



Touristic Consumption as “Sitesharing”: Unpacking the Smart Tourism Paradigm from an Internet Studies Perspective

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Abstract. This paper presents a conceptual framework “sitesharing” for understanding touristic consumption within the smart tourism paradigm. Smart tourism considers the use of ICTs as beneficial and essential to the future of tourism. However, the integration of technological intermediaries with the sphere of tourism bears investigation in terms of the wider effects on tourism processes. Taking an interdisciplinary stance, the paper utilizes an internet studies perspective in order to examine the political, social, and cultural implications of the integration of ICTs within tourism. Through the exploration of three key metaphors drawn from across the fields of study: performance, place, and sharing; the paper considers how ICTs influence tourists’ consumption, telling, and experiencing of tourism. The framework of sitesharing argues that sharing, rather than seeing, becomes the requisite practice of tourists with concomitant changes in the form of tourist practice and the shape of tourist places. From the discussion, four emergent dimensions of sitesharing are presented with the intention of informing future tourism research.

Keywords: Smart tourism · Internet studies · ICTs · Sharing · Performance · Place · Sightseeing

1 Introduction

While the social and academic fields of e-tourism continue to develop at a rapid rate as spurred by the ongoing development of new technologies, tourism products and research; scholars have also begun to argue that the academic field is a mature discipline [1]. It is perhaps fitting then in recent years we have also seen the beginnings of an overarching research paradigm tying together many of the various strands and agendas within the ambit of e-tourism: smart tourism. Smart tourism posits that technological actors are able to increase fluency between visitors and tourism providers by utilizing real-time connectivity and tourist data flows [2]. It is such that smart tourism relies upon high-speed connectivity, big data and the internet of things (IoT), with its premise being that digital technology is able to support tourist experience and increase overall satisfaction. Given the very visible integration of information communication technologies (ICTs) on the part of tourists and hosts at locations around the

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world; and the rising popularity of online platforms and entities like Airbnb, TripAdvisor or Google Maps as part of the tourism process, it is unsurprising that the smart tourism paradigm has gained such currency within industry and research. Taken with the acknowledgement of the need for ongoing critical perspectives, the development of smart tourism may be considered a boon for research and industry as it provides a cogent frame through which to understand how technology and data can be used to improve the tourism product.

It can be argued that the integration of ICTs dramatically reconfigures the process of tourism by permitting ongoing social connectivity within the journey and enabling the formation of large-scale peer-to-peer tourist networks. Thus, this paper will consider the effects of these and other technologically enabled developments upon the process of touristic consumption. Traditionally, the representative practice of tourism has been that of sightseeing. This is typified as a primarily visual method of consumption within canonical tourist texts such as those from MacCannell [3] and Urry [4] in which touristic destinations, i.e., 'sights', were consumed through ocular practices. The primacy of the visual in touristic consumption is illustrated in Rojek's [5, p. 58] quotation: "most tourists feel they have not fully absorbed a sight until they stand before it, see it and take a photograph to record the moment." However, the dominance of the visual as the premier way of understanding tourism began to wane in the early 21st century amongst greater attention to theory from the humanities arguing the importance of the role of the body and senses in tourist encounters, culturally specific ways of knowing, and tourist agency, within what is known as the 'performance turn' in tourism research.

At the current point in time, the rise of ICTs does also provide a radical disruption within the tourism process. And while both of these developments potentially destabilize the centrality of ocular practices within tourism, the term sightseeing is still widely used and continues to apotheosize the practice of tourism in a popular sense. From here the question arises, is sightseeing still an appropriate metaphor for conceptualizing touristic encounters, or are there better ways to understand the practice of tourists?

The purpose of this paper is to consider how tourism consumption occurs within the paradigm of smart tourism. While much attention has been given to the potential applied benefits of new technologies within smart tourism, much less has considered the social, cultural, and techno-political implications of the integration of new technological institutions within the tourism process. It is such that by unpacking smart tourist experience and consumption, the paper hopes to shed light on the complex system of entities and interactions within the wider terrain of the smart tourism ecosystem. The paper takes a conceptual approach by utilizing literature from the academic field of internet studies in order to provide an interdisciplinary overview of the smart tourism paradigm. Such a perspective helps support a dearth of conceptual research within tourism [6] and can add detail and gravity to discussions of the integration of ICTs into tourism.

