



## Interview

### TechTalk with the Editors of Journal of Travel Research: The Perspectives of Technology by Dr. Nancy G. McGehee and Dr. James Petrick

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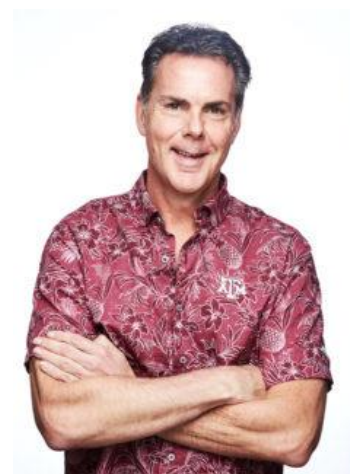
*"Ultimately, what I want to see is how we are using technology for human connection."*

- Dr. Nancy G. McGehee

Dr. Nancy G. McGehee (Virginia Tech) and Dr. James Petrick (Texas A&M) are Professors and Co-Editors of the Journal of Travel Research (JTR), which is currently the top-ranked travel and tourism journal in 2021 (Impact Factor: 10.982; Category 4 ranked journal by the Association of Business Schools (UK); A\* ranked by the Australian Business Deans Council). In January 2022, the Journal of Smart Tourism conducted a TechTalk interview with both of them. For length and clarity, the conversation has been modified.

#### **COVID-19 and vulnerability: Educational, academic, and industrial perspectives**

Dr. Petrick and Dr. McGehee talked about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tourism in three aspects: education, research, and industry. Dr. Petrick discussed how his school adapted to advanced technology in education during the pandemic. "We created a virtual study abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic, finding ways to visit and experience culture, events, and activities without physically being there. Schools have attempted to figure



*"Technology doesn't belong to any discipline, so we can do groundbreaking studies within our field."*

- Dr. James Petrick

out how to get college students worldwide provide visions of their campus cultures to the rest of the world," Dr. Petrick said. He also shared his thoughts on the industry. "From an industry standpoint, we need to figure out what the best practices are." He stated that research should provide best practices to the industry, and that researchers should assist service providers not only with what to do but also how to do it in detail. "Every submission to the JTR is required to describe how the findings differ as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic."

Dr. McGehee emphasized two key roles of technology post-COVID-19: 1) providing a seamless and healthy experience and 2) related to human resources. She emphasized the importance of a seamless and healthier experience for tourists following the pandemic. "According to research, there exist 72 touch points between the time we arrive at the airport and the time we board the plane. Finding ways to streamline the process with technology is important." She also gave examples of how hotels (e.g., Hilton and Marriot) are gaining ground by building innovation labs and embracing new technology. "Hotels' innovation lab efforts cover a wide range of topics (e.g., Internet of Things, augmented reality, and virtual reality), as well as other technologies. Technology has

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Received 18 March 2022; Accepted 30 March 2022

been used in the hospitality and tourism business for various purposes. These innovations will remain available after the COVID-19 pandemic.”

### **Technology adoption in tourism**

Dr. McGehee shared how rural and volunteer tourisms are adopting technology and whether the level of technology adoption varies by tourism types. She began by describing how an isolated volunteer tourism destination used and benefited from technology, particularly during the pandemic. “Volunteer tourism organizations use online experiences to stay in touch with volunteers, maintain relationships, and remind people about what is going on in the destinations,” she described. According to her, levels of adoption of technology are less about specific types of tourism and more about *access* to technology.

She proposed that various types of capital (e.g., financial, technological, and political) are required in tourism. “For example, in addition to financial capital, we need technology capital in the form of dependable broadband service and access to smart phones, Internet, and political capital support that enables policies to be implemented.” Dr. McGehee also claimed that scale and access are what matters. For instance, volunteer and rural tourisms are on a small scale, whereas theme park tourism in Orlando is a great example of a destination with many resources (e.g., political, financial, and technology). She also discussed how people use technology (e.g., smartphone, GPS, and holograms) to improve the experience, reduce wait times, and maximize their time while experiencing major destination/attractions. As a result, technology is alive and well in tourism, and resources (capitals) are what determine availability rather than the type of tourism.

