

UK'S DESTINATION BRANDING THROUGH NETFLIX'S BRIDGERTON: SOFT POWER, SCREEN TOURISM, AND POST-PANDEMIC TOURISM RECOVERY

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Abstract

Tourism is a vital pillar of the United Kingdom's economy and national image. Following the severe disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK government prioritized tourism recovery while simultaneously facing intensifying global competition and the persistent concentration of international visits in London. This study examines how the UK government strategically utilized the Netflix series *Bridgerton*—one of the most-watched streaming productions of all time—as a soft power instrument for destination branding to boost its post-pandemic tourism sector. Employing a descriptive qualitative method, this research applies the concepts of soft power (Nye 1990) screen tourism (Hudson and Ritchie 2006), and destination branding (Kartajaya 2005; Pereira et al. 2012) as its analytical framework. The findings reveal three interconnected strategies: first, the implementation of production incentive policies through the British Cultural Test mechanism, which strengthened the authentic representation of British cultural identity, heritage, and landscapes in the series; second, the formalization of screen tourism as a national strategy through a Memorandum of Understanding between VisitBritain and the British Film Commission; and third, the integration of *Bridgerton* into the global 'Starring GREAT Britain' campaign (launched in 2025), which positioned the UK as an iconic filming destination, differentiated tourism offerings through *Bridgerton*-themed experiences, and deployed integrated promotional branding through media partnerships, B2B activities, digital platforms, and print media. These strategies contributed to the UK's post-pandemic tourism recovery, with international visitor arrivals reaching a historic record of 42.6 million in 2024, surpassing pre-pandemic levels for the first time. This case demonstrates how popular culture can function as a concrete manifestation of soft power with measurable national impacts.

Keywords: *Bridgerton*, Destination branding, Screen tourism, Soft power, United Kingdom

1. Introduction

Tourism has long served as a cornerstone of the United Kingdom's economy, contributing approximately 9% of GDP and representing the country's third-largest service export. Beyond its economic function, tourism plays a central role in shaping the UK's international image, attracting visitors who engage with British heritage, culture, and creative industries, thereby reinforcing the country's position as a global soft power. In 2019, the UK welcomed 40.9 million international visitors who spent more than £28 billion, ranking Britain tenth among the world's most-visited nations (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, delivered an unprecedented shock to this sector. Lockdowns, international travel restrictions, and widespread health anxieties

caused international visitor arrivals to collapse to 11.1 million in 2020 and a further reduced 7.1 million in 2021, while tourist expenditure fell to £6.2 billion and £5.9 billion respectively (British Tourist Authority 2021). The UK's pandemic recovery proved markedly slower than that of comparable European destinations: by the summer of 2021, Britain had recovered only 14% of its 2019 visitor levels, compared with 85% for Greece (House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2022). This prompted serious concern within government about the UK's long-term competitiveness as a tourism destination.

Compounding the recovery challenge were structural issues predating the pandemic. International tourists overwhelmingly concentrated their visits in London, leaving significant regional destinations underexplored and underserved by international marketing. VisitBritain's 2021 attitude survey identified a further concern: many international visitors reported low motivation to travel to the UK because they believed they already knew what to expect, which is a perception that British destinations offered little new to discover beyond well-known London landmarks. This combination of pandemic-induced crisis and pre-existing structural weakness required an innovative strategic response.

In this context, the UK government, through the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and its national tourism authority VisitBritain, identified popular culture, specifically film and television, as a powerful vehicle for destination branding. This was not an entirely new insight: prior research and industry data had already established strong correlations between British screen productions and tourism motivation. The British Film Institute (2021) estimated that international tourist spending on screen tourism in the UK reached £892.6 million in 2019 alone, and past productions such as *Harry Potter* and *James Bond* had demonstrably attracted visitors to specific British locations.

