and memorability. It was found that at Huntingdon Castle, the authenticity of the building and its material culture set the stage for human and artifact interaction (*performance*). The stories became a

platform of engagement by stimulating interaction between the *people* (guide and tourist) and thereby connect the *place* and *people* in an authentic and memorable way. These interactive encounters are a mutually constructive *process* where the guide's actions inspire and enable tourist reactions. The guide assimilates the storytelling to personally engage the tourists on a physical, sensorial, cognitive and emotional level (*perspective*). Through cognitive and intellectual inter-connection with the story, tourists integrate their prior knowledge to acquire new knowledge and learning whilst simultaneously activating the imagination and engendering affective responses of empathy and personal reflection. *Pleasure* is accumulated from these episodic story-based interactions and determined by the tourist through post experience memorability (Fig. 1).

The SETE co-creation framework (Fig. 1) considers the strategic application of storytelling as a value enhancing engagement platform, specifically designed to stimulate dialogical interaction and tourist participation to propel the co-creation process. During this co-creation process, the tourist's perception of the guide's interpretation and performance is mentally amalgamated with their personal knowledge and experience to construct a coherent narrative of the past. A new story is therefore co-constructed between guide and tourist in the present. The experience is socially, temporally and contextually situated, where tourists exhibit performative, embodied and affective practices, which are influenced or enabled by the authenticity, social relations, and emotional and imaginative immersion (Calver & Page, 2013). Tourists connect intellectually, physically, emotionally, and spiritually with the people, story and place, which alter their affective or cognitive states and consequently influence their perception of value. Value in the form of pleasure is the experiential outcome, which is idiosyncratically determined by the tourist. The SETE framework adopts Carù et al.'s (2014) concept of *simple pleasures* to include short moments of interaction, mindfulness and learning and *small victories* can ensue as the tourist progresses along the continuum to engage their emotions and imagination to achieve a sense of immersion and temporary escape. These ephemeral moments are interspersed throughout the experience and accrue to a judgement of enjoyment in the post experience reflection stage resulting in a spiral of co-created experience leading to tourist memorability (Campos et al., 2018). This involves the tourist's cognitive abilities, personal and sensorial inputs to produce behavioural responses and affective reactions (Pera, 2017), and leave them with memories of the experience (Hodge, 2011; Kim, 2014; Mathisen, 2012).

## 6. Conclusion, contribution and future avenues

In this paper, we considered the design and management of the story enhanced tourism experience, responding to Mohammadi et al. (2021) and Blazquez-Resino et al.'s (2015: 708), calls for 'research focused on providing frameworks that can help organisations manage the value co-creation process'. In response to the research question (how are stories employed (*performance*) in the co-creation of the tourism experience (*process*)), we have explored the co-creation process, wherein stories act as the central thread that stitches the story enhanced tourism experience together. In the proposed SETE framework (Fig. 1), it is assumed that the co-creation *process* occurs through the *performance* of stories; the role and function of the *people* and how and when they derive (value) *pleasure*. The influencing aspects of the environment or *place* and the participants' *perspective* on how they feel and think during the experience are also incorporated. The assumption is that storytelling acts as a co-creation tool, enabling the guide to interact, forge a connection and engage the tourist, precipitating the tourist's active participation and engendering positive cognitive and emotional responses. The process is a series of the guide actions and tourist reactions and value is therefore co-created in these pleasurable moments of interaction.

This study answers Mathisen (2014), Mijnheer and Gamble (2019) and Ross's (2020) research calls to investigate stories as a co-creation

