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The concept of smart tourism in the context of tourism information services☆

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Identifies changing concepts of smart tourism within the Chinese academic literature.
- Proposes the concept that smart tourism has at its core the tourist demand and ubiquitous technology.
- Utilizes the term 'informationization' to describe key aspects of smart tourism.
- Links smart tourism to big data analysis.
- Links smart tourism to Government e-commerce policies.

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ABSTRACT

Smart tourism has become increasingly popular in mainland China. Different types of events and activities have been classified as *smart tourism*, leading to the misuse of the term. What, then, is smart tourism? How to define it? Although researchers have defined the term, there has not been any consensus on a widely accepted interpretation. The definition provided by this study emphasizes smart tourism as an individual tourist support system within the context of information services and an all-encompassing technology. This paper compares the characteristics of both traditional tourist information services and those incorporated in smart tourism. Based on the concepts, recommendations are provided and future research/industrial directions are discussed. For the Chinese tourism market, smart tourism represents a new direction implying a significant influence on tourist destinations, enterprises, and also tourists themselves.

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1. Introduction

Following the popularization of the concept of *Smart Planet* by President Obama in January 2009, Chinese experts later proposed the concept of *Smart Tourism.* In July 2011, Qiwei Shao, director of the China National Tourism Administration (CNTA), officially launched a mission statement to facilitate and advocate smart tourism in the following decade. It was a milestone in transferring smart tourism from academic conceptualization to industrial practice. CNTA's official announcement of *Beautiful China, 2014 – Year of Smart Tourism* on November 5th, 2013, established *Smart Tourism* as an important initiative in China's tourism policy that was bound to lead the development of smart tourism to a new phase.

After five-years of work, the understanding of domestic experts on smart tourism has developed, and industrial practice keeps rapidly growing. However, an awareness of the theoretical foundations of smart tourism remains unclear. Given this lack of clarity, practices such as *putting previous wine into new bottles* and *rushing headlong into mass action* will simply lead to a new round of inefficient resource allocation and consequent lowered confidence on the part of enterprises and government authorities. Under such

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circumstances there exists a danger that the concept of smart tourism could be abandoned (Lu, 2011). Thus, at present, we need to clarify the concept of smart tourism, as well as recognize the key elements involved in smart tourism development, and a need also exists to unveil the core of smart tourism through research, to develop a better direction for business practice, and promote the development of smart tourism (Zhang, 2012). It does appear that, until now, debates over definition, methodology, modes of practice, features and functions of smart tourism, etc. have not generated agreement as to terminology or content in the academic community, and thus research outcomes remain unclear (Lin, 2013). Therefore, this paper tries to interpret the concept of smart tourism from the perspective of tourist information services.

2. Present analysis on the concept of smart tourism

2.1. Literal understanding of smart tourism

According to the Chinese Xinhua Dictionary, "smart" is defined as the ability to quickly, flexibly and accurately understand and solve problems (Chinese Xinhua Dictionary). The English definition of smart is wisdom (Wang, 2012), the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment; the quality of being wise (Google translate). Since tourism cannot be simply regarded as a combination of wisdom (people) and travel (industry), we propose "smart tourism" instead of "wisdom tourism".

Smart tourism might be very similar to the term, "intelligent tourism". Intelligence means being able to change its state or action in response to varying situations, differing requirements, and previous experiences, which means that intelligence can generate appropriate results based on different needs, different states and different historic experiences. However, "smart" means to do the right thing in various complicated circumstances, so entitling a program as "smart" is different from calling it "intelligent". The content of "smart" is more extensive and requires large data inputs. What is more, "intelligence" falls into the ambit of technology, whereas "smart" places more emphasis on the technological outcomes for people.