What transformed the post-pandemic period was the extraordinary global reach of streaming platforms. The Netflix series *Bridgerton*, a period drama set in Regency-era England produced by American studio Shondaland, premiered on Christmas Day 2020, reaching 82 million households within its first 28 days and subsequently becoming one of the most-watched series in Netflix history across all three seasons (Netflix 2025). Filmed entirely at historic locations across England, including Bath, Greenwich, Yorkshire, and numerous stately homes, *Bridgerton* generated immediate tourism interest. The city of Bath alone reported £1.5 million in contributions from domestic *Bridgerton*-motivated visitors in 2021, even while international travel remained restricted (BBC 2021).

This study examines the following research question: How has the UK government utilized the Netflix series *Bridgerton* as a soft power instrument for destination branding to boost its tourism sector in the post-COVID-19 period? The research spans 2021 to 2025, tracing the evolution from organic tourism impacts following *Bridgerton*'s premiere to the institutionalization of screen tourism as national policy and the launch of the 'Starring GREAT Britain' campaign. The findings contribute to the scholarly literature on soft power, screen tourism, and destination branding by demonstrating how these three domains can be systematically integrated within a coherent governmental strategy, and by providing empirical evidence of measurable outcomes at the national scale.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

Soft power, as originally conceptualized by Nye (2004) refers to a state's ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or financial inducement. Where hard power operates through military force or economic sanctions, soft power works by making others want what you want by projecting an image, set of values, or cultural identity sufficiently compelling that foreign actors are drawn toward it voluntarily. Cultural products, such as film, music, literature, cuisine, and television are widely recognized as primary vehicles through which soft power is expressed and experienced internationally (Paksiutov 2020; Nisbett 2015; De Martino 2020).

The United Kingdom has long positioned itself as a global soft power leader, with its creative and cultural industries, encompassing the BBC, the music industry, publishing, fashion, and above all its film and television sector, serving as central strategic assets. The British Film Commission (2022) explicitly framed the audiovisual industry as a cornerstone of UK soft power, noting that productions filmed in Britain not only generate direct economic value but also shape international perceptions of British culture, heritage, and creativity. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2022) reinforced this by formally recognizing *Bridgerton* as a manifestation of UK soft power, citing its role in promoting British heritage locations to millions of viewers globally during the pandemic.

In the specific context of tourism, soft power operates through a mechanism scholars sometimes describe as the 'halo effect' of cultural exports: the positive associations generated by a beloved film or television series transfer to the location itself, increasing its perceived attractiveness as a travel destination. This process is especially powerful when the production is set in and filmed at real locations, allowing audiences to form emotional connections with actual places rather than fictional or studio-constructed settings.

2.2. Screen Tourism

Screen tourism also described in the literature as film-induced tourism, cinematic tourism, or set-jetting refers to the phenomenon whereby film and television productions motivate audiences to visit the locations where they were produced or where their narratives are set (Beeton 2005; Busby and Klug 2001; Domínguez-Azcue et al. 2021). The relationship between popular media and tourist behavior has been documented across numerous cases, from the Lord of the Rings trilogy's transformative effect on New Zealand tourism to the surge in Danish visitors to filming locations from *The Killing* and *Borgen*.

Hudson and Ritchie (2006) identify four key factors that determine the effectiveness of screen tourism as a destination marketing strategy: encouraging producers or studios to choose specific locations as filming sites; leveraging post-release media publicity about filming locations to raise awareness; executing targeted marketing activities after production to promote the associated destinations; and developing peripheral tourism activities and experiential products around filming locations. The greater the alignment across these four factors, the stronger the tourism impact.

The rise of global streaming platforms has substantially amplified screen tourism's reach and intensity. A production distributed through a platform such as Netflix can simultaneously reach hundreds of millions of viewers across dozens of countries, enabling a single series to create worldwide demand for specific destinations almost instantaneously, a dynamic that was not possible in the pre-streaming era of geographically segmented broadcast distribution. When viewers develop strong emotional attachments to on-screen characters and settings through binge-watching, they experience what Reeves (as cited in (Hudson and Ritchie 2006) terms an 'irresistible drive'—a compelling psychological motivation to physically visit the locations that produced such powerful feelings. VisitBritain's own research confirmed this: 70% of tourists who had visited the UK reported visiting at least one filming location, while 91% of prospective visitors expressed interest in doing so (VisitBritain 2024).

