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Item Type	event;event
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Download date	2024-07-04 12:13:23
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/49201

Guiding principles for good governance of the smart destination

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Abstract

Smart tourism development has received tremendous attention worldwide, but relevant literature remains largely focused on the technological aspects of achieving the greater economic growth and efficiency through innovation, mobility, inclusion and environmental sustainability the smart paradigm promises. While well-being and experience enhancement are considered at the individual level of tourists and (sometimes) residents, guiding principles for achieving responsible smart tourism at the destination level are lacking. Addressing these concerns, this paper begins to explore justice and ethics principles that offer the potential to help facilitate good governance of sustainable smart destinations. By merging smart tourism goals with justice and ethics considerations the paper presents preliminary guidelines for theory building, public policy and development practice in the context of smart destinations governance, and future research in this area.

Keywords: smart tourism; sustainable development; governance, ethics, justice, responsible tourism

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Introduction

Smart tourism, i.e. the sum of all integrated efforts at a destination that take advantage of smart technology to achieve environmental sustainability, increased mobility, inclusion and innovation (Gretzel et al., 2015), is essentially a utopian lens that helps envision and realize alternative forms of tourism development. Smart development ideas emerged from the smart growth discussions after the establishment of the Kyoto Protocol (Cocchia, 2014). Sustainability therefore lies at the root of the smart concept. However, while some literature has specifically addressed the importance of sustainability in smart tourism (e.g. Shafiee et al., 2019; González-Reverté, 2019; Perles-Ribes & Ivars-Baidal, 2018), sometimes even addressing social sustainability (poverty reduction and social inclusion), the bulk of the research and much of industry practice remains focused on technology implementation, with little evident concern for the environment or the social implications for the destination (Gretzel & Collier de Mendonça, 2019).

Smart tourism without a strong focus on social sustainability can be problematic in many ways. Smart technologies increase the mobility of tourists and heighten the discoverability of destination areas beyond the typical tourism precincts. They also facilitate the accessibility of non-tourism infrastructure. As a result, touristic and residential spaces converge, increasing the potential for conflict. The controversial practices of Airbnb hosts in major tourism destinations around the world and the increased invasion of residential buildings by tourists are a concrete example of how smart technology platforms can lead to exploitation of resources and feelings of injustice among residents. Some have gone as far as accusing smart development efforts of representing an empty rhetoric that allows places to sell themselves in a global marketplace rather than actually addressing inequalities (Wiig, 2016) and dealing with issues such as overtourism (Ivars-Baidal, García Hernández & Mendoza de Miguel, 2020).

Calls for greater recognition of sustainable development goals and stronger governance within smart destinations have emerged (Gretzel, 2018; Perles-Ribes & Ivars-Baidal, 2018) but questions regarding the goals and ethical principles of good governance for smart destinations abound. Two related questions emerge here; (i) What ethical principles guide policy making and evaluation for good sustainable destination governance, and (ii) What additional principles need to be considered for the smart destination? To address these issues, this conceptual paper offers a critical review of the smart tourism literature, presents principles of good governance based on existing works on justice in tourism, and then proposes a preliminary framework to help guide good governance and public policy for an *ethical* smart destination in practice. This is complemented with a call for more research that can inform the conceptualization and implementation of smart destination governance beyond its dominant instrumental goals.

Literature Review

Smart Destinations

Smart destinations have been conceptualized in the literature as special cases of smart cities that take advantage of smart technology to deliver new forms of value to tourists (Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015). SEGITTUR, the government agency in charge of leading smart tourism development projects in Spain, describes smart destinations as

“built on an infrastructure of state-of-the-art technology guaranteeing the sustainable development of the tourist area, accessible to everyone, which facilitates the visitors’ interaction with and integration into their surroundings, increases the quality of the experience at the destination, while also improving the quality of life of its residents” (SEGITTUR, 2018, n.p.).

Gretzel, Zhong & Koo (2016) describe smart destinations as involving a new smart tourism economy with new resources, new players and new exchange models based on opportunities afforded by smart technologies. The pillars of smart destinations are usually described as involving 1) technology/innovation; 2) mobility; 3) accessibility/inclusion; and, 4) sustainability (Gretzel, Ham & Koo, 2018). While residential quality of life is mentioned, in practice the primary goal of smart destinations lies in increasing the destination’s competitiveness through the enhancement of tourist experiences (Gretzel et al., 2015), catering in critical ways to the needs of the creative tourist class that seeks more personalized and extra-ordinary experiences (Gretzel & Jamal, 2009). Smart destinations support new opportunities for co-creation and a different kind of relationship between the tourist and the destination (Femenia-Serra, Neuhofer & Ivars-Baidal, 2019). Changing relationships between tourists and residents, however, remain unaddressed.

