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Research Note

The Truth about Smart Tourism: A Qualitative Research Agenda

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Abstract

This research note aims to provide a critical understanding of "tourist stupidity" and "exclusiveness" within the smart tourism domain and to propose a corresponding qualitative research agenda. It argues that qualitative research methodologies are too infrequently applied, leading to a paradox evident in smart tourism studies. Accordingly, it suggests that embracing a qualitative perspective is essential to diversify the scholarly discourse and promote advanced inquiry in the field of smart tourism. It further seeks to contribute to ongoing debates by focusing on umbrella terms, such as "tourist stupidity" and "exclusiveness," for a more nuanced and holistic understanding of smart tourism and proposes a research agenda that advocates a re-evaluation of qualitative approaches.

1. Introduction

The pursuit of truth lies at the core of academic research, resonating as a fundamental endeavour within scholarly discourse (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). This research embarks on a focused exploration within the domain of smart tourism, recognizing the intricate and multifaceted manifestations of truth within this evolving field. The dichotomy between positivist and interpretivist approaches, corresponding to quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, respectively, underscores the divergent paths through which truth can be sought, including in the context of smart tourism. While quantitative research relies on empirical data and statistical analysis to uncover truths considered objective, qualitative research adopts a co-constructed narrative perspective, viewing truth as emerging from dynamic interactions (Creswell, 2007; Denzin et al., 2023)(Creswell, 2007; Denzin et al., 2023). Furthermore, critical theories in qualitative research contend that truth is entwined with power dynamics, emphasising the role of researchers as amplifiers and providing a platform for the inclusion of marginalised voices (Denzin, 2008; Foucault, 1976).

Nevertheless, within the burgeoning field of smart tourism, the qualitative literature addressing the unveiling of truth remains notably limited, thus necessitating a more comprehensive exploration (Riley & Love, 2000). The current body of research on smart tourism exhibits an underutilisation of explicit engagement with epistemological discourse, as evidenced by the infrequent incorporation of key terms, such as constructivism, interpretivism, and realism (Hunter et al., 2015). A critical examination of the knowledge production landscape reveals a significant gap, underscoring the necessity for increased constructivist research within the field of tourism studies (Marcus & Fischer, 2014; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Hollinshead, 2004; Dann & Phillips, 2001).

In recognition of this gap, this paper proposes a qualitative research agenda dedicated to uncovering uncharted truths within the realm of smart tourism. Specifically, the exploration delves into the paradoxes embedded in smart tourism, examining its evolution in the post-pandemic era, and shedding light on the two particular phenomena of "tourist stupidity" and "exclusiveness." These terms encapsulate the challenges and opportunities inherent in the smart tourism landscape, offering a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play. The proposed research agenda seeks not only to contribute to the academic discourse on smart tourism but also to guide future qualitative investigations, thereby enriching our comprehension of this dynamic and evolving field.

2. Paradoxes in Smart Tourism

The onset of the information age, starting with the inception of the Internet in the 1990s, coupled with the proliferation of smartphones in the mid-2000s, marked the inception of the "digital transformation." It gave rise to new industries and services through the convergence of information and communication technology (ICT). Presently, novel digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence, big data, the Internet of Things (IoT), cloud computing, hyper-connected information and communication, virtual reality and blockchain, have advanced significantly and have permeated all aspects of society. The global outbreak of COVID-19 in 2019 led to robust social distancing measures worldwide. Even in this context, ICT enabled remote living and working. The pandemic-driven shift towards remote interactions paradoxically accelerated the era of "digital transformation" or "digital deepening" by fostering further technological advancements. Travel restrictions imposed due to social distancing measures even gave rise to metaverse tourism, allowing people to travel virtually to famous tourist destinations. The ability of developing technologies to provide comfort, transform the unattainable into reality, enhance productivity, promote sustainability and improve quality of life has played a

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pivotal role in the lives of humans, particularly in the context of contemporary adversities. Today, living without these technologies appears to become increasingly inconceivable, and humans and digital technologies have found themselves in close coexistence.