Internet studies is an area of the humanities that is concerned with the influence of the internet and ICTs on society. As the internet has evolved into a ubiquitous social technology, the field has covered areas such as identity, sociality and techno-politics, while exploring internet-mediated social life [7]. Since the early 2000s, the shift to a widely participatory internet with Web 2.0 and the rise of social media has highlighted

the role of the internet as a platform for self-expression and civic participation within social activities including tourism. At present, social media platforms are not only integrated within but generative of tourist experiences as ICTs help us to connect to information, peers, locations, and services. Destinations and hosts integrate ICTs to support visitors. Experiences are streamed and shared as a means of verification and enhancement. And the large technological platforms that channel and collect data gain powers as actors and arbiters within touristic ecosystems. To consider such developments, the paper’s conceptual investigation is anchored in an interpretivist approach that is concerned with how the internet is appropriated within daily life and used by people as a tool for agency and meaning-making [8]. Using this approach, the paper seeks to examine some of the as-of-yet-unquestioned implications of smart tourism, as well as considering new ways to study and conceptualize this phenomenon.

The paper undertakes its investigation in the form of three interlocking areas of discussion which are taken from three prominent theoretical metaphors from across the fields of study: performance, place, and sharing. Each section presents thematic discussion and suggests areas for future research. At the culmination of the theoretical discussion, the paper will present a conceptual framework referred to as sitesharing [9]. This is intended as a both a departure from and continuation of the framework of sightseeing that has accompanied studies of tourism throughout the 20th century. Sitesharing presents a way to conceptualize the implicit political influence of ICTs within the field of tourism as well as a recognition of tourists’ agency to use these technologies to shape the social and cultural dimensions of tourism. This framework is intended to shed light on some of the implicit power structures within the smart tourism ecosystem as well as to explain trends and support inchoate theorizing on the experience of tourists within e-tourism.

2 Performance

The performance turn in tourism research that occurred during the late 20th century challenged the stereotype of the ‘passive’ sightseeing tourist [10]. Here, rather than the audience for staged performances of local culture, tourists were also seen as performers who contributed to the meaning of tourist locations through their individualized interpretations of, and behaviors at, the destination. From such an understanding it has been argued that, in addition to visual consumption, performance is an important theoretical frame through which to understand tourist encounters [11]. Drawing on Goffmanian thought, research within the performance turn suggested that tourists consumed locations not only in socially instructed ways but also in line with individualized motivations and interpretations; a contention that was supported by ethnographic studies of tourists on-site.

Just as tourist destinations have been conceptualized as locations for tourists’ to express different ideas or facets of their identity, so too has the online realm been considered as a location for self-expression. As social media has grown in popularity and the number of social platforms and spaces available online has increased, one important idea is Papacharissi’s concept of the “networked self” [12]. Here, Papacharissi contends that individuals commonly use a number of separate yet interlinked online profiles in order to perform the self across a variety of social contexts. To do

this, individuals make strategic decisions about how the self is presented on particular platforms and use technological functionalities to maintain distinctions between different audience groups. Taken from the perspective of tourists, the idea of the network self is salient not only as a way of managing social context but as a way for tourists to conduct mobile social relationships across space and time. Online avatars such as social profiles or email accounts provide tourists with different social affordances such as following, collaborating and dis/connecting [13]. However, while this compartmentalizing of identity and social relationships gives tourists the ability to manage their social experience, it also speaks to the pervasive context of the online audience within smart tourism and the potential weight of this virtual entity within the experience.

While tourism was previously conceptualized as a liminal experience that occurred in binary opposition to everyday life, the tourist's networked self now remains partly or wholly in contact with social relationships and responsibilities [13, 14]. The implication here is that the context for tourism performance changes too. Rather than something that occurred in an isolated, liminal timespace, touristic performances are now frequently integrated into the more mundane context of social media in which encounters may be shared, and feedback received, live in the moment. This pervasive connectivity means that the tourist may feel obliged to engage in routines of social communication within the journey. The negotiation of this social connectivity, framed through the presence of the online audience, is a nascent tension within smart tourism.

