Distracted gaze: Problematic use of mobile technologies in vacation contexts

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Digital technology has undeniably altered the way tourists experience destinations. Yet, the problematic use of smartphones and similar mobile devices in vacation contexts has received limited attention. Using descriptive and interpretive approaches, this study explores tourists' experiences and perspectives on the impact or lack thereof of continual engagement with mobile media devices on their tourism experiences. The broad-spectrum view was that mobile distraction takes "something" away from individual tourist experiences as well as travel groups' experiences, although interpretations of the significance of this forfeiture varied considerably. Findings highlight the perceived repercussions of various forms of digital distractions for the quality and scope of the tourist's consumption of sights and sounds; the tourist's wellbeing; social interactions; and the experiences of 'others'. However, some tourists' cognizance of these deleterious effects may not necessarily translate into mindful use of mobile technologies in the holiday context. Findings hold key implications for theory and practice.

1. Introduction

The rising importance of mobile media devices (MMDs) in the 21st Century cannot be ignored. Smartphones, tablet computers, and wearable devices such as smartwatches are deeply transforming the way we engage with technology on daily basis. The International Telecoms Union (ITU, 2015) reports that mobile-cellular subscriptions worldwide has grown from 738 million in 2000 to over 7 billion in 2015, representing a penetration rate of 97%. Mobile broadband subscription penetration experienced the most dynamic growth within the last eight years by increasing 12 times to reach 47% in 2015 (ITU, 2015). Smartphones in particular have become a critical part of our daily lives. By 2013, global sales of smartphones had already crossed the one billion threshold and exceeded the sales of conventional phones.

This growing use of MMDs is in part due to their convenience (Wang, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2012) and multifunctional applications (Kennedy-Eden & Gretzel, 2012). An increasing number of people are employing smartphones for tasks that were hitherto only available on personal computers. This has further created a perceived need to always stay 'wired' to multiple media devices (Courage, Bakhtiar, Fitzpatrick, Kenny, & Brandeau, 2015). The 2016 Global Mobile Consumer Survey reveals that 93% of smartphone owners check their phones within 3 h of waking up. Among younger users, this number extends to as much as 97%. The average person across all age groups in the US, for instance, looks at his or her phone 47 times per day (Deloitte, 2016).

There is no doubt that advances in web-enabled and multifunction mobile media devices have served to enhance the travel experience (Tussyadiah, 2015; Tussyadiah & Wang, 2016; Wang et al., 2012). The utility of MMDs for staying in touch with family, friends, and workplaces while away from home, for safeguarding safety, making enquiries, and obtaining directions, as well as the convenience that comes from empowering travellers to be able to continue to amend travel plans after leaving home makes this technology invaluable for the leisure travel context (Ayeh, 2017a). Nonetheless, this has altered patterns of behaviour, making mobile technology pervasive and vulnerable to problematic use. Such problematic usage raises concern as it interferes with various activities in life (Augner & Hacker, 2012), not excluding those pursuits in the domain of travel and tourism (Wang, Xiang, & Fesenmaier, 2016). Continual engagement with MMDs, coupled with the habit of simultaneously processing multiple channels of information – termed multitasking – are emblematic of this pattern of usage. In tourism related contexts, the increased demand put on information processing resources in a holiday context by multitasking raises concern about the quality of the tourist experience (Ayeh, 2017b). Yet this has not been given the requisite attention in existing literature. This study therefore explores tourists' cognizance of the impacts or lack thereof of multitasking with MMDs on the touristic experience and their awareness of the possible implications.

'When we 'go away', Urry and Larsen (2011) opine, 'we look at the environment with interest and curiosity … In other words, we gaze at what we encounter' (p. 1). Though Urry and Larsen's (2011) "gaze" does not merely refer to the natural eye's vision but 'the "discursive

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determinants" of socially constructed seeing or "scopic regimes'" (p. 2), they nonetheless emphasise that this gaze is fixed on features of landscapes and townscapes which distinguish them from daily experience. In other words, what tourists *see around them* determine their experience; therefore, 'What happens when this "gaze" is distracted?' is a critical question that should not be ignored by the research community.

2. Literature review

2.1. The dark side of mobile technology use

The negative side of mobile technologies has drawn interest from scholars in various disciplines (e.g., Lee, Chang, Lin, & Cheng, 2014; Soror, Hammer, Steelman, Davis, & Limayem, 2015; Thomée, Härenstam, & Hagberg, 2011). Research has found use behaviours to have led to numerous unintended adverse consequences, such as stress (Thomée et al., 2011), sleep deprivation (Cain & Gradisar, 2010; Van den Bulck, 2003) and poorer learning (Chen & Yan, 2016; Fox, Rosen, & Crawford, 2008). Others have found the problematic use of cell phones as responsible for risky and illegal actions (Pennay, 2006) leading to increased vehicular accidents (National Safety Council, 2010), fatal injuries (Lamba et al., 2016; Mohn, 2017) and more teen deaths than drunk-driving (Techlicious, 2013).