2.2. Differences between smartness and intelligence

Many scholars regard "smart" and "intelligent" as similar and interchangeable concepts. However, to our knowledge, they are essentially different. Intelligence focuses on a technical capability offering more convenient and efficient services (including tangible products) to the users. Additionally, intelligence can be regarded as an experience or a consequence of an experience. But under such circumstance, human beings are thrown into a state of passivity, meaning that different levels of intelligence may lead to difference types of experiences, but users have to stay intelligent enough to get access to services through intelligent devices. On the other hand, smartness emphasizes the ease with which users can automatically obtain suitable and precise services (being "Smart" can privately perceive users' needs and provide accurate service information) by data accumulation with technological means (devices). The process is heavily contingent upon the availability of information (data) integration technology. Therefore, the main difference between intelligence and smartness is just two different aspects of wisdom. Intelligence lays in the basic utility of knowledge and information, but smartness is a sublimation of intelligent power anticipating needs. For example, the process of automatically generating a travel route according to the users' inputs and the computational optimization algorithm can be understood as intelligence; whereas the user conducts an activity according to his or her own previous experience, personality, location, group purchasing information, etc. Such a process can be regarded as being smart.

Briefly, the distinction between being *smart* and *intelligence* is clear. In this paper we adopt the term *smart tourism*, rather than *wisdom tourism* or *intelligent tourism*.

2.3. Understanding of concept of smart tourism in foreign countries

The notion of smart tourism in Western countries can be traced back to 2000 when Gordon Phillips defined smart tourism as *simply taking a holistic, longer term and sustainable approach to planning, developing, operating and marketing tourism products and businesses*. In his opinion, smart tourism is shaped by two types of techniques: 1) smart demand and use of management techniques that are capable of managing demand and access; 2) smart marketing techniques that can be used to target the proper customer segments to deliver appropriate messages (Phillips, 2000). On January 28th, 2009, at the first Meeting in Madrid Spain of the UN World Tourism Organization's (UNWTO) Tourism Resilience Committee, UNWTO Assistant Secretary-General Geoffrey Lipman called on member States and the Sector to strive for "smart tourism", which was defined as clean, green, ethical and offering high quality services (UNWTO, 2012) at all levels of the service chain.

Another concept of smart tourism came from The Organisation for Smart Tourism in the U.K. in 2011, when the use and application of technology in the tourism sector was considered as *digital* or "*smart" tourism* (www.smarttourism.org, 2012). Jennie Germann Molz, identified an emerging ethos of "smart tourism" that aims to employ mobile digital connectivity to create more intelligent, meaningful and sustainable connections between tourists and the destination. She suggested that "smart tourism" represents wider efforts to imagine tourism as a form of deep civic engagement, and not just as a simple form of consumption (Molz, 2012).

In Western countries, it is rare to take smart tourism as the core strategy of tourism development. There, scholars and business people have tended to explore the overall contribution that smart tourism brings to the tourism industry from the view of sustainable development, focusing mainly on in-depth participation, and the nature of the relationship between tourists and tourist destinations, within a context of the e-role of tourism in economic growth and social development.

2.4. Smart tourism in China

For its part the Chinese government has formally adopted smart tourism as the core strategy of its tourism development policy, creating a growing interest from both academia and industry. The existing concept of smart tourism in China can be classified into seven categories as described below.

One definition of smart tourism focuses on the application of technology in the tourism industry, is derived from the work of Ma and Yao and their colleagues (as described below), and is much cited. Some researchers and enterprises with a technical background have tended to interpret smart tourism as changes of management, service, and marketing created by the latest and most up-to-date application of information and communication technologies.

According to the Baidu online encyclopedia, smart tourism refers to the *use of cloud computing, networking, and other new technologies with a portable terminal* via *the Internet or mobile Internet, in achieving information about tourism resources, the tourist economy, tourist activities, etc. In this regard, tourists can acquire information in a timely manner to arrange and adjust their travel plans, so as to obtain intelligence and convenient use of all kinds of tourism information* (http://baike.baidu.com/view/5217093.htm, 2012). This

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