Recent years have witnessed the pervasive integration of smart technology into various domains—not only the realm of technology but also urban environments and the field of tourism (Gretzel, 2011; Gretzel et al., 2015; MacKay & Vogt, 2012; Wang et al., 2014). These trends have garnered considerable interest and attention among scholars (Buhalis, 2009; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Gretzel et al., 2015; Mehraliyev et al., 2020). The integration of smart technologies has significantly impacted and, in some instances, entirely revolutionised tourists' behaviours and experiences, on-site activities and pre- and post-visit interactions (Jamal & Habib, 2020; Lamsfus et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2022; Shi et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2016). Tourism scholars have, thus, coined the terms "smart tourism," "intelligent tourism" and "smart tourism destination" to capture this profound impact, signifying a shift in the conventional roles of tourists and the very nature of the tourist experience (Gibson & Jordan, 2004, p. 215). Smart tourism has been described as a tourism approach that leverages integrated efforts at a destination to gather and consolidate data from physical infrastructure, social connections, government /organizational sources and human interactions. This data is then harnessed using advanced technologies to enhance on-site experiences and create value propositions that prioritise efficiency, sustainability and the enrichment of visitor experiences (Gretzel et al., 2015, p. 181). In essence, the smart tourism concept is centred around data- and technology-driven innovations used to optimise the tourism experience and strive for "smartness" within tourism. However, a pertinent question arises: Is it reasonable to label tourism as "smart" solely based on its utilisation of data-driven strategies and advanced technologies to enhance the tourist experience? Or, is smart tourism truly smart?

3. Tourist Stupidity in Smart Tourism

Smart tourists are indispensable for the success of smart tourism. Nevertheless, not every individual is inherently "smart." Human beings are not immune to moments of "stupidity" in various contexts, including tourism. Additionally, certain characteristics of the travel experience might even trigger or exacerbate such moments. In fact, tourism is often described as a predominantly hedonistic and liminal experience, wherein tourists seek instant happiness, sometimes at the expense of others and, in the longer term, to their own detriment (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Moon & Cho, 2023). Unwise actions may arise from the display of traits like omnipotence, omniscience, egocentrism or invulnerability, often influenced by particular emotions and mental states (Ronell, 2002; Sternberg, 2002). These actions can result either from a failure to comprehend the context or a lack of reflection. Consequently, exploring stupidity in tourism, where tourists are placed in less familiar environments, is worth considering. Recently, Weaver and Moyle (2019) introduced the "Matrix of Tourist Stupidity" concept, categorising tourist behaviours into abstention, sabotage, non-use errors and misuse errors. This matrix sheds light on the discordant behaviours of tourists, especially in the face of ubiquitous technological intervention. According to their study, some tourists deviate from expected behaviours, such as not using a smartphone when anticipated, crafting deceptive online reviews or excessive technophilia. This perspective on stupidity in tourism acknowledges that not all tourists are equally adept at using or inclined to engage with smart technologies. Pratt and Tolkach (2022) even expanded the notion of stupidity beyond technology, proposing that it represents a broader concept intricately woven into human behaviour. Despite such valuable research on tourist stupidity, a notable limitation remains in terms of its application within the context of smart

tourism. As a response, a research agenda, filling in the missing theoretical and practical explanations, is illustrated below:

• Mitigating Tourist "Stupidity" with Smart Technologies: If behavioral traits, such as egocentrism, omnipotence, omniscience and invulnerability, contribute to the manifestation of tourist behavior that can be categorized as "stupidity," can smart technologies effectively alleviate these behavioral tendencies? This research can shed light on the intricate factors that contribute to tourist behaviors, particularly those identified as "stupidity," and aims to provide context-specific, qualitative evidence that can inform targeted interventions for mitigating such behavior through the strategic application of smart technologies.

• Smart Technologies and Tourist Behavior in Ego-Intensive Tourism Contexts: The capacity of smart technologies to influence tourist behavior, particularly in tourism situations marked by heightened ego, serve as an intriguing subject of exploration in this qualitative research. By directly engaging with tourists in real-life scenarios and deeply exploring their interactions with smart technologies, this study contributes to the unravelling of the ways in which these technologies shape tourist behavior and provides narratives shedding light on the potential of smart technologies as catalysts for transforming tourism practices.

