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Why it Matters: The Tourist/traveller Dichotomy in the Context of Pandemic-era Overtourism

Kelley A. McClinchey
Wilfrid Laurier University

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Why it matters: The Tourist/traveller Dichotomy in the Context of Overtourism

Introduction

We've all seen them, the photos of the Trevi Fountain in Rome, Las Ramblas in Barcelona, Yellowstone National Park in the USA, and many other places flooded with visitors. Visitors behaving badly has even become a recent topic of mainstream news media (Tiefenthäler, 2023). But are they *all* tourists? What about lifestyle travellers defacing ancient ruins, infiltrating sacred sites for the perfect photo, or digital nomads staying in Airbnbs adding to regional housing crises (Smigiel, 2023)? The traveller/tourist dichotomy has been discussed in academia and everyday media for quite some time, scholars describing travellers as more drifter/explorers and tourists as pleasure seekers (Cohen, 2010). Travel writers have declared strong perspectives extracted from personal observations and travel experiences describing tourists as behaving badly with travellers behaving more responsibly (Flinn, 2014). But why is there even more attention now? The answer may be associated with another recent phenomenon that has gained attention in academia and media, that of overtourism (Phi, 2020). This research explores what it means to be a traveller/tourist through a discourse analysis of online blogs and travel news opinion pieces investigating this contradiction in the context of overtourism.

Literature Review

Traveller/tourist Dichotomy

The traveller/tourist dichotomy begins with travel being depicted as superior to tourism; the idea of the traveller heavily based in anti-tourism and tourist angst, the tourist viewed negatively (Dann, 1999). Many theoretical assumptions of tourists and travellers concentrate on the individual rather than social and cultural influences (Mehmetoglu, 2004), taking for granted wider cultural discourses within the context of holidaying and travelling (McCabe, 2005). Others have sought to view the traveller or tourist based on the places travelled to (Oakes, 2005) or envision travellers as being more freely mobile, often described as backpackers or lifestyle travellers partaking in alternative tourism (Cohen, 2010). Travellers conjuring up images of being more responsible, having less negative impact on a local destination, and associated with good behaviour (Wood & House, 1992). Tourists are perceived as passive observers, seeking comfort, negatively impacting local communities (O'Reilly, 2005). These distinctions have become problematic in the era of increasing mobility, accessibility and social media influences (e.g. Gretzel, 2019). Tourism in a wide range of contexts is contributing to negative impacts and, potentially, overtourism (Butler & Dodds, 2022).

Overtourism

Scholars began coining a 'new tourism phenomenon' (Milano et al., 2019 p.353) as overtourism based on failed sustainability indicators (Mihalic, 2020). Overtourism, an extension of the carrying capacity concept, is defined as the excessive growth of tourism leading to overcrowding causing permanent damages to the natural environment and everyday lives of local communities (Wall, 2019). Several edited compilations offer case studies and conceptual discussions with policy recommendations for responsible management (Milano et al., 2019; Séraphin et al., 2020), while some work reports that response to and management of overtourism has been a failure (Butler & Dodds, 2022). Since then, scholars have acknowledged its complexity offering solutions for overtourism by developing strategies for more resilient and sustainable tourism (Fontanari &

Traskevich, 2023; Kirilenko et al., 2023). Much of the premise of overtourism is the context of overgrowth largely based on increased number of visitors, tourism-dedicated infrastructure, and a loss of resources for local communities (Dodds & Butler, 2019). However, scholarly work has had its limitations in bringing awareness to the thematic threads of overtourism and expanding this discourse is recommended (O'Regan et al., 2022). There is limited acknowledgement as to what kind of tourist/traveller results in overtourism in specific contexts. One such way to improve this, is to better understand how everyday media has framed, not just overtourism, but the terms traveller and tourist. These terms and their relationship with each other need to be further conceptualized because our interpretations of what - and who they are - affect how they impact destinations.

Methodology

As a socially constructive and interpretive inquiry, this study applied discourse analysis (DA), to investigate the traveller/tourist dichotomy and its connection to overtourism (Hannam & Knox, 2005). DA has grown steadily in tourism research since the critical turn (Canally & Carmichael, 2011; Hassanli et al., 2019; Wang & Morais, 2014) with critical DA being a practical tool in analyzing the power constructions involved in socio-cultural activities (Foucault, 1972; Muldoon et al., 2023; Yan & Santos, 2009). As an extension of this work, this study examined through a latent thematic analysis, online blogs and news opinion articles on the topic of traveller/tourist from 2002 until 2023 (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A Google search using several key word combinations (e.g. 'traveller vs tourist' and 'tourist + traveller'), revealed several thousand hits of which the first 100 related documents (Whalen, 2018) specific to discussing the definitions, and similarities and differences of the terms were noted. A final number of 30 online documents were selected once repetition of content and ideas was reached and no new themes emerged (Walters, 2016).

Results

DA indicated that the traveller/tourist dichotomy is framed as good/bad and as do's/don'ts. Themes emerged as the tourist gaze, destination choice, experiences sought, personal values/attitudes, and travel behaviour. The travellers' gaze looks upon a place as a natural/cultural landscape void of outsiders whereas the tourist gazes upon themselves foremost, as in the selfie (Néjé, 2023). Travellers are perceived as travelling individually, packing lightly, wandering and deviating, being spontaneous, and purchasing unique keepsakes of local culture (Resuma, 2021; Zaremba, 2016). For tourists, destination choices are must-see, major attractions yet for travellers they are off-the-beaten-track places, not well-known (Ermogenis, 2018). Tourists are perceived as travelling in groups, packing heavily, having streamlined mobility, well-planned itineraries, and purchasing trinkets as souvenirs (Eaton, 2015). The discourse presents travellers as caring and tourists as not caring (Macca, 2023). Some present a discourse of 'do be a traveller' and 'don't be a tourist' (Flinn, 2014; Meyer, n.d.) whereas others suggest that there is no difference, or it borders on travel snobbery (Groundwater, 2018; Hoeller, 2015). Overtourism in the media refers to the bad behaviour of tourists but also use examples of travellers (backpackers, digital nomads) in their discussions as well (Rodriguez, 2023).

Discussion and Conclusion

Results indicated that the traveller/tourist discourse ‘good/bad’ represents tourists as behaving in ways that contribute more to overtourism with travellers being presented as the solution to overtourism (Compton & Haitt, 2023). These generalized assumptions can be problematic as negative impacts occur in both contexts. Those perceived as travellers such as backpackers or ‘beg-packers’ in Thailand have been criticized for their low level of spending, pollution, anti-social and disruptive behaviour (Hess, 2019) and digital nomads’ burden on an overstretched environment are a threat to sustainability (Ledsom, 2022). These discourses more silent in the context of overtourism. Digital nomads, backpackers and lifestyle travellers can cause immense negative impacts on a destination (Jover & Diaz-Parra, 2022) and tourists that perceive themselves as travellers can behave in extremely inappropriate ways (Hardingham-Gill, 2019) encouraging other travellers (indirectly through social media) to do the same.

Both travellers/tourists’ mobility, accessibility and privilege are intricately weaved within the neocolonial structures of tourism that are grounded in imperialism and that reinforces the power dynamics visitors have on a place (Sinclair-Maragh & Gursoy, 2015). There is already a call for a more nuanced approach to overtourism (O’Regan et al., 2022) and this should also include the traveller/tourist dichotomy. Until we conceptualize the traveller/tourist beyond the frame of good/bad or do/don’t both will lead to negative impacts and, potentially, overtourism.

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