

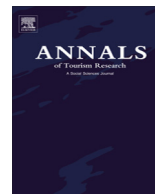


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The reflexive tourist



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of social media as a conduit for tourist reflexivity. The rationale arises from the realisation that existing research has so far failed to recognise fully, in a sociocultural sense, the tourist as a reflexive agent. Taking a novel 'humanist' netnographic orientation, layered with a semi-autonetnographic voice, the paper mobilises the example of slum tourism, to examine tourist reflexivity as it is evident in social media space. The reflexive (slum) tourist emerges as exhibiting three capabilities: interrogating personal misconceptions and allowing self-transformation; embracing ambivalence, complexity and uncertainty; and, critiquing own and others' tourism behaviours. Interestingly, in this sense, tourists opt to *self-review* in product review sites.

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Introduction

Background

How can tourists, as actors and consumers in a morally charged tourism system, demonstrate a capacity for reflexivity? This paper is prompted by the realisation that existing research does not adequately address this question, especially in the context of the new communicative cultures created by social media networking technologies, commonly termed 'Web 2.0' (Wesch, 2007). Thus, embracing the 'moral turn' in the social sciences (Caton, 2012; Mostafanezhad & Hannam, 2014), and taking a novel 'humanist' netnographic approach (Kozinets, 2015), layered with a semi-autonetnographic voice, the paper mobilises the case of slum tourism to demonstrate the role of social media as a conduit for tourist reflexivity, wherein they (tourists) engage in a self-critical process in respect of their

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individual and collective experiences. Indeed, as [Mostafanezhad and Hannam \(2014\)](#) note, (all) tourism will always have moral implications, and, as a field of experience, tourism is ripe for moral investigation. But, while scholarship in tourism social media continues to grow in breadth and depth, it tends to focus superficially on the communicative content as reviews of products and services. As such, it fails to recognise fully, in a sociocultural sense, the tourist as a reflexive agent. For tourists, reflexivity is an important skill as it provides an avenue for self-accountability and self-improvement, which ultimately influence tourist behaviours as we know them.

The study context—‘slumming’ or ‘slum tourism’, an activity where tourists visit impoverished urban settlements in developing country destinations such as India’s Dharavi slums, South Africa’s townships, and Brazil’s favelas, offers an optimal lens for examining the study’s research questions, as it lends itself to moral–ethical questions of poverty exploitation, racial and economic divides, power differentials in host–guest relations, and the ‘gaze’ ([Diekmann & Hannam, 2012](#); [Mekawy, 2012](#); [Meschkank, 2012](#); [Steinbrink, 2012](#)). Thus in their narratives, tourists grapple with the questions of whether slum tourism is humane; how it can be humanised, and, more specifically, whether their personal involvement (past or prospective) could be judged as ethically, economically, socially, and culturally appropriate. Unsurprisingly, within related studies, the semantics associated with slum tourism carry negative connotations; they include ‘safari tours’, ‘zoo tours’, ‘negative sightseeing’, ‘poverty tours’, ‘poorism’, ‘social bungee-jumping’, ‘voyeurism’, and exploitation ([Meschkank, 2012](#)). The idea of treating poverty as a tourist attraction is seen as morally questionable by some, although others focus on the potential benefits for local communities, such as the creation of revenue from the sale of locally produced goods to tourists; the increased awareness of poverty and the promotion of charitable causes; and the disconfirmation of stereotypes about peoples living in slums ([Dovey & King, 2012](#); [Freire-Medeiros, 2012](#); [Frenzel & Koens, 2012](#); [Meschkank, 2012](#); [Steinbrink, 2012](#)). It is important to point out though that the terms ‘slum’ and ‘slum tourism’ do not represent my preferred view of the residential places they are imposed on. This point is revisited later, in the context of touristic insights.

Nonetheless, Web 2.0 presents an opportunity to delve into the moral questions of tourism practice from a new angle. As such, as an adaptation to the virtual world, for the current study, data were sourced from four travel-related online communities, namely Virtualtourist, Tripadvisor, Yelp, and Travelpod. With the advent of social media networking technologies, there is a shift in the way individuals document their private experiences and share them with the rest of the world. The anonymity/pseudonymity and invisibility of online communities allows individuals a higher degree of disclosure—this has been described as the online disinhibition effect ([Suler, 2004](#)). As [Vasalou, Joinson, Bänziger, Goldie, and Pitt \(2008\)](#) argue, and as the findings will show, the open text channel available in social media networks provokes self-reflection that is reminiscent of diary entries, suggesting a new form of ‘virtual diary’. Tapping into these media, the paper therefore addresses the research question: In what ways, if any, do tourist narratives in tourism social media demonstrate a capacity for self-reflexivity? Further, in response to calls for more critical approaches to studying (tourism) social media (for example [Munar, Gyimóthy, & Cai, 2013](#)), the paper also advances a tourism social media research agenda that embraces complexity in human engagement with and within tourism, and with new online technologies.

The paper is organised as follows: a consideration of the value of reflexivity, broadly, is provided next, followed by a summary of the ways in which reflexivity has been dealt with in tourism research. The next section presents the paper’s methodology of humanist netnography, after which the findings of the study are presented thematically. The conclusion then summarises the key points made in the discussion and their implications, as well as charting a trajectory for future research.

The reflexive tourist in tourism social media

The value of reflexivity

The tourism industry is a space of contested (im)balances of power, controversial practices (for example slum tourism), and exploitation. Humanistically, the responsibility falls on tourism partici-

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