



The relationship between smartphone usage, tourist experience and trip satisfaction in the context of a nature-based destination



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ABSTRACT

Leisure travel occurs in spaces and is a form of experience. Given the popularity of using smartphones at destinations, the tourist experience is no longer bounded by the physical limits of the destination. This study considers the relationship between travel motivation, smartphone-related constructs of motivation to share travel experience while visiting the destination (sharing motivation), smartphone usage at the destination, and tourist experience and trip satisfaction arising from the entanglement of the physical space and the virtual space connected through the smartphone. The relationships are examined in the context of Hualien, a popular nature-based destination in Taiwan. Partial least squares analysis of the data obtained from 297 Taiwan residents who had visited Hualien at least once and who possessed smartphones showed that tourist experience and satisfaction are determined by the physical space of the destination and the virtual space connected by the smartphone. However, the inroads made by smartphones are still limited for nature-based destinations, and smartphones may not always have a positive influence. This study also found that tourists, who have different travel motivations and on-site sharing motivations, react to this joint physical-virtual space differently. The use of smartphones at the destination may simply be a reaction to boredom and to kill time, hence the lack of influence of on-site experience sharing on experience and satisfaction. This study showed that tourists value the functional purpose provided by smartphones.

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1. Introduction

Leisure travel occurs in spaces (Crouch, 1999) and is a form of experience (Mehmetoglu and Engen, 2011). Tourist destinations as physical spaces provide the ‘props or cues’ that underpin tourist experience (Laing et al., 2014) and act as ‘a blend of consumers’ space and tourism products providing a holistic experience’ (Dmitrovic et al., 2009, p. 116). Taking place with physical or corporeal proximity to the destination, on-site tourist experience is an outcome of the interactions of the destination, tourism system, its people and tourists (Larsen, 2007). Tourists, being the actors, play an active and important role in the formation of tourist experience (Cutler and Carmichael, 2010).

Past studies have confirmed the significance of information communication technologies in tourist experience (Neuhofer et al., 2014) and in transforming the meaning of travel (Wang et al., 2012). Information communication technologies, particularly mobile technologies, increasingly influence the formation, facilitation and co-creation of tourist experience (Neuhofer et al., 2014). Given the spatiotemporal nature of travel (Tussyadiah and Zach, 2012), mobile technologies are increasingly used to deliver tourism services (Canadi et al., 2010). Tourists also use the smartphone at the destination for

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various functional purposes, such as guiding them around the destination, meeting their immediate needs and revealing new experiential opportunities (Dickinson et al., 2014). On-site information search through the smartphone also enhances travel experience and influences how tourists view a destination (Wang et al., 2012).

Mobile technology at the destination also creates new means of territorialization (Lemos, 2010) through the convergence of the physical space of the destination and the virtual space connected through the smartphone. Except at locations where the use of technology-based communication tools is out of reach, labeled by Pearce and Gretzel (2012) as dead zones, the smartphone user occupies multiple spaces while at the destination (Misra et al., 2014). Tourist experience at the destination is no longer bounded by the physical limits imposed and the actors being physically present within the destination. There is now an entanglement of the physical space and the virtual space, which this study names the physical-virtual space. This extended space comprises the physical territory and the remote entities connected through mobile technologies (Tussyadiah, 2012). Smartphones allow tourists to communicate with non-travel companions when they are traveling and ‘transport people to other social settings’ (Humphreys, 2010). As noted by Germann Molz and Paris (2015), ‘today’s travelers are not just on the road, but also – like so many people – on the phone, online and on screen’ (p. 174). Activities revolving around a smartphone, such as logging onto Facebook, uploading photographs and calling friends, are now ordinary and routine aspects of most travelers’ journeys (Germann Molz and Paris, 2015). Smartphones also offer tourists the convenience of giving feedback on their travel experience while touring the destination. Thus, sharing travel experience is no longer restricted to the post-trip stage but can also be conducted instantaneously and on-site (Wang et al., 2014).

Some studies have found that the use of mobile devices in the tourism industry improves tourist experience and enhances tourist satisfaction (Lee et al., 2014). However, concerns have also been raised about the potential negative impacts of mobile interaction on real encounters during travel. By allowing tourists to be in the physical and virtual worlds regardless of location (Wang et al., 2014), smartphones could alter the temporal and spatial organization of social interactions (Dickinson et al., 2014) and allow a persistent state of ‘absent presence’ (Misra et al., 2014), sometimes at the expense of travel companions and connections with localized experiences (Germann Molz and Paris, 2015). However, by being close to each other although they are physically far apart (Höfllich, 2005), travelers can share their travel experience with others and fulfill interpersonal relationships in the virtual world. On-site experience sharing also differs from post-trip experience sharing in an important aspect. Responses and comments from the virtual social network can be received instantly at the destination, hence, making the feedback immediately gratifying. Any good feelings arising from such a feedback process can become part of the tourist experience and satisfaction associated with the physical-virtual space. Hence, the jury is still out on the impact of mobile devices on tourist experience and satisfaction. This could be considered another round in the on-going debate between social cohesion and fragmentation that often arises when new technologies appear on the social scene (Germann Molz, 2012).

More studies are definitely needed on the impact of smartphones on tourist experience at the destination. Lee et al. (2014) have commented that the field of tourism has scarce research on the relationship between tourism and the value of technology. Furthermore, ‘little is known about the underlying processes that shape (and/or reshape) smartphone use and tourist experiences’ (Wang et al., 2016, p. 52). The use of smartphones in the tourism context is a relatively new phenomenon (Wang et al., 2014). Many past studies are concerned with supply-side issues (MacKay and Vogt, 2012) and involve human-computer interaction design aspects of applications or devices (Wang et al., 2014). Evaluating the factors that affect the adoption of mobile information services in travel is also a major area of research (Wang et al., 2014). How mobile technology affects the tourist experience is another frequent subject of analysis (Tussyadiah and Zach, 2012; Wang et al., 2012, 2014). However, calls to consider the integration of technology into experiences have been made by researchers because there is still a major gap in understanding of the role of technology in experiences (Neuhofner et al., 2014). How travel motivation affects on-site sharing motivation and the use of smartphones during travel is also far from clear.

In response, this study analyzes the relationship among travel motivation, smartphone-related constructs of motivation to share travel experience while visiting the destination (sharing motivation) and smartphone usage at the destination and tourist experience and trip satisfaction arising from the entanglement of the physical and virtual spaces. The relationships are examined in the context of Hualien, a popular nature-based destination in Taiwan. Its offerings can provide tourists rich entertainment and escapism experience. By using this context, this study can zero in on the pros and cons of using smartphones at the destination and especially its impact on tourists who travel with ‘escape from the mundane environment’ in mind. The research questions (RQs) are the following:

- RQ1: Does travel motivation influence tourist experience and satisfaction in the physical-virtual space?
- RQ2: Does travel motivation influence smartphone-related constructs of sharing motivation and smartphone usage?
- RQ3: Do smartphone-related constructs of sharing motivation and smartphone usage contribute to tourist experience of escapism and entertainment, and satisfaction in the physical-virtual space?

The study also has important managerial implications for destination marketing organizations (DMOs) and related parties. A good understanding of how smartphones affect tourists’ experience and satisfaction is essential for practitioners to attract tourists and influence and manage tourists’ expectations.

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