In terms of considering how tourists present themselves, or perform, to the audience, the conceptual frame of "microcelebrity" posits that individuals choreograph performances of self that are structured in relation to one's personal brand, desired attention, and the feedback from the audience [15, 16]. In a way that is similar to conventional celebrity, individuals shape their online performances to manage attention via strategies like audience management, self-editing, reciprocity, and play. Such techniques may require significant investment of time and energy on the part of the user, however, there are also benefits in terms of the receipt of capital. While it is possible to question the pervasiveness of the microcelebrity model as a mode of online performance for average users, its influence as a top-down discourse that shapes the context and norms of wider social media need also be considered.

Given the relationship between the online audience and performance strategies, smart tourism consumption should be seen as a social activity. Furthermore, tourists' online narratives should be seen as structured, externally-oriented performances at the same time as potential reflections of actual experience. As an example, travel influencers commonly share their experiences within the guise of personal narrative while at the same time fulfilling directives from professional partners that shape the form and tone of their output.

Regarding tourists' performance, some final concerns raised by the discussion in the paper but beyond its scope are, what affect does the disciplinary gaze of the online audience have on the performances of tourists (particularly given the liminal and transformative context of tourism)? To what extent is the desire for performance-derived attention and capital a motivator for experience? And, how and when do tourists switch consciousness between online/offline or more/less social planes within the networked self?

3 Place

The doing of tourism is closely intertwined with the notion of place. In his foundational work, MacCannell [3] describes tourist places as a sequence of differently arranged stages which structure a variety of discursive relationships between tourists and locals. Such a viewpoint suggested a relatively structured relationship between tourists and place, an idea also supported by the hermeneutic cycle of touristic representation, which contends that tourists’ experiences of place are primed by the materials consumed prior to travel [17]. However, in recent scholarship attention has shifted to tourists individualized ways of not only seeing and consuming but also telling and shaping the landscape.

As we enter the era of smart tourism, the conceptualization of tourist place may broaden from a purely physical, atom-based environment to consider tourist environments shaped of bytes in online space. Important in an understanding of online space is the idea of Web 2.0 and participatory culture. The second-generation Web 2.0 promoted an environment which lowered entry barriers to content creation and supported involvement from amateur users in forms such as blogs, wikis, forums and social media [18]. Implicit here is the idea that individuals have the ability to collaborate with likeminded users and participate in the shaping of the cultural narratives within their fields of interest. Such group participation may provide a sense of agency to those involved and destabilize the position of established players. A famous example compares the user-created Wikipedia with Encyclopedia Britannica. From a tourism perspective, the website TripAdvisor, a repository of user-created content, has come to challenge incumbents in the field such as guidebooks publishers as a source of knowledge.

It may be argued that the self-publishing capabilities of Web 2.0 lend agency to tourists as shapers of tourist place and practice. Tourist narratives are shared in great numbers on social media and these tell the stories of tourists’ individualized experiences with touristic locations. Aside from written and/or visual narratives, tourists shared stories also contain metadata such as hashtags, keywords, and geo-location information, which add layers of meaning and allow these stories to be organized into particular categories such as place, socio-cultural demographics, or by emotion. The agglomeration and sorting of tourist-created content allows for the surfacing of dominant themes and ideas, which add “social, emotional, psychological, and aesthetic dimensions to a sense of place” [19, p. 42]. Drawing on the rhetoric and technological functionality of Web 2.0 and the participatory internet, such a point suggests individual tourists’ agency to shape the meanings of touristic places and culture.

Apart from the democratization of tourist placemaking, another aspect here is the hybridization of the tourist landscape. The creation of digital content creates layers of textual, visual, and other meanings that are overlain upon physical place. As tourists use ICTs as part of anticipating, consuming, and telling travel, we are led toward an increasingly hybridized digital-physical travel experience that may be considered as augmented or virtual reality travel. Within smart tourism, tourists’ consciousness and attention will be split between the physical landscape and the screen (or cognitive interface) and they will need to manage both physical and digital inputs as part of

conducting tourism. As tourists themselves form the main source for the production of data and meanings within smart tourism, their influence on tourist landscapes should be seen as implicit. In this environment, rather than rarefied ‘sights’ which remained in some way separate from the visitor, tourism is conducted at permeable ‘sites’ for which meaning is spread across digital and physical layers.

Some further ideas to consider here are how will different layers of narrative, such as narratives from locals versus tourists, or narratives in different languages, merge in the creation of place? How will tourists balance between physical and online experiences in hybridized places? And how does the channeling and potential manipulation of data by technological elements affect its meaning?

