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Smartphone Use During Travel

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Smartphones and Travel: A mediated travel experience

Introduction

As existing technologies are updated and new technologies are brought into the globalized travel marketplace, what it means to travel is changing. The distance between home and other is rapidly diminishing (White & White, 2007). Of various technologies impacting the way we travel, it appears the Smartphone is having a profound effect in both home and travel contexts (Wang, Dang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2016). It is reported that by 2016, 51% of us will use Smartphones during travel. This is up from 43.5% in 2015. There are presently more than 300,000 travel applications to address most any situation and desire (Dickenson, Ghali, Cherrett, Speed, Davies, Norgate; 2014)

The aim of this study is to further explore the relationship travelers, and in this case young travelers, have with their Smartphones during travel. A bigger objective is to better understand if and how the travel experience is being mediated by the use of Smartphones. The Smartphone is selected specifically and refers to hand held technology with far greater capability than traditional cellular telephones.

Despite the newness of the Smartphone, there already exists considerable literature on how people use the Smartphone during travel (Dickson, Ghali, Cherrett, & Speed, 2014). Smartphones are said to affect the travel experience by creating a sense of safety, easing decision making, and providing travelers with support, all adding to increased confidence. The smartphone, with all its capabilities, is said to transform tourists into explorers able to roam destinations independently, to enjoy enroute experiences, and explore unfamiliar destinations with more confidence (Wang, Park & Fesenmaier, 2011). Additionally Smartphones are reported to add value to the trip, make it easier and easier to solve problems, to share experiences and store memories, and enhance travel satisfaction (Tussyadiah, 2015). Theoretical frameworks to situate Smartphone use during travel are sparse but include Diffusion of Innovation (DOA) and Spillover among others (MacKay & Vogt, 2012). DOA is used to explain the spread of technology in different domains of life (Rogers, 2004). Spillover attempts to explain the blurring of work related technology into other domains and vice versa (Chesley, 2005). Both appear marginal in situating contemporary use of Smartphone use during travel because the today the Smartphone acts as much as a crutch as an enhancement. To separate the Smartphone as the crutch versus the enhancement is a subjective task. However, Currie's (1997) early work proposed a framework that posits people maintain home based behaviours during travel that provide comfort and that present too much tension for which to change.

This paper reports on a study of a sample of backpackers in Edinburgh, Scotland. A brief quantitative survey, with one key qualitative component, is used to better understand the relationship between the traveler and their smartphone, and how the travel experience is mediated by its use. Study findings offer insights into a technology-induced, mediated travel experience and ultimately, the potential for a changing relationship between the traveler and place.

Method

During the winter of 2015, we collected data from 126 young travelers in Edinburgh, Scotland, using a brief quantitative survey tool. Interviews were conducted in-person in a systematic manner, that is, every 5th person. Respondents were found in two popular public squares located near several backpacker hostels. In total, 11 people rejected the survey of the 126 completes. The tool was intentionally brief to increase likelihood of acceptance by potential respondents in an intercept-survey manner. The questionnaire includes typical respondent profile items, along with two central measures. The first includes 11 items and focusses on how the traveler uses the Smartphone during travel. The second measure of 15 items is based on a five-point agreement scale and explores the relationship between the traveler and their phone. The survey also includes an open ended question asking, "What would your travel be like if you did not have your phone with you?".

Results

93% of the sample is between 18 and 30 years of age, 98% reported traveling with their phone, 64% is female, 31% male, and 3% other, 95% self-reported as adventurous or very adventurous travelers, and 55% reported using their phone more than 11 times a day. The sample straddles the definition of the backpacker and "flashpacker." The former is defined as younger, flexible, budget conscious, possess a desire to meet others to explore, and they tend to take longer trips (Pearce & Loker-Murphy, 1995). The flashpacker is similarly described, but tends to be more technologically connected with home during travel (Germann & Moris-Paris, 2015).

When respondents were asked where their favourite place is to use the smartphone during travel, the most common responses are cafés or hostels, but many indicated that Wi-Fi is becoming so ubiquitous, that 'anywhere' is rapidly becoming more realistic. When asked if they would stay in a hostel without Wi-Fi, 45% indicated yes, while 27% reported no, and related comments suggested that Wi-Fi might be accessed most anywhere today.

The most common *daily* uses for the Smartphone are to take pictures (89%), access social media (85%), access travel apps (75%), connect with friends (61%), connect with family (56%), post on social media (49%), listen to music (46%), make travel arrangements (33%), book accommodation (25%), play games (16%), and finally, to watch movies and television shows (7%).

Pearson Chi Square revealed gender differences in 7 of the 13 items. Items garnering a p value of <.05 or less include connecting with family, connecting with friends, connecting with work, make travel arrangements, book accommodations, posting of social media, and play games. Of the significant items, females scored a higher mean in 3 of the 7, they are; connecting with family, connecting with friends, and posting on social media,

Respondents were asked the extent to agree or disagree with a series of statements, to reveal insights of their relationship with their phone during travel. Items are presented herein by their combined agree and strongly agree, based on a five point Likert scale of importance.