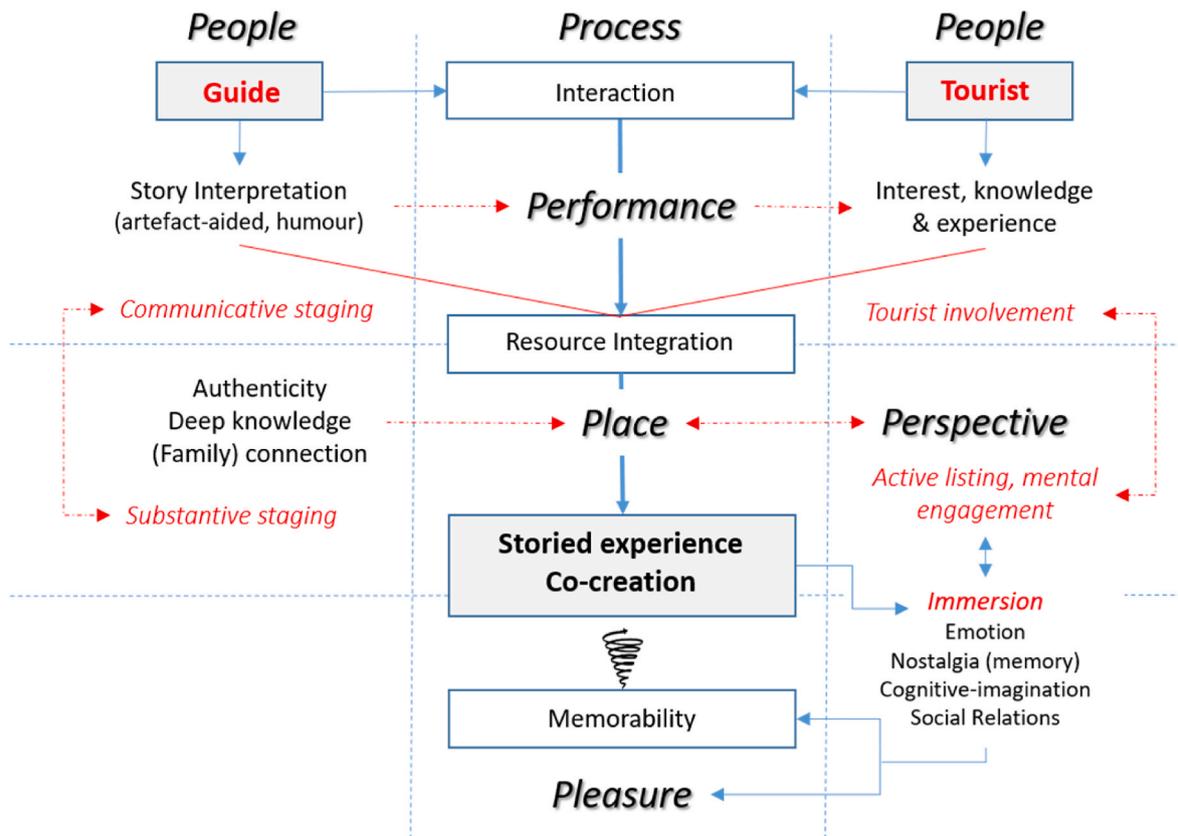


Fig. 1. Story enhanced tourism experience Co-creation.

tool. It extends Chronis's (2012) view of stories as a means to stimulate interaction and active involvement in a multisensory engagement process and offers a trajectory to Pera's (2017) work by incorporating the progression of engagement in the co-creation process and identifying the pleasure acquisition operations in this context. It gives prominence to the premise that superior experiences emanate from interactive encounters between the tourists and their guides (Fig. 1), which offer a way to inform, educate and entertain tourists. Narrative analysis exhibits the nuances of both interaction and co-creation, offering tourism managers insight into how to design and deliver story based experiences in HHTAs (Cox, 2015; Pera, 2017). By shedding light on 'storytelling' as a tourism experience, and describing how the process of co-creation of that experience occurs, those in practice can contemplate both the actors involved and the influencing dimensions therein. Potential avenues for further research include an empirical study exploring the trustworthiness of the proposed framework in this and other contexts.

**Paper contributions**

Jacqueline Doyle lead the research study, collated the data and made extensive contributions to this paper in terms of research design, data collection and analysis, and model development. Proportionate contribution 70%

Felicity Kelliher made significant contributions to this paper in terms of research concept, design, data collection and analysis and model development. Proportionate contribution 30%.

**TM impact statement**

Drawing on insights from the debate on experience co-creation process, this ethnographic study concentrates on the co-creation of experiential value between the tourist and tour guide and aims to illuminate this process, the role of the actors involved and the influencing

dimensions in a single case site, the Historic House Tourist Attraction of Huntingdon Castle, Ireland. This research answers calls to investigate stories as a co-creation tool. It extends Chronis's (2012) view of stories as a means to stimulate interaction and active involvement in a multisensory engagement process and offers a trajectory to Pera's (2017) work by incorporating the progression of engagement in the co-creation process. It also gives prominence to the premise that superior experiences emanate from interactive encounters where tales of people and place are a means to inform, educate and entertain tourists.

**Declaration of competing interest**

None.

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**Appendix A. Supplementary data**

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