



Present whilst absent: Home and the business tourist gaze



Cheryl Willis^a, Adele Ladkin^{a,*}, Juliet Jain^b, William Clayton^b

^a Department of Tourism & Hospitality, Faculty of Management, Bournemouth University, Talbot Campus, Poole, Dorset BH12 5BB, UK

^b Centre for Transport and Society, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on business travel as a contemporary form of mobility and how it relates to family life. Through qualitative research with business travellers, insights are gained into the role digital technology plays in enabling connections to home and family. The paper argues that technology affords a 'business tourist gaze', characterised by a focus on 'home' rather than 'away' as might be the case for leisure tourists. The paper discusses how, through the business tourist gaze, the boundaries between the everyday and the exotic are dissolved and the business traveller is disconnected from the destination, simultaneously absent whilst present both at the destination and at home. Theoretical understandings of the business tourist experience are offered.

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Introduction

Sheller and Urry (2006) proclaimed that 'all the world seems to be on the move' (p207). This appears true in almost all facets of contemporary life as witnessed through unprecedented patterns of travel across the globe, at least for those empowered to move. Embodied in the notion of a new mobilities paradigm, this phenomenon has been studied with increased interest, notably with a focus on how such mobilities shape spatial and social relationships. Despite mobility being at the heart of tourism, in 2005 Hall stated that the concept of mobility had not found much application in tourism studies. However, more recent literature does attest to various lines of enquiry, such as how technology enables the maintenance of social relationships 'on the move' (Molz, 2012), the relationship between different tourist mobilities and sustainable tourism (Lund-Durlacher & Dimanche, 2013; Moscardo, Konovalov, Murphy, & McGehee, 2013; Williams, 2013) and importantly for the context of this paper, the distinctions between different forms of mobilities. This points out that travel can be mundane as well as exciting, challenging the binaries of 'everyday' and 'exotic', traditionally offered to describe the differences between everyday life and touristic experiences (Binnie, Edensor, Holloway, Millington, & Young, 2007; Edensor, 2007; Janta, Cohen, & Williams, 2014). This is important when considering business travel where experiences may differ markedly from those of the leisure traveller. The mobilities paradigm thus lends an important perspective to investigating how business travel is experienced and how it 'resonates with people's lives, their identities, their ways of knowing and being in the world' (Coles, 2015, p63).

Central to these discussions is the role played by digital technology in facilitating business travel and enabling work on the move, and in negotiating and maintaining social relationships where co-presence is not possible. Despite the proliferation of technologies which in could reduce the amount of business travel required, a 'compulsion to proximity' (Boden &

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: cwillis@bournemouth.ac.uk (C. Willis), aladkin@bournemouth.ac.uk (A. Ladkin), Juliet.Jain@uwe.ac.uk (J. Jain), William2.Clayton@uwe.ac.uk (W. Clayton).

Molotch, 1994) means that face to face meetings are still often preferred for the trust and deeper relationships they engender between contacts (Bergstrom, 2010; Jones, 2013). As networks are increasingly stretched across space, so business travel continues to keep apace. The role of technology for enabling work on the move is well understood, whilst the use of technology for connecting to home for the business traveller remains limited. This area of enquiry is important as it has been evidenced that business travel can be demanding physically and psychologically (Espino, Sundstrom, Frick, Jacobs, & Peters, 2002) and connecting home and being 'virtually present' may help to alleviate some of these negative consequences of business mobility.