1. My Smartphone makes travel more comfortable for me (98%)
2. Traveling with my Smartphone makes travel a lot easier (96%);
3. I enjoy being able to look up information while I travel (94%);
4. The phone makes my travel feel safer (78%);
5. My family is pleased that I bring my phone with me during travel (72%);
6. In the future I will always travel with my Smartphone (70%);
7. Other people use their Smartphones too much while traveling (70%);
8. I would like to try travel without my phone (53%)
9. I use my phone too much during travel (50%)
10. It is important for to stay connected with social media while I travel (29%)
11. Traveling with my phone makes me feel like I never left home (19%)
12. I bring my phone for emergency reasons only (15%)
13. I would not travel as much without my phone (13%)
14. I wish I did not bring my when I travel (8%)
15. I would not travel at all without my phone (8%)

Pearson Chi Square (at $<.05$) revealed gender differences in 4 of the 15 items including:

- i. I use my Smartphone too much while I travel
- ii. I wish I did not bring my Smartphone on my trips
- iii. I would not travel if I could not bring my Smartphone with me
- iv. It is important to me to stay connected on social media while I travel

Generally respondents have a strong connection to their Smartphone and report that it enhances their travel planning and experience. However, some contradictions emerged, such as 53% would like to try travel without their phone, but only 8% indicated they wish they did not bring their phone. Interestingly, 76% believe that others use their phone too much during travel, while 50% believe they (respondents themselves) use their phones too much.

The most interesting aspect of the results involve qualitative responses to the question of: *How would your travel experience be different without your phone?* This question was the final question and 101 of the 126 respondents provided a qualitative response. Responses followed one of two themes: the first being that the phone facilitates travel in many positive ways similar to previous literature on the subject. For example, without the phone, travel for the respondent would be more difficult; get lost more; be more unsafe; travel would be more risky, and have to plan more; travel would be different, I would have to ask people about directions; I would have to plan more carefully; I would be more anxious and nervous; and I could not be as spontaneous. Each response implies that the approach to travel, or the travel experience itself, would be different without use of the phone. A second theme, referred to as longing, included items such as: [without my phone...] I would be more engaged and free and it would be better; it would be more exciting and spontaneous; and it would be more peaceful.

The implications of this research suggest the Smartphone is having a profound effect on the way travel is planned and experienced. Germann and Moris-Paris (2015) suggest similar findings of a

mediated travel experience in their analysis of “flashpackers” as does Wang and Fesmaier (2015), and both point to the positives that the phone brings to travel. The results of this study also suggest respondents believe the phone brings numerous advantages to travel, but where this study differs, is that it begins to show hints of tension in the use of the phone during travel.

Discussion

This research addresses two questions while invoking many more. The research provides insights into how the Smartphone is used during travel and the aspects of the travel-based relationship young travelers have with their phones. This data suggest a mediated travel experience based on the Smartphone facilitating different approaches (spontaneity and ease) to travel, as well as perceived freedom and safety during travel. By adding to the perception of certainty and safety to travel has Smartphone use increased the number of people traveling? The WTO proudly announced in 2012 the one-billionth arrival and a milestone in global mobility.

Has the phone impacted the types of people that travel, that is, provided that same perception of certainty and safety, are those who otherwise would not travel, travelling? Plog’s (2002) Model of Venturesomeness details psychographic types who were more and less likely to travel. Venturers are likely to travel without many comforts and safety amenities, while dependables will not. Is the growth in global travel fueled by an influx of dependables, emancipated by hand held technology? This phenomena being well-documented in the definition of the “flashpacker” (Germann & Moris-Paris 2015).

What implications does it hold for the way we experience a place in relation to contact with local people? It was not long ago that finding directions in a new locale meant having to talk to people on the street. Later directions could be found while huddled in an internet café but still with other people. Today the smartphone provides GPS and maps and translators for signs and travel information that make contact with local people more optional than mandatory. How does a lessened reliance on local contact affect the travel experience?

What implications does it hold for the notion of vicarious travel? How much do we know about the relationship between young adult children and their parents, related to travel? Are parents living vicariously through their children’s real-time contact in far off exotic locales? Who benefits more? Is this the new way young people experience place?

The youth cohort of 18 to 30 is traveling more than ever. Smartphone facilitated travel is likely an important reason for this growth. It is reported that over 20% of all global arrivals are now in this youth segment (Bicikova 2014). What does such a high rate of travel mean for this group as it develops and works through its life-long travel career (Pearce & Uk-II, 2005)? Will there be a new type of travel emerge? Will there be a backlash to using the phone during travel? In Australia, some hostels have implemented a social hour, whereby no phones are allowed in the commons and people have to talk to each other. Will travel without the Smartphone be the new frontier of extreme?

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