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Wherever You Go, There We Are: Tourism in a Society of Ubiquitous Connectivity

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Abstract

This document is synthesis and analysis of literature from tourism and computer-mediated communication. While the discussed concepts have been addressed similarly in both fields, little direct interdisciplinary interaction has existed. There is much that each field can learn from the other, and current research regarding computer-mediated communication and mobile communication technologies have the ability to make profound contributions in how we understand the role of tourism in the future. As such, the issue of defining the modern touristic experience, the social science research in mobile information and communication technology which holds relevance to tourism, why this nexus of disparate fields matters to tourism researchers and practitioners, and the prospects for future research are specifically examined.

Keywords: touristic experiences, computer-mediated communication, mobile technology, social implications

INTRODUCTION

The role of tourism in society can be a challenge to explain to the general layperson. After all, in world where two-way, interactive media seems to negate the need for travel, and increased concerns on the environmental impacts of transportation are expressed, it seems like tourism may no longer be necessary. Yet, tourism researchers examining arrivals (worldwide) know that tourism continues to be a dominating economic force for many countries. Therefore, in order to understand the role of tourism, it is necessary to understand what makes something a “touristic experience,” and how the changing aspects of modern life factor into tourism.

When a person returns from a trip to some far-off destination, the tales of those adventures can be found in their usual haunts: scattered postcards and letters, memoirs sent to friends, photographs placed in treasured albums, and floating through the ether of our memories as we recall the stories we've heard or told. Yet, with increasing frequency, these tales are also finding their way to computer-mediated communication spaces enabled by mobile information and communication technologies, such as online social networking web sites and cellular phone text messages. No longer are the stories of these travels being told exclusively upon their completion, but rather during the actual event, and often with distant persons who have the ability to vicariously experience the travels themselves, or even alter the experience for the traveler. Travel is morphing from an experience to be relayed at a later date, into a narrative that exists between the traveler and their social network.

With this increasing intertwining of conversation with those at home while out on a trip, the elements that define a person as being “away” are becoming less clear. In addition, as more information becomes available and is shared about various locales, even those which a person may define as “home” are having new discoveries presented to local residents, which results in locals having a tourist-style experience within their own community. Thus, this idea of “home” versus “away” is becoming a less distinct notion, since both appear to be able to occur within the other’s domain.

Combined, these issues of the changing narrative of the traveler, and the unusual blending of “home” and “away” make up a major aspect of what is loosely termed as the “touristic experience.” This document focuses on that shifting target in tourism research - the touristic experience - and additionally the role that information and communication technologies (ICT) - specifically those technologies which are mobile - have in affecting that experience. Since the touristic experience is comprised of a large number of aspects, it can be difficult to pin down the particular elements which hold the greatest influence. However, in a review of the most recent tourism research literature focused on defining the touristic experience, the issue of “home” versus “away” is the most prominent factor cited in the makeup of the touristic experience (Davis, 2001; Hui, 2008; Jansson, 2007; Uriely, 2005).

In a response to this conundrum, the following sections will examine the concept of the “touristic experience” and the important issues therein and provide a short background on the study of the social affects of mobile information and communication technologies. The document will conclude with an understanding as why these concepts matter to tourism researchers and practitioners, and provide some ideas for examining these topics further.

Defining the "Touristic Experience"

Much of the prior ideas of tourism and what defines the touristic experience come initially from the discussion of Thorstein Veblen's 1899 work, "The Theory of the Leisure Class," which provided some of the first real analysis of tourists, with particular regard to the wealthy individuals going on European "Grand Tours" which were popular at the time (Veblen, 1899). Tourism studies - as a unique academic field - is relatively new, and as such studies related to tourism (and the related concepts of proximity and mobility) were often coming from sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and economists, and were creating their own concepts of what made a "touristic experience." Ultimately, the majority of studies considered being "away" as what defined a touristic experience, with the general terms of being "more than 50 miles from home, for purposes other than work or business."

