



# THE ROLE OF GEO-BASED TECHNOLOGY IN PLACE EXPERIENCES

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**Abstract:** Today, as various context-aware technologies have become increasingly ubiquitous, tourists have access to retrieve voluminous geographic information about tourism destinations. These technologies are suggested to aid tourists in gaining meaningful experiences with places. This study identifies how the use of geo-based technology plays a role in the acquisition of geographic knowledge and behavior. It is identified that the use of geo-based technology while traveling contributes to the different components that frame the structure of tourism experience. Further, this study also confirms that tourism experience can be seen as a part of the everyday experience as geographic behavior exhibited on a day-to-day basis is found to have an effect on tourism experience. **Keywords:** geographic cognition, geographic behavior, tourism experience, geo-based technology. © 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an encounter between and amongst several things: people, space, and contexts (Crouch, 2005). Indeed, tourists seek benefits from the consumption of the experiential characteristics (i.e., physical, social and cultural) of places, spaces and landscapes. In the early conception of tourism experience, MacCannell (1973) characterizes tourists' sites as locations of the authentic and tourists visit these places in search for the reflection of their authentic selves. This implies tourism as "sightseeing," emphasizing the destinations as a package of visual materials or signs. This is akin to the concept of tourist gaze (Urry, 1990, 1995) that gives an emphasis to the 'signs' as the 'objects of gaze' while highlighting the subjectivity of the gaze. Indeed, recent discussion on tourism experience tends to be more subject-centered. Uriely (2005) identifies the pluralization of tourists, the multiplicity of tourist experiences, and the shift from tourism experience

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as the consumption of displayed objects to the subjective interpretation and meaning. Similarly, Crouch (2005) suggests that being a tourist “is essentially the process of making meaning of spaces and cultures” (p. 28), which “does not equate making clear rationality, but rather working his/her way through things,” spaces and relations (p. 31).

Using the metaphor of tourism as a form of performance and tourist spaces as stages, Edensor (2001) argues that different tourist locations (e.g., mountains, cities, beaches, heritage sites) are often managed to provide and sustain the common sense understanding of a particular performance or activity to take place. Tourists’ encounters with these spaces (i.e., resulting in activities, interactions, interpretations), while subjective in nature, are contextualized by the geographic features of the destination with its sensual quality. Here, the geographic cognition, and the state of geographic knowledge, comes at play as a factor influencing how tourists perform in these stages.

The discussion of geographic experience is rooted in the fields of cognitive geography, which deals with human perception, memory, reasoning, problem solving, and communication involving earth phenomena (Montello & Freundschuh, 2005), and behavioral geography, which focuses on people’s behavior within space. Early conceptualizations of geographic cognition are dated back to the work of Lynch (1960) on images of cities, Lowenthal (1961) on environmental images, and Gould (1966) on mental maps, among others. Mark, Freska, Hirtle, Lloyd, and Tversky (1999) suggest that people extract geographical knowledge from their complex interactions with space. According to Kuipers (1983), as people move along the paths in the geographic space, they may recognize that the paths have some points in common, which allows them to use inference rules to build network models of places and connections. Kuipers (1983) calls this process *spatial knowledge acquisition*. Further, geographic cognition is intertwined with people’s spatial behavior, which can be detected from changes in locations over time. People need to act spatially to forage for food, to shop, to commute, etc. (Mark & Freundschuh, 1995). People’s movement in space (e.g., commuting, travelling, recreation, and migration) are overt behavior resulted from a cognitive process of spatial decision making (Lloyd, 1997). In summary, geographic experience is intimately associated with geographic knowledge acquisition from people’s complex interactions with and within space. It is argued in this study that tourists go through the process of geographic knowledge acquisition and representation as they move to and within a destination, and use spatial knowledge to gain a meaningful tourism experience.

Information and communication technology (ICT) has been widely believed to have a substantial geographic impact (Curry, 1998) and geographic technology (i.e., largely based on geographic information systems (GIS), global positioning systems (GPS), etc.) is increasingly available for idiosyncratic use of everyday experiences (Line, Jain, & Lyons, In Press). Due to the spatiotemporal nature of travel, tourists and businesses alike find these technologies relevant and important for various purposes, including leisure and business travels (Bask,

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