• The Role of Smart Technologies in Shaping Sustainable and Responsible Tourism Practices: Can smart technologies effectively serve as catalysts for the transformation of tourism practices characterized as "bad" or "stupid" into sustainable and responsible alternatives? Furthermore, in accordance with the insights provided by Pratt and Tolkach (2022), does the nature-versus-nurture debate offer valuable perspectives on the complex relationship between tourist behavior and smart technologies? This research can address these questions through a comprehensive examination that combines theoretical analysis, empirical investigations and case studies. In doing so, it can provide novel insights into the transformative potential of smart technologies in fostering sustainability and responsibility within the dynamic landscape of the tourism industry.

The concept of tourist stupidity in smart tourism is multifaceted and warrants a nuanced approach. By understanding the nature of tourist stupidity, its contributing factors and the potential of smart technologies and educational initiatives, stakeholders can work together to foster more responsible and sustainable tourism practices. Moreover, addressing tourist stupidity is not only a matter of individual behaviour but also a collective responsibility of the tourism industry and society at large. This exploration can, thus, contribute to the broader academic discourse on the truth of smart tourism, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive understanding of its complexities and the potential for its future transformation.

4. Exclusiveness in Smart Tourism

Smart tourism, universally celebrated as "smart," conceals a compelling paradox demanding deeper inquiry. Within this pervasive domain lies an unspoken acknowledgment that, despite its omnipresence, smart tourism may, in fact, not universally embody "smartness." Nevertheless, the potential for inclusivity persists, albeit within the constraints of multifaceted conditions. The previously mentioned "non-smart" tourists are individuals who exist on the fringes of smart tourism, finding it challenging to become part of it. Furthermore, it is worth noting that approximately 15% of the global population lives with some form of disability, a statistic that is steadily increasing according to the World Health Organization (2023). When we consider not only individuals with disabilities but also seniors, children, infants and other groups facing diverse challenges, the number of individuals who stand to benefit from the accessibility smart tourism can offer

becomes even more substantial. The development of remarkable services benefiting socially marginalised individuals has made significant strides; however, the voices of these individuals still seem to echo only softly within academic discourse (van Dijk, 2006; van Dijk & Hacker, 2003). The perspectives and needs of socially marginalised groups in our society are of utmost importance because aging, illness or unforeseen accidents can affect anyone, rendering this not a remote narrative but one that could become our own personal story (Midgley, 2009; Midgley & Livermore, 2009). Many scholars have consequently conducted research on the potential impact of smart technologies on marginalised populations, and this topic has recently garnered increased attention and discussion in academic circles (Ali et al., 2023; Buhalis & Amaranggana, 2015; Gretzel & Koo, 2021; Lam et al., 2020; Lin et al., 2022; Qiao et al., 2022; Tlili et al., 2021). However, despite the potential for the answer to this pressing question to be found within the domain of qualitative research—an influential approach within the context of smart tourism research—it remains underutilised (Hunter et al., 2015).

Within the realm of critical theory paradigms, qualitative research is firmly anchored in the pursuit of equity and social justice (Agger, 1991; Dann & Phillips, 2001; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Hollinshead, 2004). This means that researchers working in this context do not merely observe; they are proactive agents of empowerment, entrusted with the vital mission of amplifying the voices of marginalised populations. The role of empowered researchers, thus, extends beyond conventional narratives, encompassing the essential responsibility of bringing stories that have been pushed into obscurity, marginalisation or neglect to the forefront. This leads us to the central question: How can these narratives, often silenced or disregarded, gain prominence in the discourse of smart tourism? Qualitative research, through its unique methodologies and empathetic lens, can act as a beacon, illuminating the intricate experiences, challenges and aspirations of marginalised communities within the smart tourism context. The following qualitative research questions may serve as a framework for in-depth investigations aiming to comprehensively address the needs and experiences of marginalised groups.

• Understanding Vulnerability in the Digital Landscape of Smart Tourism: This research agenda is dedicated to unravelling the ways in which vulnerable tourists navigate the digital landscape of smart tourism. By exploring various cultural and contextual factors, the study can shed light on the intricate dynamics that shape their interactions with technology while travelling. The aims of this research are to provide a more nuanced understanding of how vulnerability manifests in the digital realm of smart tourism and the diverse factors that contribute to the digital experiences of vulnerable tourists.