2.3. Destination Branding

Destination branding involves the strategic construction and communication of a unique, distinctive identity for a tourism destination with the aim of shaping visitor perceptions, generating preference, and ultimately driving visitation decisions (Pereira et al. 2012; Ruiz-Real et al. 2020). It is understood as a subset of nation branding, the broader effort to manage how a country is perceived internationally, and shares its conceptual foundations in marketing and brand management theory (Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2006; Morgan et al. 2002).

Kartajaya (2005) proposes an influential strategic framework for destination branding comprising three interconnected dimensions: positioning, differentiating, and branding. Positioning refers to the effort to establish a clear, unique, and memorable place in the minds of potential visitors to define what the destination stands for and why it merits consideration. Differentiating involves identifying and communicating the specific attributes that distinguish the destination from its competitors, the qualities that cannot be replicated elsewhere. Branding encompasses the systematic communication of the destination's identity and offerings across all relevant channels and touchpoints, ensuring a coherent and persuasive message reaches target audiences.

For the United Kingdom, destination branding has been institutionally organized around the 'GREAT' nation branding campaign since 2011, which positions Britain as creative, innovative, open, and diverse. Within this framework, VisitBritain manages sub-campaigns targeting specific audiences and themes, often tied to cultural moments or popular properties. Previous screen-tourism-adjacent initiatives included 'Paddington is GREAT Britain' (2014), 'Bond is GREAT Britain' (2015), and 'Magical Britain' tied to Harry Potter (2017). The 'Starring GREAT Britain' campaign launched in January 2025 represented a qualitative step forward: rather than a single-property tie-in, it constituted a systematic national strategy integrating screen tourism across the full breadth of UK filming locations and productions.

3. Research Methods

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, suitable for examining the complexity of governmental strategies, institutional processes, and their observable

outcomes within a defined socio-political context (Merriam 2009). The research period spans 2021 to 2025, beginning with the documented tourism impacts following *Bridgerton*'s premiere in December 2020 and concluding with the formal launch of the 'Starring GREAT Britain' campaign and the first available post-campaign data.

Data collection relied entirely on secondary sources gathered through systematic document analysis, encompassing six categories of material: official UK government and institutional publications (DCMS policy reports, Tourism Recovery Plan, Promoting Britain Abroad, BFI and BFC reports); parliamentary committee evidence and transcripts; VisitBritain annual reports, press releases, and campaign materials; official Netflix and production company statements; international and national news media coverage; and peer-reviewed academic literature on soft power, screen tourism, and destination branding. All sources were cross-referenced to ensure consistency and reliability.

Data were analyzed thematically, with themes structured around the three core analytical concepts; soft power, screen tourism, and destination branding, and further organized within Kartajaya's (2005) positioning-differentiating-branding framework for the destination branding analysis. Triangulation across source types (government documents, industry reports, news coverage, academic literature) was employed to strengthen the validity of the interpretive findings.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. Production Incentive Policies: The British Cultural Test as a Soft Power Mechanism

The UK government's first and most foundational strategic lever was its audiovisual production incentive system, which was already in place before the pandemic but was deployed strategically as a mechanism for ensuring that internationally funded productions authentically represented British cultural identity. The High-End Television Tax Relief (HETR), introduced through the Finance Act 2013, enables qualifying television productions to claim tax credits equivalent to approximately 20% of their qualifying core UK expenditure. For a production the scale of *Bridgerton*, whose estimated total production cost across three seasons was approximately £160 million, this translated to approximately £32 million in tax credits from the UK government (Reid 2024).