Tourism research on mobile technologies however tends to applaud the invaluable role of these technologies in enhancing tourist experiences (e.g., Tussyadiah, 2015; Wang et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2016; White & White, 2007). A study by Wang et al. (2012) underscores how smartphones can alter tourists' behaviours and feelings by addressing a wide variety of information needs. Scholars have also recognised spillover effects from smartphone usage in everyday life into travel (Wang et al., 2016). Still, these spill-over effects have been viewed largely from an optimistic perspective by emphasising outcomes such as confidence, safety, connection, flexibility, fun, and convenience.

Although the dark side of mobile technology is yet to be given deserving attention in extant tourism literature, recently, some scholars have recognised a paradox in technology usage in travel contexts (e.g., Pearce, 2011; Tribe & Mkono, 2017). In his book, *Tourist Behaviour and the Contemporary World*, Pearce (2011) describes how digital elasticity is displacing the concept of liminality. Pierce elucidates how mobile technology mitigates cultural shock while at the same time diminishes the travel experience (Yang, 2013). From a series of focus group discussions, Pearce and Gretzel (2012) also observed that tourists' dependence on mobile connectivity results in several 'tensions' when they travel to destinations where Internet connectivity is unavailable. However, what remains unclear is the nature of the deficits incurred in the travel experience when tourists are continually engaged with mobile technologies in the holiday context. A recent study by Kirillova and Wang (2016) suggest that frequent use of smartphones for work-related communications tends to compromise a sense of recovery delivered by a travel destination, thus accentuating the need to further explore the implications of tourists' ubiquitous connectedness to MMDs for the tourism experience.

Most concerns about the undesirable consequences of mobile technology use, in the general literature, revolve around multitasking. Though there is pluralism in perspectives on the nature of the limitation in human information processing during dual-task performance, there appears to be a consensus that when two or more tasks are carried out synchronously, the cognitive system is constrained (Courage et al., 2015; Fox et al., 2008; Kemker, Stierwalt, LaPointe, & Heald, 2009). Psychology scholars assert that attention is a finite mental resource driving every cognitive activity (e.g., Pashler, 1994; Ruff & Rothbart, 2001). Contingent upon the demands of the activity, attentional resources can be dedicated to a single task or feature or divided more widely across numerous tasks or features (Courage et al., 2015). In the holiday context, this is more likely the case when a tourist carries out several tasks concurrently (e.g., chatting on a mobile app like WhatsApp, Facebook, etc. while listening to a tour guide; or taking photos/videos during a walking tour).

3. Research design and methodology

To probe respondents' reflections on their mobile phone usage behaviour in holiday contexts, naturalistic inquiry using focus groups and in-depth interviews was employed in the collection of primary data. The qualitative approach of this study was informed by Schutz's (1967) theory of social phenomenology as a philosophical lens as well as a methodological approach. As a descriptive and interpretive theory of social action, Schulz's social phenomenology explores subjective experience within the meaningful world of everyday life of individuals or what Schutz and Luckmann (1973) termed as the 'life-world'. The spatial and temporal aspects of experience and social relationships are considered highlights of this theory (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Social phenomenology assumes that individuals dwelling in the world of everyday life have the capability to assign meanings to situations and make judgments, often using conversations to discover the means employed by people for the sustenance of social relations (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In this study, the subjective meaning of experience was the primary issue for interpretation.

3.1. Data collection

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were first conducted with a convenient sample of three separate groups of young American tourists travelling overseas. The object of the focus groups was to generate a rudimentary understanding of the issues. In-depth interviews were subsequently conducted with another set of participants from more diverse backgrounds to further explore potential variations in the salient issues emerging from the FGDs.

A total of forty-two participants were recruited for the study. Data were collected via three focus groups and 22 individual interviews. Appendix A summarises respondents' background information. All the FGD participants were identified as moderate to frequent users of mobile media devices, with ages ranging from 18 to 21 years. This sample falls within the segment of population (18–24) who most frequently check their mobile phones (a daily average of 82 times; Deloitte, 2016) and most likely to multitask with MMDs. Beastall (2008) describes this generation as having an advanced relationship with technology that is fashioned from birth. Representativeness was not a requirement since the focus was a proof of principle rather than population generalisation.

The discussions were guided by a series of open-ended questions that followed the principles of phenomenological psychology (Thompson, 1997) and sought to probe participants to reflect on their MMD use behaviour and its implications for the touristic experience and vacation outcomes (e.g., 'Tell me about your use of the smartphone when engaged with a tourist activity'). A wide range of issues were canvassed during this process. Based on respondents' own words, the study prodded for description and elaboration. The questions became increasingly more specific as the discussions progressed. Although the dialogues also explored participants' general use of mobile media devices for tourist-related endeavours, 'multitasking' and 'mobile distraction' were primary foci and often recurred at a number of points throughout the discussions. All the FGDs followed the same protocol to ensure consistency of approach.

Regarding the in-depth interviews, participants' ages ranged from 21 to 57 years old. In order to ensure broader representation, a judgmental sampling technique was used, and participants were purposively chosen to include a wide range of age and nationality backgrounds. The interviews were conducted from April to June 2016 and from September to October 2017. In the process of data collection and analysis, an interpretative framework was constructed; hence, the sampling strategy altered from mostly judgmental to largely theoretical to build on the evolving concepts. Novel aspects, categories, or explanations