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Rethinking post-tourism in the age of social media

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ABSTRACT

The article explores how the culture of spreadable social media affects post-tourism, and, by extension, the boundaries of tourism. Post-tourism is understood as a generalized social condition that entails de-differentiation between tourism and other social realms as well as a complex set of reactions against this predominant trend. Through a case study of urban explorers the article demonstrates how spreadable media impose new layers of reflexivity and hesitation as to whether and how to share tourist representations. While spreadable media provide resources for personalized communication they also make it more difficult to uphold cultural boundaries and distinctions. Differences in handling spreadability testify to the extended role of post-tourism as a site of symbolic struggle among the aspirational middle classes.

Introduction

During the 1980s and 1990s several influential thinkers pointed to the social transformation of tourism. If industrial capitalism had been signified by mass tourism and especially the packaged tour, then, what Lash and Urry (1987, 1994) called "disorganized capitalism", or "reflexive accumulation", brought along the expansion of various niche markets and the blurring of boundaries between tourism and other areas of social life (including both work and leisure oriented practices) (see also Urry, 1988, 1990/2002). Besides growing access to travel and accommodation among "ordinary people", which made tourism *per se* less distinctive, a key aspect of this development was the intensified circulation of tourism related media content through domestic technologies (such as satellite television, video, and, eventually, the Internet). In 1985, Feifer coined the term "post-tourism" to highlight a new and symbolically playful mode of travelling; one in which the traveller (typically a middle-class Western consumer) was reflexively aware of the staged nature of mass tourism and deliberately performed tourism according to media imageries rather than searching for authentic places. This idea of ironic travellers was echoed in Eco's (1986) writings on postmodern society as a world of hyperreal, themed environments and simulated travel. Similarly, in 1994, Lash and Urry discussed the "end of tourism", proclaiming that the notion of tourism was getting fuzzy due to people's everyday involvement in virtual travel through media and visual consumption.

Much has happened since the late 20th century. The volumes of international tourists are continuously growing. Mainstream tourists travel longer distances and niche tourists explore a broadened range of alternative places and activities (see, e.g., Novelli, 2005). In the realm of media and mediatization we have seen the expansion of the Internet as an indispensable source of travel-related information and phantasmagoria, as well as a formidable explosion of social media platforms and mobile applications for navigation, accommodation (finding, rating and sharing), and the creation and circulation of images and other types of content. Yet, there has not been any systematic attempt to study and clarify how the new conditions of connected lives and social media influence post-tourism as a realm of symbolic struggle and thus also the boundaries of mainstream tourism.

This article is an attempt to revisit the post-tourism debate and connect it to recent media transformations in general and the normalization of *spreadable media* in particular. Post-tourism is here interpreted in a broad sense, including not just postmodern forms

of touristic sign-play but also the broader trend towards growing fragmentation of tourism practices and *de-differentiation* between tourism and other social realms. Spreadability, a term introduced by Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013), is taken as a key manifestation of the new commercial logics sustained by social media industries (see also Van Dijck, 2013). It points to the social normalization of the "popularity principle" (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), meaning that visual material and, more indirectly, sights are constructed in order to generate maximum attention.

The main reason to revisit, and to *rethink*, post-tourism is thus that some of its fundamental preconditions, especially media infrastructures, have changed. Tourists, like people in general, are to an increasing extent (co-)producers of media texts that can be spread and discussed far beyond the close circles of traditional family albums. Instagram images, for example, can be geo-tagged and immediately commented upon, which in turn contributes to the cultural (re)coding of tourism places and practices. Relations between the authentic and the simulated are continuously challenged (e.g., Jansson, 2007; Tribe & Mkono, 2017). Another, secondary, reason to revisit post-tourism is that it constitutes an interesting site of *symbolic struggle*. Post-tourism is an area where the boundaries of tourism are negotiated and challenged and where cultural capital, following Bourdieu's (1979/1984) theorization, is at stake. As argued in the original formulation of the post-tourism thesis, the desire to move beyond and distinguish oneself from (mass) tourism can above all be associated with the aspirational middle classes (Feifer, 1985; Munt, 1994), whose economic resources are not sufficient to dismiss mass tourism altogether but who can use their symbolic skills, that is, cultural capital, to transform pre-existing forms of tourism and establish new genres of "non-touristic tourism". Studies of post-tourism thus open up to a broader discussion of middle-class ways of life and how social media play into dynamics of social distinction.