It took until much more recently with the work of sociologist John Urry - examining the earlier works of Boden and Molotch, and Robert Putnam, where he noted that studying a touristic experience required an understanding of social aspects of "home" versus "away" and how virtual co-presence plays into that (Urry, 2002; Urry, 2003). His work had noted that, "mobile electronic devices makes it possible for people to leave traces of their selves in informational space," an idea which has served as a focal point in understanding how simultaneous moments of “home” and “away” can occur, owing to mobile ICT. Urry's work has then largely served as a foundation for current studies on the social aspect of the tourism experience (Ballantyne, Packer & Axelsen, 2009; Jansson, 2007). However, since this blending of “home” and “away” has occurred, Urry has actually declared that the concept of “tourism” no longer exists (Urry, 2003).

The husband and wife team of Peter White and Naomi Rosh White have also been prominent in the tourism research community for their development of defining the tourist experience through the notion of “home” and “away” in ethnographic research. As White & White's foundational study of tourists in New Zealand notes, the idea of "home" vs. "away" has become increasingly complicated compared to decades past, as geographic separation no longer mandates that the tourist also be separated from prior social and emotional connections (White & White, 2007). As such, White & White include the previously developed phenomenological concept of "life worlds" in their definition of the “touristic experience,” which are the shared, constructed social environments in which an individual lives (Schutz & Luckmann, 1980). This “life world” additionally maintains a distinction from physical worlds, which is the geographic, or proximity-based environment an individual lives in, and it is also

this proxemic "world" that the aforementioned researchers believe holds less importance than it had in the past (White & White, 2008).

White & White also include the concept of the "deterritorialization of relationships," in this "home" versus "away" aspect, in which they argue modern communication services have permitted strong interpersonal relationships to remain salient in spite of physical distance. It is their belief that this deterritorialization of relationships has implications toward how "home" is defined (as "home" can be thought of as being an emotional state), and thus impacts how the nature of "away" is perceived. White and White based this sub-concept on Williams and McIntyre's definition of "deterritorialization of relationships" (Williams & McIntyre, 2001). Zhao's concepts of "co-presence," "telepresence," and "telecopresence" also influenced White & White's definition of the touristic experience (Zhao, 2003). Zhao defined "telecopresence" as people engaged in reciprocal interaction carried out through an electronic communications network.

Later work by Jansson takes a different approach, suggesting a new framework for considering the arbiter of co-presence - the mobile communication devices - and that they may be involved with creating a new dialectic: encapsulation and decapsulation (Jansson, 2007). In his research, Jansson argues that mobile communication can assist with an encapsulating experience - where the tourist plays along with the "role" prescribed to them by the tourist site - but more likely creates decapsulation, as the moments of co-presence draw the tourist out of "the moment" and back into their prior world of familiarity. As such, he suggests that encapsulation - and thus being "away" and having a touristic experience - might only occur for those who choose to have a full escape from their lives at home: turning off the cell phone and computer, and leaving their watches behind. Jansson further disagrees with Urry's assertion that "tourism is dead," by suggesting that it is merely redefined, and no longer can be considered as explicitly being a sense of "away." This assertion is further supported by the work of Gale, who notes that "away" can be bought "home" and be considered just as much a tourism experience as any other (Gale, 2009).

When taking a sociological approach to the study of the touristic experience, I choose to subscribe to ideas put forth by Jansson and Gale that "home" and "away" can no longer be considered discrete entities since they are not exclusive situations. Instead, I find that it may be more apt to move toward the idea of encapsulation / decapsulation to define the touristic experience, which leans toward studying the mindful engagement in a destination, no matter whether that locale is near or far from the traveler's primary residence. In addition, it may be useful to consider the concept of "mental propinquity" - that is the mental sense of nearness - when considering how far away a traveler feels they are from their social network of friends, family, and colleagues.

Social Science of Mobile Information Technologies

Mobile information and communication technology (ICT) has a much longer and more varied history in research compared to the attempt to define the concept of the "tourist experience." There has been much work which examined mobile ICT from the perspective of the technical engineering involved, the ergonomics of product design, and the development of the networks required to make such technologies function. However, that broad approach is not the focus of this document, but rather the intention is to provide a brief overview of the social science behind mobile ICT.