Some literature also mentions increasing destination management capabilities as a central goal of smart destination development (Ivars-Baidal et al., 2019; Gretzel & Scarpino-Johns, 2018; Koo et al., 2016; Boes, Buhalis & Inversini, 2016) but mostly without clearly articulating to whose benefit. Following the smart city literature (Yigitcanlar et al., 2018), governance is mentioned as an instrumental layer in the make-up of smart destinations (Gretzel et al., 2018), but is not sufficiently conceptualized. Concerning governance and destination development and management processes, only Lalicic & Önder (2018) specifically discuss participatory approaches to smart destination management and Perles-Ribes and Ivars-Baidal (2018) suggest that strategic planning, transparency, efficiency, participation and responsiveness form cornerstones of effective smart tourism management. As such, there is a clear gap in the literature regarding the bridge between the sustainable tourism development and smart destination paradigms in terms of guiding principles for good governance and policy, and ultimately supporting the realization of an *ethical* smart destination.

Governing for sustainability: Some key ethical principles

What constitutes good governance in a smart tourism destination? At the very least, the smart destination must be guided by some key ethical principles that inform good governance and policy for sustainable tourism development. The notion of good governance generally includes transparency and effective government, e.g., the ability to formulate and implement sound policies, reform structures, manage resources, facilitate economic and social well-being, ensure rule of law, lack of corruption, citizen voice and participation (Rodrik, 2008). In a liberal society, one can identify some overarching principles that guide policy making for good governance, such as *justice* and *equality*, *democracy* and *difference*. Theoretical support arrives from multiple sources (see Jamal, 2019), including planning theorist Susan Fainstein’s work on *The Just City* (Fainstein, 2010, see also Fainstein 2017). She argues for justice to be the first principle for evaluating public policy effectiveness in the western liberal pluralistic context. Case studies of policy in popular destination cities like Amsterdam, London and New York help her to present justice as “a primary goal for urban policy” (Fainstein, 2017: 13). She identifies, too, the key values of *equity*, *diversity*, and *democracy*, in her ‘just city.’ When conflicts arise between these three principles, she says that

Rawlsian principles of distributive justice and equity take priority over diversity and democracy (Rawls, 1971).

By contrast, in *Justice and Ethics in Tourism*, Jamal (2019) agrees with Fainstein on a pluralistic approach to justice, but differs in arguing that which values and approaches guide justice would need to be determined based on the *particular* context, and situation in which tourism is embedded (past and present). In other words, *particular* principles may be needed for the specific needs of the destination (place) in addition to *general* principles like equity and democracy. For instance, as she points out, autonomy and self-determination may be prioritized as critical principles in an Indigenous context that has struggled historically with domination and dispossession, as might particular cultural or religious traditions. And while direct participation and control over decision making may be vital for democracy in a particular community-based tourism context, even this plays out in pluralistic ways, guided by pluralistic worldviews and *difference* (Jamal, Budke and Bribiesca, 2019).

Jamal (2019) argues that good governance involves considering ethical principles that aim towards justice *and* the good of the place, the people and things in it, as well as the good of those who visit it. Guiding and evaluating good policy, ensuring fair and equitable practices toward the local residents and their natural and cultural goods, requires addressing not only material dimensions and tangible environmental, ecological, economic and social/social-political impacts, but also intangibles such as human–environmental and cultural relationships and the *well-being* of the destination—the place and its inhabitants, human as well as other-than-human. It requires *caring* relationships, care *for* others and care *about* place, care by those who host and by those who visit. And it requires *respect* for, and *recognition* of the “other”, in addition to respect for human rights, justice, equity and fairness in the distribution and use of resources, democracy and difference (Jamal, 2019). As such, it is a *relational, inclusive* ethic of place, where an ethic of care balances an ethic of justice to ensure the good of the destination.

Vitally important here also are key principle of sustainability and conservation as well as *responsibility* for conservation and use of destination resources, and responsibility in relations to the place and its inhabitants, human and non-human others (Jamal, 2019). Consider, for instance, The Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism in Destinations.¹ This initiative strove to incorporate local South African knowledge and experience into responsible tourism guidelines that were field tested in and around Cape Town. Of key importance was that responsible tourism (RT):

- Minimizes negative economic, environmental, and social impacts;
- Generates greater economic benefits for local people and enhances the well-being of host communities, improves working conditions and access to the industry;
- Involves local people in decisions that affect their lives and life chances;
- Makes positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage, to the maintenance of the world’s diversity;
- Provides more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people, and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues;

¹ The Capetown Declaration. Online: <https://responsibletourismpartnership.org/cape-town-declaration-on-responsible-tourism/>

- Provides access for physically challenged people, and
- Is culturally sensitive, engenders respect between tourists and hosts, and builds local pride and confidence.

Many of the principles noted earlier for guiding the just and good destination (e.g., equity, diversity, democracy, respect) are evident in the RT principles above, along with sustainability, conservation and the principle of responsibility. Together, they offer valuable guidance for identifying some critical principles to inform policy making and good governance in the smart destination.