4 Sharing

Tourists have always recorded their journeys and shared these with others as a variety of media forms. Travel narratives were shared not only as a way of recounting the events, landscapes and interactions encountered during travel but also as a way of describing personal growth. In the current era of e-tourism tourists upload personal stories to the internet in great numbers. While the telling of online travel narratives is frequently explained as a social imperative such as the act of staying in contact with friends and loved ones or establishing new relationships, the telling of online travel tales is not only a social activity but also is also influenced by the conventions of tourism and the operation of technology and tourism companies. The act of disclosing personal information online may be seen as being influenced by the discourse of “sharing”, which has been developed in part to assist the commercial operations of online platforms [20]. While this term has varied, generally positive connotations in its original sense, these meanings may be coopted by corporations in order to facilitate the collection of consumer data. Lampinen [21, p. 2] explains that platforms encourage a culture of personal disclosure and social reciprocity: “in part because the more we share, the more data they can amass about everyday activities that used to be difficult to track.” This culture of sharing is also apparent within the sphere of smart tourism as a way of supporting the collection of data regarding tourists’ experiences and opinions.

Smart tourism valorizes ICT as a technological agent facilitating connections between stakeholders in order to increase the value of tourist experience. Within this context, tourists are encouraged to share their personal narratives and data in order to ostensibly improve their experience. This sharing occurs in different ways, both purposefully, as in the case of personal narratives such as reviews, comments, messages or queries; or automatically via sensors within applications, personal devices or the physical landscape (i.e., IoT). However, once this data is shared it will likely not go to directly to the host but rather through the hands of technological intermediaries such as online platforms, device makers, and internet connectivity providers. For online platforms in particular, their business models involve collecting, analyzing, and sometimes selling, the data collected from users. Furthermore, as platforms offer the facilities for social practices, they are also able to develop leverage in influencing how the social practices take place.

The political influence that platforms exert on their users may be viewed by examining the different technological structures which underpin their operation such as algorithms, protocols and defaults [22]. These structures can shape social practices or flows in particular ways, such as the character limit imposed on communications on Twitter, or the way users are incentivized to leave reviews on Airbnb by automatic reminders or status tiers. While these examples may appear insignificant, they demonstrate the ability of platforms to influence how traveler data is created and how travel takes place and may culminate in the influencing of traveler sociality and culture.

Within the smart tourism paradigm, touristic consumption necessitates the sharing of data whether as personal narratives, ambient data, metadata or otherwise. Such a scenario permits the political influence of technology companies as actors within the sphere of tourism. While the influence of large non-tourism specific technology companies such as the GAFAM platforms (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft) has arguably been minimal up until this point in time, there exists significant potential for these entities to become players in the tourism ecosystem. The influence which platforms exert within a tourism sphere has so far received little scholarly attention [23], and need be considered in more depth as technology companies such as online platforms and device makers continue to channel the ever-increasing flows of tourist data.

Considering the influence of technological intermediaries on tourism, some final questions to consider are, as tourism is a global endeavor but connectivity services differ markedly around the world, to what extent does the digital divide affect the implementation, growth and consistency of smart tourism? Will privacy concerns, or social discourses like ‘oversharing’, reduce tourists’ willingness to share data? And, in the era of informationalization, to what extent are personalized narratives like selfies essential markers of touristic consumption?

5 Discussion

Building on the theoretical discussion provided, this section will put forward a conceptual framework referred to as sitesharing in order to theorize touristic consumption within the smart tourism paradigm. Sitesharing is defined as a mode of tourism in which the sharing of online narratives is the requisite act of touristic consumption. In order to further explain this concept, the paper will discuss the two constituent components of the term: site and sharing.