From a purely definitional perspective, mobile ICT is any information and communication technology which has been expressly designed to be used by person away from a fixed location (Jensen, 2000). It should be noted that this does not include any technology that happens to have been "made mobile," such as the use of desktop computers in non-traditional settings, nor does this internet

communication technologies which would not be portable without non-human assistance (for example, an aircraft's communication system - while technically a mobile communication system - does not apply as a person could not use that technology without the aircraft being present). Mobile ICT is comprised of a range of technologies that typically consist of devices such as cellular telephones, personal digital assistants, pagers, laptop computers, and handheld computers. In addition, global positioning system (GPS) receivers are often also included in the group of mobile ICT owing the use of GPS data to provide salient information transient individuals (GPS is used both alone and as a complementary technology to other forms of mobile ICT).

While mobile wireless communication has been around since the turn of century with the use of low-power continuous wave (Morse code) communications between amateur radio operators in the early 1930's, it has really only been with the advent of the cellular telephone and its use by the general public that the social effects have begun to be studied (Jensen, 2000; Ling, 2008). Starting in the mid-1990s, researchers in Scandinavia began to examine the social effects of cellular telephone use as the use of those devices began to skyrocket. On the forefront of this research has been Rich Ling, a researcher with Telenor in Norway. His work, based on the sociological foundations of Emile Durkheim and Erving Goffman, has largely focused on how mobile communication - with particular regard to the cell phone - has mediated both virtually co-present and physically co-present communication (Ling, 2008). He notes that mobile communication can be used as a form of ritual interaction, which does not require that a person be in the same physical location for that ritual to occur. As an example, a person may have a ritual of phoning their parents each morning, but that ritual may occur regardless of whether the person is in a work or leisure setting; home or away.

The social impact of mobile communication has also been the primary work of James Katz who developed the Center for Mobile Communication Studies at Rutgers University, and also founded the Society for the Social Study of Mobile Communication (SSSMC). One of Katz's primary contributions to the inquiry of the social effects of mobile communication has the introduction of apparatgeist theory, which he had defined as the rhetoric and meaning-making that occurs among the users of mobile communication, owing to perpetual contact (Katz, 2008). Katz firmly believes that apparatgeist gives the world a community of people that are free to "act and communicate together without restriction over time" [as quoted in (Holmes, 2005)]. Katz's theory of apparatgeist, along with Ling's work on ritual interaction in mobile ICT has formed the basis for much of the mobile communication theory now used in when studying the social effects of mobile ICT.

Why does this area matter to tourism research?

Over the relatively young history of conducting tourism research, the focus of that work has largely been on tourist planning, site selection, marketing, and economic factors (Davis, 2001). However, there has been a shift within the past seven years to move away from those control and planning analyses, and move toward a better understanding of the nature of travel from a social science perspective. In particular, there is an increasing attempt to understand why people continue to travel, when advanced communication technologies were once predicted to replace the need for short-term physical relocation (Urry, 2002).

With this shift in studying concepts in tourism that move away from economic approaches and into these social constructs, it has been challenging to locate research that aims to define socially constructed tourism theories and expose common methods and measures. This is an area of inquiry which finds itself - justified or not - emphasizing a sense of earnestness and seriousness in a seeming attempt to justify the legitimacy of studying a field inherently associated with hedonism and pleasure.

As such, applied research has largely been the focus, with tourism-industry funded research desiring information related to the economic impacts of tourism and quality customer service measures.

While more tourism researchers have taken up the call to focus on socially focused tourism research, and investigating the changing nature of the tourist experience, the development of common theories, methods, and measures still remains elusive. As J.R. Brent Ritchie (2009) noted in his meta-analysis of prior tourism studies, *The Challenges of Consumer/Tourist Experience Research*, "There is a lack of innovation in tourism research, and a failure of many studies to relate theory to method." (p. 119). As such, it is imperative that new research in tourism studies take up the challenge to help create social science theories of tourism, and attempt to define that basic element of tourism: the tourist experience.

Why does this area matter to tourism practitioners?