The rapid advancement of smart technologies to connect visitors to neighborhoods and spaces that would have been very difficult to reach even a decade ago, means that visitors have to exercise respect, responsibility and care in the way these technologies are used, how they interact with place and residents to “co-create” stories and experiences, and how the resulting “products” are shared. It raises challenging questions about social rights to the destination’s public spaces and intrusion into the private sphere, the rights of residents who are being displaced by the ‘smart’ creative class and gentrification, as well as questions about the rights to the “virtual” domain where so many images and stories are co-created and consumed with too little benefit for those whose lives and livelihoods are being appropriated in the co-creation process. Good governance then must govern for good technology design, content/experience co-creation, marketing and *regulation* of the co-created products.

A Preliminary Ethical Framework for the Smart Destination

Though it may seem obvious that justice is a key principle to guide sustainable tourism development and good governance in tourism destinations, it should be noted that there is a paucity of research on justice in tourism (Jamal, 2019). The few existing articles in tourism focus on global justice, destination justice, and organizational justice (Jamal and Camargo, 2018). *Equity* is one of the more common themes in the tourism literature, for example, in Rawlsian applications of distributive justice to the just destination (e.g., Jamal and Camargo, 2014). and in relation to sustainable tourism development. Conservation is associated closely to sustainability in the following call for inter-generational equity in the use of goods and resources for sustainable tourism development (UNWTO, 1994 p. 30):

Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life” support systems.

While much further research and ethical analysis is needed, some important ethical principles have been identified to guide sustainable tourism development and policy making in tourism destinations. Jamal (2019) has drawn on cross-disciplinary sources, including feminist theorists, philosophers, development as well as planning scholars (including Fainstein, 2010, 2017) to identify the following:

- Justice at the general and particular level
- Equity
- Rights (including human rights, social rights, cultural rights, etc.)
- Recognition of diversity and difference

- Democracy, inclusiveness and participation
- Sustainability and conservation
- Well-being and care
- Respect
- Responsibility and regulation

In addition to these, it can be argued that a Smart Destination must specifically consider the following because of the central role sophisticated technologies play in facilitating tourism experiences:

- Ethical tourism marketing (Jamal and Lee, forthcoming)
- Co-creating ethical tourism products
- Accountability and regulation of the local-global “virtual” spaces in which smart products circulate
- Special care with respect to technology design and use to protect against privacy violations and algorithmic discrimination
- Consideration of the typically invisible environmental consequences of technology use at the destination and elsewhere (e.g. energy consumption of server farms and e-waste; potential negative consequences of electromagnetic frequencies on humans and animals)
- Awareness of new levels and forms of dependency on non-local technology providers
- Identification/monitoring, coordination and distribution of wealth as well as responsibility among a dynamically emerging set of stakeholders beyond traditional tourism realms.

In summary, we propose that a much-needed movement towards the *ethical* smart destination requires good governance that is not only effective in its formulation and implementation but also transparent, just, responsible, participatory, pluralistic, inclusive, context-specific and caring, but also especially sensitive to the consequences of widespread smart technology use. Most importantly, such good governance is oriented towards achieving well-being for human and other-than-human stakeholders at the destination and beyond. This requires significant conceptual broadening of currently established smart destination goals.

Conclusion

Having a set of ethical principles to guide good governance and public policy can help answer critical questions regarding the benefits and costs of smart development efforts. Such principles are currently missing from smart tourism discourse in academia and practice. Bridging literatures on sustainable development, responsible tourism, ethics, justice and smart tourism, this paper provides a first step in the direction of formulating principles that can facilitate sustainable development and good governance of the *ethical* smart destination. While smart development already integrates some key dimensions such as inclusion, sustainability and quality of life, these are formulated in such abstract ways that they do not provide much insight and guidance for responsible destination development and management. In addition, the technology focus of smart tourism adds new concerns that traditional work on sustainable and responsible tourism does not

consider, thereby increasing the urgency for guiding principles that can steer policy makers and other stakeholders towards a just and good destination, i.e., an *ethical* smart destination.

Being far from complete, the proposed principles are a preliminary offering that illustrates both urgency and rich opportunity for future research on both the ethical dimensions as well as the rapidly evolving domain of the destination. For instance, a careful mapping of the specificities of smart tourism development and its potential consequences for destinations is urgently needed to help the development of guiding principles to inform *ethical* smart tourism development efforts. In addition to theory building on justice and ethics in the smart destination, multi-stakeholder empirical research could critically enhance our understanding of areas that will lead to friction or will ultimately undermine the goals of smart development. By establishing the concept of the *ethical* smart destination, we hope that this paper will inspire research that adds to current tourist experience and destination competitiveness focused smart tourism research in critical ways.

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