Eligibility for this incentive is conditional upon passing the British Cultural Test, administered by the British Film Institute (BFI) under DCMS oversight. The test assigns points across four dimensions: cultural content (maximum 18 points), covering narrative setting, character nationality, source material, and language; cultural contribution (maximum 4 points), assessing the representation of British creativity, heritage, and diversity; cultural hub activity (maximum 5 points), measuring the proportion of principal photography, visual effects, and post-production conducted in the UK; and personnel (maximum 8 points), evaluating the nationality and residency of directors, writers, producers, composers, cast, and crew. Productions must achieve a minimum of 18 of 35 possible points to qualify.

Bridgerton satisfied this threshold comfortably. In the cultural content dimension, all seasons are set explicitly in Regency-era England with predominantly British characters and English dialogue, earning maximum points.

The cultural contribution dimension was met through the series' extensive engagement with British architectural heritage, period costume, social customs, and the creative reinterpretation of Georgian-Palladian locations. The cultural hub dimension was satisfied by the decision to conduct all principal photography exclusively at locations across England, spanning London, Bath, Yorkshire, Surrey, Sussex, Berkshire, Gloucestershire, and beyond with post-production VFX work performed by London-based studios One of Us and Outpost VFX. Finally, the personnel dimension was met through the substantial participation of UK-resident cast members, department heads, and crew across all production phases.

Critically, the BFC provided active facilitation throughout the production process. It served as the official government liaison, offering guidance on tax relief mechanisms, assisting in the identification of suitable locations, connecting the Shondaland and Netflix production teams with regional film offices, and coordinating with local authorities on filming permissions. The agency Filming in England, operating under BFC, played a particularly significant role in sourcing regional locations beyond London, recruiting local crew, and facilitating access to Bath, Bristol, Surrey, and Yorkshire filming sites from the earliest scouting phase in 2019 (Wood 2020; Roden 2024).

The significance of this incentive structure extends beyond its immediate financial benefit to the production. By making British cultural authenticity a formal eligibility criterion, the Cultural Test ensured that productions receiving government support would naturally foreground British heritage, landscapes, and creative talent in their final output. For *Bridgerton*, this meant that Bath's Royal Crescent, Ranger House in Greenwich, Castle Howard in Yorkshire, and dozens of other historic sites were not merely incidental backdrops but central elements of a production whose British character had been formally assessed and certified. The resulting series therefore functioned simultaneously as entertainment product and as an implicit promotional document for British heritage tourism—an outcome the government could subsequently build upon without having to intervene directly in the creative process.

This mechanism illustrates how soft power can be institutionally structured rather than left to emerge organically. The government did not commission *Bridgerton*, direct its content, or instruct Shondaland on how to portray Britain. Instead, it created a policy environment in which an internationally funded production company voluntarily maximized its engagement with British cultural heritage in order to access financial incentives—and in doing so, produced a global cultural product that served UK tourism interests.

4.2. Institutionalizing Screen Tourism: From Organic Impact to National Strategy

The immediate tourism impacts generated by *Bridgerton*'s premiere, observable even during the pandemic when international travel remained restricted, prompted the UK government to develop screen tourism as a deliberate, systematic national strategy rather than allowing its benefits to accrue only organically. This shift from reactive recognition to proactive institutionalization unfolded progressively between 2021 and 2023.

The Tourism Recovery Plan (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport 2021) was the first post-pandemic policy document to acknowledge film and television as strategic assets for destination promotion, signaling the government's intention to formally incorporate screen tourism into its recovery framework. This was followed by the Promoting Britain Abroad report (House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2022), which explicitly endorsed the use of popular screen productions, citing *Bridgerton* as a primary example, as instruments for promoting UK destinations internationally and distributing visitor footfall more equitably across regions.