From a practical standpoint, as tourism-focused destinations better understand how tourists are desiring to use their mobile technologies, social network sites, and engaging with their environments, they'll be able to anticipate which kinds of network services should be provided. For example, a destination may ensure that wireless Internet networks cover the most common parts of a locale visited by tourists, and may provide mobile software which makes it easier to access local transit information, tourist site details, or share stories and photographs with friends and family back home. In addition, as they understand how "home" and "away" changes for the traveler, tourist destinations can make better decisions as how to focus their place to have increased "awayness" or become the "home away from home," depending on the desired marketing orientation.

With the increasing use of mobile ICT devices, such as cell phones, handheld computers, and global positioning system (GPS) receivers, their use in the tourism is bound to occur as people are on the move. It is natural to assume that people would use some of these technologies made familiar in work settings and carry them over to their leisure pursuits, especially as so many of them are able to provide real-time connections to information about tourism sites, and/or provide direct communication with people in the traveler's social network. There have, in fact, been studies which have already sought to examine the direct effects of mobile ICT when used in a tourism setting (Tussyadiah, Fesenmaier & Yoo, 2008). Still, this prior research has often focused on narrow forms of mobile technology, and has failed to account that certain assumptions of device penetration, bandwidth capacity, and general knowledge of how to use these devices will likely increase after the completion of those studies, and the results may not be as generalizable to the greater population. Other errors have included issuing devices that are unfamiliar to the tourist, rather than seeking to examine how they use their own technologies with which they've already established a degree of familiarity (Tussyadiah et al., 2008). Clearly, more work needs to be done in the practical study of this area.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Where does the tourism researcher go from here? Prior studies attempting to measure the touristic experience have largely been a qualitative affair. Much of the research has been done as ethnographic case studies, and has been reported without much analysis aside from generalizing synthesizing the statements made by people in the case studies into common themes (White & White, 2007). In order to move beyond a purely theoretical realm, a focus on quantitative measurement will be needed in future studies. Fortunately, there have been a few past studies that have attempted quantifiable measurement of the touristic experience, and can provide guidance for the future.

One approach to measure touristic experience is to use the most common method of tourism research: the written survey. Oh, Fiore, and Jeoung (Oh, Fiore & Jeoung, 2007) took just such an

approach, and sought to define the tourist experience in terms related to the concept of the "experience economy." That concept had centered on the idea there were four realms of experience - entertainment, education, esthetics, and escapism - which combined to create optimal experience effects for an individual in a given situation. Oh, Fiore, and Jeoung adapted that concept to create a seven-point Likert scale (strongly disagree - strongly agree) survey which split 24 experience dimension items and 11 consequence variables across those four realms of the experience economy concept, and administered those surveys guests at bed and breakfasts. However, as this was a concept not yet previously studied, they were required to do a qualitative study in advance, which involved brainstorming sessions and personal interviews with the operators of various bed & breakfast operations in order to determine the experience items which would best fit in the four "experience economy" realms. Those items (initially 56) were pared down into the final set by a panel of ten researchers.

While using experience economy measures is one good way to approach measure the touristic experience, it is important to also consider other components. Building on that course of study, would be to expand to the use of other forms of mobile ICT, and noting how they alter the sense of "home" and "away." Of particular interest would be precisely how GPS plays into this theory, as it is considered to be a form of mobile ICT, yet is the only identified information technology that is not a form of two-way communication. Therefore, it would be desirable to run a form of the survey assessment comparing those using GPS during their trip with those who do not, and how their sense of "away" is altered, when they effectively have a device giving them instant local knowledge. As far as this researcher has been able to examine, no such studies have been conducted thus far to indicate what kind of social impact GPS has had on the tourist experience, let alone focusing on notions of "home" versus "away."

Finally, it will be important to develop this area of tourism research by adding in new areas of research that are coming out of technology and media studies, and also from geographers who are seeking to understand how we interact with our environments. New technologies are coming forward, such as the concept of "augmented reality" where virtual objects are overlaid in a person's field of vision to produce an environment where real objects and virtual objects are able to commingle and interact. While these technologies largely start with business and general entertainment applications, they are likely to find their way into the tourism setting, and it'll be important for researchers to understand how these newer technologies alter the touristic experience.

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