We also asked Dr. McGehee how advanced tourism technology can improve the experience of international and domestic travelers. “I think there are many commonalities, whether they are domestic or international,” she said, “but I do see opportunities to improve international and local travel experiences.” She mentioned three areas where technology can help in tourism: mass transportation, immigration/visas, and seasonality.

Mass transportation is one area where technology can help international and domestic travelers. Unless they are driving to neighboring cities, most travelers use public transportation at some point. With the increased complexity of transportation, rapid innovation in technology and alternative fuels is needed to help keep the tourism industry vibrant and carbon-neutral. However, tourism academia and industries are often behind as they try to figure out how to adapt to changing trends.

Immigration/visas is the second opportunity focusing on international travelers. According to Dr. McGehee, “Visa and immigration systems have a huge opportunity to streamline the transportation component of getting a person from point A to point B. Advanced technology in terms of ethical immigration and visa procedures will help us to understand each other.” In addition to immigration and visa opportunities, instantaneous language-to-language translation, particularly, has an enormous potential. She shared her travel experience where she was able to mingle with people from other cultures without a language barrier due to communication opportunities. “If the language is different, we won’t be able to share culture and experiences while traveling,” she explained. In accordance with this, Dr. McGehee also suggested that virtual reality should be used as a simulation tool before an event occurs. In this manner, future tourists can learn about the culture they are visiting and avoid making mistakes on their trip when dealing with different cultures.

Focusing on domestic travelers, Dr. McGehee spoke about seasonality. “When looking at domestic travelers, you can isolate fairly specific seasonal dates (e.g., holidays).” She also explained that domestic travelers are more short-term in nature, with a shorter window of leave time between considering travel options and deciding to book a hotel. Domestic travelers have a higher

probability that they are visiting friends and relatives. In conclusion, technology can help tourism combat seasonality, short lead times, and make destinations more agile and capable of anticipating travel patterns.

### **Innovative technology in tourism: Opportunities and challenges**

We also asked their insights on innovative technology. Dr. Petrick claimed that historically, transportation has been a primary source of innovation, but now innovations to the travel field come from multiple areas (e.g., security camera and health monitoring devices). He shared his experience as a participant in a study on meditation and slowing down the pace of life to develop wearable devices that make people’s lives easier. “Technology usually makes me busier. However, I believe that technology in the future will help us live healthier and longer. We have to figure out how to do that as scholars and practitioners,” he emphasized.

He suggested that one of the opportunities that innovative technology can answer is to reduce global warming. “In the future, people might be able to use molecular and nano technology and other means to lessen their carbon footprint.” From an environmental standpoint, he posed the following questions for future practitioners and scholars to consider: How can technology make us healthier? What are some things we can do to improve our current situation? Is it true that using virtual reality makes us healthier and more productive? In terms of other opportunities for using metaverse technology in tourism, he emphasized the role of virtual reality in cultural preservation. People, according to Dr. Petrick, must be unique and not copy from other places. “When I travel to Asia, I want to see culturally specific buildings, as well as cultural interaction with preserved green spaces.”

To amplify the preceding opportunities, Dr. Petrick emphasized the critical role of *adopters*. “Since the virtual world is unknown and unfamiliar, many people will likely be hesitant to participate. However, adopters and innovators can make virtual reality take off and lead other customers to want to accept the technology, as well.” He also discussed space tourism and advanced technologies, such as rocket ships, which can transport hotels into space, as well as people’s own ability to replicate things without having to have them. In this regard, he stated that Texas A&M University starts offering various genetic food engineering courses to teach such technologies that will revolutionize the way hotels and restaurants operate. As a marketer, he expressed interest in face recognition software for future applications in the tourism industry.

Dr. McGehee and Dr. Petrick agreed that the tourism industry and academic fields have been a little behind the times in terms of adopting and embracing technology into studies and practices. Dr. Petrick stated that given that technology changes so quickly, keeping up is a great challenge and changes will happen faster than people can adopt. “For example, digital currency is now a reality, and we must consider how it will affect tourism businesses.” As a follow-up, Dr. McGehee stated that scholars and service providers must consider how to incorporate non-fungible tokens (NFTs) into the tourism industry, because if NFTs are used in the real world, then tourists are likely to adopt them.