Against this background, the aim of this article is to examine how current forces of media technological change, especially the logic of spreadability, affect post-tourist practices of spatial consumption and the boundary work vis-à-vis mainstream tourism. Empirically, the study looks into the alternative culture of *urban exploration* (sometimes called urbex, or just UE). The UE movement gained popularity in the 1990s – let alone that it has deep historical roots in for example subterranean explorations (dating back to the 19th century) – and has gained further visibility since the expansion of the Internet and social media. Urban explorers identify, visit and document, especially through photography, derelict and off-limit man-made structures of modern society, such as abandoned mines, factories and residential buildings. Due to its reliance on media technologies and its cultural affinities with various forms of niche tourism (notably ruin tourism, heritage tourism and dark tourism) urban exploration constitutes a valid site for grasping the cultural mechanisms of contemporary post-tourism. Urban exploration can be seen as a symptom of a society where post-tourism, understood in terms of both specialization and de-differentiation (Lash & Urry, 1994; Urry, 1995, Chap. 9), has turned into a normalized social condition, especially among the mobile middle classes (Jansson, 2018). As we will see, urban exploration is a manifestation of a post-tourist society, while at the same time a critical reaction to it.

Three research questions guide the analysis of this article: (1) How is the appropriation, recording and representation of UE sites affected by spreadable media? (2) To what extent and in what ways do urban explorers negotiate the force of spreadable media? (3) What are the implications of spreadable media for the social structuration of urban exploration and its boundaries to mainstream genres of tourism? The empirical study is based mainly on interviews with urban explorers in Sweden. The findings identify three *registers of reflexive hesitation*, which characterize the post-tourist handling of spreadable media: the *place-political* register, the *aesthetic* register and the *ethical* register. These registers highlight an ambiguous condition where the distinctions of post-tourism (in this case urban exploration) are increasingly difficult to sustain. It is thus suggested that spreadable media extend and deepen the theoretical relevance of post-tourism as a cultural diagnosis of middle-class life under post-industrial capitalism while *at the same time* providing an arena for challenging and moving beyond post-tourism.

Post-tourism as a generalized social condition

The term post-tourism originally appeared in Maxine Feifer's (1985) book *Going Places*. Her analysis addresses the growing awareness among tourists, especially within the middle classes, that there cannot be any "authentic" tourist experience since tourism by definition constitutes an organized and largely staged practice (see also MacCannell, 1976). The simulated nature and growing popularity of tourism also makes it increasingly difficult to employ it as a means of distinction. As a consequence, according to Feifer (1985), certain middle-class subjects engage themselves in a playful and hyper-mediated form of spatial consumption. She characterizes the post-tourist as a traveller that to a great extent pursues the travelling in front of the TV screen and though travel magazines, consuming and *gazing* at spectacular sites without being physically mobile. Post-tourism thus highlights that most forms of leisure travel starts "at home", and the post-tourist is somebody who reflexively takes part of this mediated phantasmagoria and becomes an expert in playing with the codes and genres of tourism. The post-tourist approaches tourism as a game, where the world becomes a stage – from the local shopping mall to theme parks and exotic destinations (see also Ritzer & Liska, 1997). This means that the post-tourist is actually *playing the role* of a tourist, gazing at other tourists and anticipating their gazes, rather than identifying with the typical practices of tourism.

As pointed out also in subsequent elaborations of the term, the post-tourist represents the middle-class ambition to escape what tourism mobilities are generally associated with: the mass movement of people following standardized taste patterns. The post-tourist takes joy in mixing, and moving between, sophisticated genres of high culture and popular forms of touristic hedonism (Lash & Urry, 1994, p. 275). As Munt (1994, p. 119) argues, the individualistic, emancipatory drive of post-tourism "signals a cultural and social *re*action of the new middle classes to the crassness which they perceive as tourism, and their craving for social and spatial distinction from the 'golden hordes'". This means that tourism at large, involving all kinds of practices, manners (especially the "tourist gaze"), destinations, material cultures (clothes, souvenirs, etc.) and aesthetic formats (notably photography), are used as the raw material for making more or less subtle cultural distinctions, and, by extension, subverting dominant schemes of cultural classification. Post-