• Digital Literacy and Marginalised Groups in Smart Tourism: How does the level of digital literacy influence the ability of marginalised groups to engage with smart tourism technologies and make informed choices during their travels? This research strand is dedicated to investigating the relationship between digital literacy and the capacity of marginalised groups to engage with smart tourism technologies. Through an exploration of how varying levels of digital literacy influence the decision-making processes of these groups during travel, the study can provide insights into the factors that either enhance or hinder their ability to make informed choices.

• The Role of Social Media in Empowering Marginalised Communities in Smart Tourism: This research focuses on the role of social media and user-generated content in empowering marginalised communities to share their narratives and experiences within the context of smart tourism. The study contributes to identifying the challenges faced by these communities in effectively utilising these platforms and exploring the potential of social media to amplify their voices. Employing a qualitative research approach, this investigation can provide comprehensive insights into how social media contribute to the

empowerment of marginalised communities within the dynamic landscape of smart tourism.

• Analysing the Post-Pandemic Dynamics of Smart Tourism and Their Impact on Marginalised Communities: This research strand investigates how the dynamics of smart tourism have changed in the post-pandemic world and explores their impact on the recovery and resilience of marginalised communities within the tourism sector. The study aims to identify challenges and opportunities that have emerged in the aftermath of the pandemic, shaping the future trajectory of smart tourism for vulnerable populations.

• Informing Ethical Guidelines and Best Practices in Data Collection Involving Vulnerable Populations in Smart Tourism: This line of inquiry focuses on how qualitative research can inform the development of ethical guidelines and best practices in data collection involving vulnerable populations in the smart tourism context. The study can ensure the respect for the rights and privacy of these populations, while also providing valuable insights for researchers and practitioners engaged in data collection in smart tourism.

The paradox inherent in smart tourism becomes apparent when we recognise its potential for inclusivity juxtaposed with the stark reality of unequal access to the advantages it offers. This disparity underscores the imperative to focus on the inclusion of socially marginalised groups, encompassing individuals with disabilities, seniors, children and others contending with various challenges. Within the realm of smart tourism, qualitative research emerges as an indispensable tool that can amplify the voices and experiences of these marginalised populations. In doing so, it can also make a substantial contribution to the ongoing quest for equity and social justice within the smart tourism domain. This exploration not only underscores the importance of addressing existing inequalities but also holds the potential to foster innovation within smart tourism. History reveals that ground-breaking innovations in various industries often originate from the empowerment of those segments of society that have been historically marginalised or previously overlooked (Schumpeter, 1962).

5. Conclusion

In the pursuit of understanding the complex realm of smart tourism, two distinct paths toward truth have been identified: quantitative research, driven by the quest for objective truths, and qualitative research, which views truth as a co-constructed narrative. While qualitative research seeks a deeper, more introspective, and nuanced comprehension of the intricate interplay of a range of factors, it remains a relatively underexplored area within academic literature. Therefore, this paper proposes a research agenda that aims to illuminate truths not previously discovered and that can guide future qualitative investigations. Furthermore, to provide a more affirmative response to the question of whether smart tourism is truly "smart," it proposes the inclusion of two overarching terms: "tourist stupidity" and "exclusiveness."

Smart tourism, despite its promise of empowerment through technology, paradoxically excludes certain segments of society due to unequal access. This underscores the critical need to consider socially marginalised groups, including individuals with disabilities, seniors and children, within the smart tourism landscape. Additionally, addressing tourist "stupidity" is a shared responsibility, necessitating a better comprehension of its underlying factors and the potential of smart technologies and education to foster more responsible tourism practices. Further scholarly research may hold the potential to enrich the academic discourse on truth in smart tourism. Furthermore, embracing qualitative methodologies, exploring emerging topics, prioritising the needs of all individuals and considering the diverse range of

human behaviours and challenges may contribute to realising the vision of a more inclusive and equitable smart tourism industry. This endeavour not only stimulates further inquiry but also catalyses responsible transformation within smart tourism. Through these collective efforts, there is a possibility to elevate the discourse, inspire innovation and shape the future trajectory of smart tourism in the years ahead.

Declaration of competing interest

Acknowledgements

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