VisitBritain's institutional commitment to this strategy strengthened under the leadership of CEO Patricia Yates, appointed in 2022. Addressing the Skift Global Forum in October 2023, Yates articulated the strategic rationale: approximately one-third of international tourists are motivated to visit locations they have seen on screen, and *Bridgerton* had demonstrated this principle concretely by driving substantial visitor interest to Bath, Castle Howard, and other regional locations that might otherwise have remained below the radar of international tourism marketing (Habtemariam 2023). Critically, Yates emphasized that screen tourism offered a solution to one of VisitBritain's most persistent structural challenges: the concentration of international visits in London, with approximately 50% of visitors failing to venture significantly beyond the capital.

The formal institutionalization of the strategy occurred on 6 December 2023, when VisitBritain and the BFC signed a Memorandum of Understanding at the FOCUS London trade event. This MoU committed both organizations to jointly develop and promote screen tourism as a driver of national economic growth and regional visitor distribution, leveraging the UK's world-leading position as a production location to create a virtuous cycle in which filming attracts investment and talent, while resulting productions attract tourists to the locations where they were made.

The empirical evidence that supported and justified this institutional commitment was compelling. Castle Howard in North Yorkshire reported a 3,400% increase in website visits from the 18-24 demographic within weeks of *Bridgerton*'s premiere (British Tourist Authority, 2024). Ranger House in Greenwich recorded an 81% increase in visitor numbers following the release of Season 2 (Khomami 2022). Bath's tourism economy already benefiting from domestic *Bridgerton* visitors in 2021, saw contributions from *Bridgerton*-motivated tourism grow from £1.5 million that year to over £5 million in 2023-2024. Nationally, Netflix (2024) reported that the *Bridgerton* production's five-year economic contribution to the UK economy exceeded £275 million, supporting more than 5,000 local businesses across production and tourism supply chains. VisitBritain's 2023 Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index survey found that 70% of tourists who had visited the UK had visited a filming location, while 91% of prospective visitors expressed interest in doing so, figures that decisively validated the strategic case for screen tourism investment.

4.3. Destination Branding Through 'Starring GREAT Britain': Positioning, Differentiating, and Branding

The launch of the 'Starring GREAT Britain' campaign in January 2025 represented the full flowering of the UK's screen tourism strategy, the moment at which *Bridgerton*'s cultural impact was formally integrated into a comprehensive national destination branding initiative. Analyzed through Kartajaya's (2005) framework, the campaign demonstrates a sophisticated and systematic approach to each of the three strategic dimensions.

In terms of positioning, the campaign addressed a fundamental challenge: that many potential international visitors perceived the UK as a destination they already knew, reducing their motivation to prioritize it over less familiar alternatives. The 'Starring GREAT Britain' campaign reframed this familiarity as an advantage rather than a liability. By positioning Britain as the authentic, real-world home of the stories and settings that had emotionally moved millions of viewers, the campaign created a new basis for desire: not curiosity about the unknown, but the powerful pull of the beloved and familiar made tangibly visitable. *Bridgerton* was ideally suited to this positioning because its combination of accessible emotional storytelling, historically authentic settings, and global streaming reach had created a uniquely large and emotionally engaged audience for British heritage locations. The campaign's tagline, 'visit the real star of the show' encapsulated this positioning with particular elegance, inverting the usual hierarchy of character over setting to suggest that Britain's landscapes and heritage sites were themselves the most compelling protagonists.

The differentiating dimension leveraged what is genuinely unique about the UK's proposition: the combination of preserved Regency-era architecture, working historic estates, UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and living cultural heritage that allowed visitors not merely to see filming locations but to inhabit, however temporarily, the world they had watched on screen. No other country could offer this specific combination, because no other country had produced *Bridgerton*, and the series' complete reliance on authentic British locations meant that its emotional geography was entirely and exclusively British. VisitBritain developed specific experiential products to give this differentiator commercial form: the *Bridgerton* walking tours of Bath (offered through VisitBritainShop in partnership with BritMovieTours and City of Bath Guides), candlelit evening tours of Castle Howard, and *Bridgerton*-themed afternoon tea at Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire, each experience designed to allow visitors to inhabit the sensory and emotional world of the series while physically present in its actual locations.