Connecting to home is not the sole preserve of the business traveller, as leisure travellers also engage in a range of practices surrounding keeping in touch with home (Gretzel & Jamal, 2009; Molz, 2012). However, there may be a distinction in terms of priority. The concept of the 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 1990, 2002; Urry & Larsen, 2011) is useful in investigating some of these distinctions between experiences of business travellers and those travelling for leisure purposes. The tourist gaze is founded on the premise that tourists gaze upon what constitutes difference from their everyday lives. It asserts that tourists 'consume goods and services because they generate pleasurable experiences which are different to those typically encountered in everyday life' (Urry, 2002: 1). This paper asserts that business travel challenges this notion as although it may contain elements of 'difference' and 'pleasure', experiences differ in important ways, particularly for the frequent business traveller whose travel is constant or occurs in close succession. Evidence from qualitative research with UK employees who travel for business is discussed in this paper. This points to a certain disconnect from the travel destination, a desire to connect to home and to be virtually present to take part in the 'mundane' rituals of everyday life via technologies available to them, rather than seeking out and embracing difference and 'the exotic'. For the business traveller, modern technologies may also foster an obligation for connection and availability, which means they are afforded little of the time for relaxation and escape traditionally associated with tourism. This paper argues therefore, that frequent business travellers obtain different perceptions of touristic spaces and develop a different 'gaze' to their leisure tourist counterparts despite inhabiting the same space at the same time; an understanding encapsulated in the idea of the 'business tourist gaze'.

This paper explores how the business tourist gaze is constructed and reinforced by technology which is used to reconfigure presence and absence for the business traveller at home and at the destination area. Through the voices of contemporary business travellers, it makes an important contribution to a more nuanced conceptualisation of business travel as a hybrid practice where travel and tourism are mixed with more mundane practices of work and thoughts which are more reflective of home and the 'everyday'. The paper considers possibilities for future research focused on this uneasy relationship between business travel and tourism and the role of technology in negotiating social relationships for different kinds of travellers. The following section provides the context for investigations into how business travel, as a core part of contemporary mobility shapes these relationships and the role of technology in this process.

Mobilities, business travel and technology

Business travel is recognised as important to the economy. In the UK for example, there were approximately 8 million business visitors in 2014, contributing £5 billion to the economy (UK ONS, 2015). Globally, some 14% of international tourists reported travelling for business purposes (UNWTO, 2015). As well as financial benefits, business travel enables a host of other benefits such as the spread of knowledge and professional practices and the building of better understanding and relationships between different regions and cultures (UNWTO, 2014). However, research on business travel is relatively limited within the tourism literature, although in the wider research arena, interests include categorisations and typologies of business mobility (Aguilera & Proulhac, 2015; Jones, 2013), travel time usage and commuting (Hislop, 2013; Lyons, Jain, & Holley, 2007), business travel practices (Beaverstock & Budd, 2013; Hislop & Axtell, 2015) and business travellers' health and well-being (Bergstrom, 2010; Espino et al., 2002; Gustafson, 2012; Gustafson, 2014). Research has also focussed on the complex debates around the seeming paradox of increasing mobility despite the proliferation of new technologies which, in theory, could limit the need for such mobilities.

The reasons behind this paradox are complex. Changing working practices such as outsourcing, international project teams and multi-unit companies create opportunities for travel (Gustafson, 2012). In addition, despite opportunities for a virtual presence, evidence suggests a continued need for co-presence (Aguilera, 2008; Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, Derudder, & Witlox, 2008; Gustafson, 2012). For organisations to function, face-to-face contact seems to be required to facilitate the development of personal relations and building trust (Bergstrom, 2010; Faulconbridge et al., 2008). What appears to be happening in practice is a combination and interdependence of co-presence and virtual presence (Haynes, 2010; Räsänen, Moberg, Picha, & Borggren, 2010). A deeper exploration into the reasons why co-presence remains important is offered by Strengers (2015) who builds on Urry's concept of corporeal travel, emphasising the role of the embodied nature of meetings and how the proximity of bodies to other bodies and places is 'obligatory, appropriate or desirable' in the practice of business meetings (Strengers, 2015: 596).

In recent years, the study of mobilities, or the movement of people, objects, capital and information has become a subject of intense research largely in recognition of the processes of globalisation which has seen social and business networks expanding across the globe with the need for communications, both virtual and corporeal, responding to these changing conditions. Within these processes, complex spatial and social relationships are formed and understanding these and how they are shaped by the process of travel has emerged as an area of research interest within the mobilities paradigm (Moltz, 2012;

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