Within the sitesharing framework, the visual sight is swapped for the more multidimensional site – a location of mundane events, happenings, or transitions – to indicate a theoretical move away from a privileging of ocular practices toward one of agency, possibility and mutability. Many have commented on the democratic possibilities of social media as a forum for individuals to spread ideas and form likeminded communities in which the balance of power shifts from the institution to the individual [18]. Such possibilities have to an extent been realized within the sphere of tourism through online platforms such as TripAdvisor, Couchsurfing and Airbnb; or through online movements with a smaller or more ephemeral footprint such as #vanlife, #holidayspam, or even #travel. While this paper acknowledges the pervasive structuring influence of platforms and their political economies, it also recognizes the

redistribution of power towards tourists which these platforms may permit. Rather than the sight, which is staged for tourists' visual consumption and may be physically or discursively separated from tourists, as MacCannell [3] outlined in his description of touristic front-stages, it is the site, a more open, fluid location of indeterminate meaning and potentiality which is used as the spatial metaphor for tourist places. Such a shift involves a recognition of tourists' ability to identify, consume and promote locations as touristic based on their own choices and also the ability for the meanings contained within place to be shaped and changed over time. From here, the next part will go on to consider the integral role of sharing within smart tourism.

In this era of information saturation, is it still enough for the tourist merely to be present before and gaze upon an attraction? The intensification of tourists' photographic practices, as highlighted by recent exposés from popular touristic locations such as Angkor Wat [24], speaks to the importance of personalized narratives as an integral component of touristic consumption. Narrative techniques such as the selfie fulfill an authenticating function by providing personalized narratives prominently featuring the tourist protagonist. Here, the pervasive dissemination of not only the global but also the personal enabled by the internet raises the bar on tourist consumption. Rather than witnessing in a personal sense, the seeing with one's own eyes on which sightseeing was predicated, it is rather the dissemination of the experience to others, the act of sharing, which becomes the defining practice of tourist consumption. Further, as smart tourism hinges upon ongoing communication and connectivity, within this paradigm the consumption of experience in fact necessitates the sharing of experiential data in order to sustain service relationships. Indeed, to what extent tourists will have the ability to opt out of, or minimize, data sharing within smart tourism remains to be seen.

Taken on the back of techno-optimistic narratives such as the participatory culture, sitiesharing permits greater openness in the interpretation of tourist behaviors and the consideration of what and where is touristic. This is not, however, necessarily at the expense of touristic grand narratives and related trends in tourist preferences. As an example, in a recent paper MacCannell [25] notes that: "There are several hundred thousand "selfie" type pictures posted on the Web of tourists at the Golden Gate Bridge. There are only several dozen similar pictures at the equally large and busy Oakland Bay Bridge two kilometers away." It is not surprising that the Golden Gate Bridge retains its cultural power as a tourist icon after nearly a century as the premier landmark of San Francisco. However, what this observation also reveals about the nature of sitiesharing as touristic consumption is the changing focus of the tourists' gaze (or, perhaps, instinct) not in terms of target but rather configuration. The image of the Golden Gate Bridge is no longer presented as a landscape but rather a portrait. In the case of the selfie image, the person or people within the frame become the main subject while the background is used to elevate the self which is presented in the foreground [26]. This example of the shifting nature of touristic instinct highlights that sitiesharing is as an evolution of, but not necessarily a radical departure from, sightseeing. In sitiesharing, ICTs become an essential component of experience; the digital image may be as or more important than the on-site events. Finally, just as with sightseeing, sitiesharing is not an all-encompassing frame. Even as smart tourism progresses, it will contain different levels of technological adoption, literacy and interest, that need be taken into account in producing a broad and textured understanding of tourism.

6 Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated how internet studies theory may be productively applied within the context of smart tourism. Following its interpretivist perspective, the paper summarizes four emergent dimensions of sitesharing that may be utilized as the base for future research:

- 1) Tourists perform their experiences to, and with, the online audience. [Performance]
- 2) Tourism place and experience are spread across physical and digital space. [Place]
- 3) IT companies act as powerful intermediaries within the tourism value chain. [Sharing]
- 4) Individual tourists gain agency within an increasingly complex touristic ecosystem. [Sitesharing]

As this paper has argued, the paradigm of smart tourism is a useful structure through which to understand the involvement of ICTs within tourism. However, co-opting marketing jargon assuming that a technology is inherently beneficial can be problematic, an issue which the literature has been cognizant of. The frame of site-sharing provides a useful lens for critically analyzing smart tourism by making visible some of the technopolitical structures which underlie its enactment. More work is needed which explores the practices through which tourists engage in sitesharing and how ICTs are integrated as part of the journey. Data will be an ever-present concern of future tourism study and so understanding the conditions which produce, manage and implement data flows will be an increasingly important part of understanding tourism. Internet studies can be a helpful domain in providing a nuanced view of such activities.

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