Dr. McGehee and Dr. Petrick also raised concerns about redefining tourism, as well as issues of ethics and privacy. “When we talk about virtual reality, it is more of a recreational activity (done in one’s usual environment) than a tourism activity,” Dr. Petrick explained. “We need to think about whether studies on virtual reality tourism belong to travel research or leisure sciences.” Given that travel is typically defined as being away from our usual environment, Dr. Petrick believes that it may be necessary to evolve the definition of “usual environment.” He inquired, “Does the fact that we have a headset on move us to somewhere else? Is this something we want to keep in travel literature, or is it something that will be moved to the recreation literature?” Dr. McGehee gave some thoughts on technology in

terms of ethics and privacy and asked, "What is our responsibility in terms of ethics and privacy? How can we assist our industry partners? What are the practical implications? What type of information do we need? What kinds of discussion do we need to have about Internet policies?"

### **Suggestion for future studies in smart tourism**

Dr. Petrick proposed several academic agendas for expanding the literature on smart tourism, including the need for longitudinal studies, physiological feedback, understanding adopters, and theory evolution. He claimed that the tourism academia must become considerably more creative and innovative rather than playing a copy-cat game, because other fields are advancing faster than tourism does.

First, academics should begin longitudinal studies. According to Dr. Petrick, although students have access to excellent technology and use it on a daily basis, whether learning is related to technology is unclear. This notion is also applicable to the tourist group. Whether tourists are truly satisfied as a result of technological advancements is unclear. "We always assume that satisfaction, particularly life satisfaction, is related to our wellbeing, but are we truly well? We don't know yet." As a result, conducting longitudinal studies should be considered for future research related to tourism education and technology.

Second, Dr. Petrick suggested that physiological feedback should be used to better understand customers. According to him, most of the time, scholars conduct surveys by asking questions from a perceptual standpoint. However, if brain machine interfacing occurs, then scholars can actually see what is going on. "Scholars can progress from social science to physical hard science." Dr. Petrick stated that using physiological feedback will be amazing and that data collection will be a blessing to research scientists. As a marketer, he expects to learn about people's perceptions of places to see if they will return, if they are satisfied, and what causes them to be loyal based on physiological data.

Third, Dr. Petrick suggested that academics and marketers conduct research to determine who the adopters are. "The metaverse remains a confusing concept. There is no agreement," he stated. He gave some examples of how quickly global technology companies (e.g., Apple, Samsung, and Tesla) have changed and stressed the importance of understanding who will use those technologies and who will not. "When everything expand from the virtual world to virtual reality? Who will be the early adopters? We all know how quickly technology advances, and it isn't going to slow down any time soon."



Finally, Dr. Petrick emphasized the evolution of theories. He suggested that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we do not act and behave the same as before, which implies that we are probably mentally different than before. This notion needs to be discussed. According to him, theories are typically thought to be something that evolve over time and slowly change. "Well, this (COVID-19 pandemic) is a significant paradigmatic shift, and we are becoming more reliant on technology." He also claimed that there exist great theories in other fields that we have not fully adopted. As an example, he shared his study (Petrick et al., 2021), which examined the cognitive activation theory from the physiological health literature. "Briefly, the theory proposes that the more stress we have, the stronger we can become if we learn how to deal with it. What we don't know is how people are dealing with COVID-19 stress right now," Dr. Petrick stated.

### **Journal's vision and direction**

Dr. McGehee and Dr. Petrick shared their vision for the JTR before the interview concluded. According to them, JTR is looking for studies that can help the industry solve problems by employing innovative methods and ideas. They both believe that to remain a top-tier journal, studies must be innovative and cutting-edge.

They also made some recommendations to the Journal of Smart Tourism. Dr. McGehee stated that as a young journal, being deliberate and particular about early publications is important, even if it is tempting to accept and fill up the journal. She also emphasized the importance of taking care of reviewers and engaging with the industry. Dr. Petrick advised finding a niche and informing the world about the specific topic Journal of Smart Tourism wants. "Think about how you can be truly unique, not only in terms of technology and smart tourism."

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### **Reference**

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### **Author Biographies**

**Jookyung Kwon** is a research professor at Smart Tourism Education Platform, Kyung Hee University, South Korea. Her research interest includes smart tourism, sustainability, inspiration, and luxury.

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