Not such smart tourism? The concept of *e-lienation*

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A R T I C L E I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The concept of alienation was adapted to tourism by MacCannell who identified it as a key feature of modernity and a strong driver of tourism where tourists seek to reconnect to authentic places and selves. Meanwhile the post-modern world has witnessed a revolution in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) especially in the realm of smart tourism where its advocates talk eagerly of the internet of everything. Such a totalising prospect demands serious review and this article fills a critical gap by conceptualising the idea of *e-lienation* as a specific form of alienation in ICT-enabled tourism. It combines philosophic questions of meaning, sociological theory and empirical research to demonstrate the meanings of *e-lienation*, its dimensions, causes, consequences and strategies of resistance.

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Introduction

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is ubiquitous in tourism. Its advocates boast of new gadgets, apps and channels and indeed who would disagree about its many benefits and opportunities. There is already plentiful research on the subject but most is about functionality and operations. It is characterised by an emphasis on innovation (e.g. Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2015) and marketing (e.g. Mistilis, Buhalis, & Gretzel, 2014) so there is a significant research gap where deeper sociological, psychological and philosophical theorisations are called for. This is particularly so as we move towards the internet of things and even the internet of everything. ICT is set to further radically change tourism and its ever more totalising prospect surely merits critical research (Munar & Gyimóthy, 2013; Tribe, 2007).

This rationale guides our interest in the relevance of alienation. Alienation describes the psychological and sociological situation where humans can feel a strong disconnect with their everyday lives and habitats. This emptiness in turn may drive a search for the authentic through travel (MacCannell, 1976). But the advance of ICT and the rise of the super-connected traveller surely give rise to new questions of alienation. How does super-connectivity influence tourists' experiences of authenticity? For example, the super-connected tourist may have an obsessive need to be online: may be relentlessly routed and led by TripAdvisor: may crave approval by Facebook friends: may fail to disconnect from work: may stubbornly maintain chats and conversations with those back home: may over-tweet: may be diverted by a need to compose perfect selfies, may over-labour to project "the perfect me in a perfect place".

This gives rise to our broad research question which is to understand and critically evaluate the nature of alienating aspects of ICT in tourism (ICTT). We use the term *e-lienation* to describe this phenomenon and offer a thick, rich description of this concept. We start by framing our context and examining the intersections of tourism and smart technology. Next we

explain and justify our method of netnography. The main section intermingles the findings with the literature review. Finally the conclusion summarises the original contribution and discusses limitations, implications and issues for future research.

Smart tourism

There is no doubt that tourism consumption and experiences have smartened up. They are increasingly mediated by the use of smart devices – tablets, phablets, smartphones, smartwatches – among an ever-growing list of innovative ICTT gadgetry (Dickinson et al., 2014; Neuhofer, Buhalis, & Ladkin, 2014; Wang, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2012; Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2016). Indeed the claim of "the Internet of everything" has been extended to "the Internet of everything in tourism". There is no shortage of research on the impact of technology on tourism as an industry and as an activity (e.g. Buhalis, 1996; Buhalis & Law, 2008; Hays, Page, & Buhalis, 2013; Kah, Vog, & MacKay, 2008). It is comprehensive in its investigation of the affordances, in a functional sense, offered by ICTT (e.g. Bowen & Baloglu, 2015) including for example smart bookings, smart advice and navigation, smart hotels and smart destinations and marketing.

However the majority of studies operate in the domain which Habermas (1978) calls technical reason. They do not question how ICTT developments impact on tourism at a socio-existential level. They overlook their implications on the tourist as an experiencing actor; as a seeker and negotiator of meaning; and as a performer on the tourism stage. By contrast this study seeks to unravel the subtle ways in which ICTT penetrates the touristic journey at the existential level. At that level we believe that the tourist/tourism-technology relationship is more intricate and far-reaching than has so far been understood or assumed. For the tourist as an actor is being reconfigured as ICTT has insinuated new appendages into touristic space and onto the touristic body in the form of smart devices.

ICTT is a vast area so within it we frame our study to incorporate the following sometimes overlapping dimensions of ICT in holiday usage: These include first, access to the internet. Second, the use of devices such as smart phones, watches, PCs and third activities such as communicating with others (e.g social media including Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, SnapChat, WeChat as well as email and text messaging); taking pictures and selfies; and planning Apps such as TripAdvisor, Foursquare, TripExpert etc.

Method

Netnography (Kozinets, 1997; Kozinets, 1999; Kozinets, 2002; Kozinets, 2015), is an adaptation of ethnographic research to encompass online spaces as fieldwork sites. It seeks to understand online communities and their cultures by gleaning insights from a range of user texts such as discussion forums, blogs, customer reviews, wikis, posts, chats, tweets, podcasts, pins, digital images, and video. By tapping into online communities, the method resonates strongly with the new net-based epistemological turn in tourism studies which Liburd (2012) terms "tourism research 2.0".

There are however significant differences between ethnography and netnography, and it would be simplistic to view netnography as "online ethnography". While both approaches are immersive, netnography does not have access to the physical context that ethnographers draw from in real world fields. Further, in netnography it is virtually impossible to verify the identity of participants who often post content anonymously or pseudonymously. However netnography has significant strengths. Kozinets (2002) argues that it is far less obtrusive and time consuming than ethnography. A further strength lies in "its particularistic ties to specific online consumer groups and the revelatory depth of their online communications" (Kozinets 2002, p. 6). Additionally data are produced in natural (online) settings. "Participants" are not objectified by the researcher's agenda—they are not mere respondents to a line of questioning. Instead they are subjects engaging with other users on their own terms, and as such, netnography accesses their authentic, engaged and voluntary expressed voices.

In this project both researchers were involved at each stage of the netnography through an iterative process of discussion, brainstorming, collecting and interpreting data while keeping a trail of sources and insights, debriefing, reflexive note-making, drafting and redrafting. The research process adopted a series of steps, adapted from Kozinets (2015) as follows. The first step was an *introspection phase* where the researchers unpacked the implications of moving from a technical to a more phenomenological approach to ICTT, mindful of its potentially alienating aspects. Next in the *investigation phase* the researchers collaboratively crafted and honed the netnographic issues, informed by their own experiences and observations of social media culture and interactions. The third *informational phase* was concerned with ethical issues. The passive, lurker approach (Björk & Kauppinen-Räisänen, 2012) was adopted for the netnography meaning that the researchers would not actively participate online. This obviated any requirement for consent from participants or for researchers to disclose their status online. The rationale was that the data were already in the public domain, and that no further information was being sought from participants. To preserve the anonymity of participants' online usernames, they were not disclosed in the findings.

An *initial review stage* followed where useful online text sites were found through search engines (Google and TripAdvisor) using Boolean searches of related terms. Guided by our research question, the search terms were selected to capture the broad range of experiences tourists have with technology while away from home. Therefore, the starting point in generating data was to form combinations of related buzzwords that appear in the literature. Combinations of 'tourist experience', 'technology', 'ICT', 'social media', 'technology mediated' and 'digital tourism', were used first to generate an initial data set. Following perusal of these data, other terms and phrases which emerged repeatedly in the social media narratives (e.g. 'why I