The branding dimension was executed through an exceptionally broad and well-coordinated suite of activities. The campaign launched with a four-minute cinematic promotional video, directed by Oscar-winning British director Tom Hooper, which combined footage from *Bridgerton* with sequences drawn from numerous other iconic British productions including *Harry Potter*, *James Bond*, *Paddington*, *Notting Hill*, and *House of the Dragon*. Produced in partnership with Netflix, Warner Bros, HBO, Universal, Marvel, Disney, and other studios, the video demonstrated the full depth and diversity of Britain's screen heritage while using *Bridgerton*—positioned prominently at the 1:33 mark with 27 seconds of footage—as its most contemporary and emotionally resonant anchor. The video was released across VisitBritain's global social media channels, uploaded to YouTube in eleven language versions to maximize international accessibility, and

deployed on digital billboard installations in key target markets including the United States, Australia, Germany, France, and GCC countries.

Digital promotion was reinforced by a comprehensive screen tourism hub on [visitbritain.com](https://www.visitbritain.com), featuring an interactive map of UK filming locations organized by genre, curated regional itineraries incorporating *Bridgerton* sites, a dedicated 'Visit *Bridgerton* filming locations' section consolidating all three seasons' sites, and influencer-generated content providing authentic visitor perspectives. The hashtag #StarringGREATBritain was systematically adopted across VisitBritain's social channels, partner embassies in multiple countries, and invited international influencers, creating a coordinated global conversation. *Bridgerton* content generated over 10 pieces of social media content under this hashtag for VisitBritain alone, with the most popular achieving 52.3 million views—the highest-performing content in the campaign's initial phase.

B2B activities complemented direct consumer marketing. VisitBritain's 'Showcase Britain' event hosted over 120 international travel trade partners from 18 countries on educational visits across the UK, with Bath and *Bridgerton* filming locations as central itinerary elements, enabling operators and travel agents to incorporate screen tourism experiences into the commercial packages they would subsequently sell to international consumers. Pre-launch media trips to the UK for journalists and digital influencers from Canada, China, Spain, South Korea, Brazil, Germany, India, Norway, and GCC countries generated substantial organic coverage in key markets. Collaboration with Agence France-Presse produced widely syndicated articles and video features on UK screen tourism, with *Bridgerton* as the lead example, published by outlets including Forbes India, Japan Today, The Straits Times, Kuwait Times, and Kompas Indonesia. The Starring GREAT Britain magazine, produced by Tourism Media Group in partnership with VisitBritain, provided a tangible print promotional artifact for distribution at trade events and partner locations.

4.4. Tourism Recovery Outcomes and the Manifestation of Soft Power

The ultimate measure of the UK government's strategy is its contribution to observable tourism outcomes. The data indicate that the combined effect of *Bridgerton*'s cultural impact, the screen tourism policy framework, and the 'Starring GREAT Britain' campaign made a significant contribution to Britain's post-pandemic tourism recovery that ultimately exceeded pre-pandemic benchmarks.

International visitor arrivals recovered progressively from the pandemic lows: 31.2 million in 2022, 38 million in 2023, and a historic peak of 42.6 million in 2024, surpassing the 2019 record of 40.9 million for the first time. Equally significant, tourist expenditure reached £32.5 billion in 2024, exceeding both the 2019 figure of £28.4 billion and the government's initial recovery targets (Office for National Statistics 2025; VisitBritain 2025). The 'Starring GREAT Britain' campaign's own performance metrics were exceptional: VisitBritain reported that campaign activities in the January-June 2025 phase generated an estimated £217 million in additional tourist expenditure, with 60% of that spending occurring outside London, a direct indicator that the regional distribution objective embedded in the screen tourism strategy was being achieved. VisitBritain described the campaign as its most successful since 2019 (VisitBritain 2025b).

At the local level, the specific tourism impacts attributable to *Bridgerton* are striking. *Bridgerton*-motivated visits contributed over £5 million to the economies of Bath, Bristol, and surrounding areas in 2023-2024 alone. *Bridgerton* walking tour bookings increased 44% in 2024 compared to 2023. Chris Bryant, then Minister for Creative Industries, Arts, and Tourism, explicitly credited *Bridgerton* as a key contributor to the government's ambition of reaching 50 million annual international visits before 2030 (Wimperis 2025), on the basis of 2024 performance, appears achievable ahead of schedule.

These outcomes demonstrate soft power in operation at a concrete, measurable level. The UK did not induce international visitors to travel through subsidies, visa waivers, or price reductions. Rather, it achieved its tourism objectives through the attractive force of a cultural product, one whose British identity was shaped by government policy, whose global distribution was enabled by a streaming platform, and whose tourism potential was systematically realized through institutional strategy and marketing investment. *Bridgerton* functioned as what Nye (1990) would recognize as quintessential soft power: it made others want what Britain wanted them to want to experience British heritage locations firsthand, by first making those locations the settings of a story they cared about deeply.

The case also illuminates an important nuance in soft power theory: the relationship between organic and managed soft power. The cultural appeal of *Bridgerton* was genuine and unmanipulated, it emerged from the quality of the production, the storytelling, and the authentic beauty of British locations. But the translation of that appeal into measurable tourism outcomes required deliberate institutional action: the production incentive framework, the screen tourism MoU, the campaign infrastructure, and the B2B trade network. This suggests that soft power, while rooted in genuine cultural attractiveness, does not automatically generate strategic benefits; it requires institutional mechanisms to identify, develop, and harvest its potential value.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has examined how the UK government utilized the Netflix series *Bridgerton* as a soft power instrument for destination branding in the post-COVID-19 period, tracing a multi-layered strategy whose components reinforced each other across policy, institutional, and marketing domains. Three interconnected strategic streams were identified and analyzed.

First, the production incentive policy framework, centered on the British Cultural Test that ensured that an internationally funded production would authentically represent British heritage, creating a global cultural product that served national tourism interests without requiring direct government intervention in creative decisions. Second, the organic tourism impacts of *Bridgerton*'s success were systematically recognized and institutionalized through the formalization of screen tourism as national policy, culminating in the VisitBritain-BFC Memorandum of Understanding and the comprehensive evidence base developed to justify strategic investment. Third, the 'Starring GREAT Britain' campaign integrated these elements into a coherent destination branding initiative, deploying Kartajaya's (2005) positioning-differentiating-branding framework to reposition Britain as the authentic

home of beloved screen narratives, differentiate its tourism offering through unique experiential products, and communicate both to international audiences through an unprecedented multimedia and trade campaign.

The outcomes—a historic record of 42.6 million international visitors in 2024, tourist expenditure exceeding pre-pandemic levels, and 60% of campaign-driven spending occurring outside London, demonstrate that this strategy generated concrete, measurable results aligned with the government's recovery and regional distribution objectives.

The theoretical contribution of this case is significant. It demonstrates that soft power is not a diffuse, unmanageable cultural force but can be deliberately structured through policy mechanisms, institutional partnerships, and marketing investment to achieve specific national objectives. It further shows that the relationship between a cultural product and its soft power outcomes is mediated by institutional architecture: the same cultural attractiveness can generate very different tourism impacts depending on whether governments have created the systems necessary to identify and realize its potential.

Future research could profitably pursue several directions. Comparative analysis with other national screen tourism strategies, particularly South Korea's systematic leveraging of K-drama and K-pop for tourism and nation branding, would enable the development of more generalizable frameworks for understanding how institutional context shapes soft power effectiveness. Quantitative studies isolating the causal relationship between specific productions and visitor behavior at filming locations would strengthen the empirical foundation of screen tourism research. Finally, longitudinal analysis of the 'Starring GREAT Britain' campaign's sustained impact as additional *Bridgerton* seasons are released and new productions are integrated into the campaign would provide valuable evidence on the durability and scalability of this model.

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