**The Role of Social Media in Creating and Addressing Overtourism**

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**Introduction**

Overtourism is a real-life phenomenon experienced by destinations and one that has spurred a social movement that is increasingly featured and debated in the media (Milano, 2018). Dickinson (2018) notes the rapid growth of the search term “overtourism” on Google between mid-2017 and early 2018, suggesting that the concept has firmly entered public consciousness. In a recent tweet, PBS host Darius Arya highlighted the extent to which the term has saturated social media and traditional news outlets (Twitter, 2018). Brand24.com, a social media tracking tool, shows that #overtourism was mentioned 283 times on Twitter in the final week of August 2018 alone, reaching over one million social media users.

While a recently published news article blames technology, and specifically social media, for encouraging overtourism (Manjoo, 2018), the relationship between social media and tourism is not so direct or simple. This chapter seeks to disentangle this relationship by describing the various roles social media play in informing and connecting tourists and residents. In doing so, it uncovers the positive and negative influences of social media and also their potential to facilitate change.

**Background**

*Overview of social media*

The term “social media” describes a family of online platforms and mobile applications that take advantage of Web 2.0 technologies to facilitate the easy creation, curation and sharing of content by users without requiring technical skills (Gretzel, 2015). Social media allow users to affiliate with other users, with contents and with events, which explains why they are referred to as “social”. These affiliations are usually visible to others, thus further emphasising the social dimension of their contents (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Kietzmann et al. (2011) suggest that identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups are the seven fundamental building blocks of social media. While social media were largely text-based in the beginning, they quickly evolved to include audio, visual and animated content. In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift towards more visual and live content, with short video “stories” becoming popular across several platforms (Gretzel, 2017a Huertas, 2018). In general, the social media landscape is highly dynamic, with new features and platforms/applications emerging on a regular basis and others disappearing.

Social media applications typically have a limited number of functions, e.g. content curation and affiliation through “following”, in the case of Pinterest, while platforms like Facebook or WeChat combine various social networking, messaging, content dissemination and engagement features and often even support e-commerce. Gretzel (2018a) identifies ten dimensions across which social media typically differ, namely 1) the options for self-presentation; 2) the modes of content discovery; 3) the options for content visibility (e.g. public vs. private); 4) the editability of content after posting; 5) the persistence of content over time; 6) the level of control over where on the application the content appears; 7) the opportunities for engagement with contents and other users’ activities; 8) the archivability of content; 9) the opportunities for establishing connections with individuals or groups of other users and with content; and 10) the message formats (length and modality) they support. Depending on their characteristics across these dimensions, social media afford different user behaviours and support different use goals. For instance, Facebook is suitable for mobilizing one’s personal social network around a social cause while Twitter permits users to join in on global conversations via the use of hashtags.

The popularity of social media is grounded in their ability to serve a wide range of psychological, social, hedonic and functional needs that static, largely one-way communication media like traditional websites cannot fulfil (Tuten and Solomon, 2017). Social media use is a global phenomenon, although regional/national differences exist in terms of platform/application and feature availability as well as user characteristics and use behaviours (Gretzel, Kang and Lee, 2008). Social media are increasingly (and sometimes even exclusively) available via mobile technologies, which has further supported their penetration of global markets and their increased usage (Statista, n.d.).

Tourism has played and continues to play an important part in the emergence and development of social media (Minazzi, 2015), with a lot of social media content being travel-related and some platforms and applications being exclusively focused on tourism, e.g. TripAdvisor (Gretzel, 2018a). Due to their relevance for tourism, social media have been adopted extensively by travellers and such media influence tourists’ expectations about destinations and their decision-making (Narangajavana et al., 2017; Zeng and Gerritsen, 2014; Yoo and Gretzel, 2008). As such, it is not surprising that social media have been linked to the phenomenon of overtourism in recent media reports. The following sections explore the specific roles social media play across various aspects of travel and tourism. It is against this theoretical backdrop that their contribution to overtourism and their potential for mitigation is then discussed.

*Social media as information sources*

Social media play an important role as sources of travel information. Travellers perceive their content as more relevant, up-to-date and credible than information available via other channels (Gretzel and Yoo, 2017). Social media also make travel planning more enjoyable for travellers (Chung and Koo, 2015). Even when not specifically looking for social media-related sources, travel planners will likely be exposed to social media-related content as part of their online travel searches (Xiang and Gretzel, 2010).

The use of social media for travel planning purposes and their impacts on travel decisions in the pre-trip stage has been a major focus in the literature on social media in tourism (Leung et al., 2013). With growing use of mobile devices in the context of travel (Wang et al., 2012), decisions are increasingly postponed, such that, with the help of social media, planning also occurs during the trip itself. Restaurant and attraction reviews, location-based social media, livestreaming and video sharing apps can feed travellers with context-relevant information and immediate feedback for their decision-making on the go. As such, social media inform not only where tourists go but also what they do at the destination, and often provide travellers with real-time and location-specific information when making en-route decisions (Fotis et al., 2011).

*Social media as frames*

Photography and tourism are intricately linked (Garrod, 2009) and social media provide new outlets for tourists to curate and share their travel photographs (Lo et al., 2011). Social media also change how tourists take photographs and videos, and how they frame their visuals (Dinhopl and Gretzel, 2016). What tourists depict in their photographs has been traditionally influenced by the iconic images they see in travel advertisements, travel guides and popular media. However, this so-called circle of representation (Jenkins, 2003) has changed because of social media, as tourists are now active participants in establishing what the iconic, must-see destinations are by sharing their photographs publicly on social media platforms (Månsson, 2011). Zhao, Zhu and Hao (2018) propose that such public sharing of travel photography on social media influences the image of a specific destination. Similarly, Balomenou and Garrod (2019) suggest that the changes in photo-taking and photo-sharing practices brought about by social media have important implications for the circle of representation, with the projected image of a destination now being constructed to a much greater extent by consumers, in addition to conventional media and marketers. This has repercussions for destination marketers, who are increasingly losing control over their brands (Gretzel, 2006). An interesting example in this context is the Quokka-selfie phenomenon on Rottnest Island in Western Australia, in which selfies posted on Instagram led to a steep increase in tourist visitation and a specific interest in interacting with the animals (see Figure 5.1). This phenomenon was only recognised and exploited by the destination marketers after it had already become popular among travellers (Acott, 2018). Nowadays, visiting the island without taking a Quokka-selfie has become unimaginable to many tourists.



Fig. 5.1: Quokka selfies on Rottnest Island, Australia (photo credit: Daria Müller and Jiayi Lee).

Social media not only frame destination images, they also influence the relative importance of the destination in the visuals and the visit experience. While travel photographs have always featured the self as a proof that one was actually there, selfies taken for the purpose of social media sharing are usually taken by oneself with a smartphone, firmly directing the gaze to the screen and away from the surroundings. Dinhopl and Gretzel (2016) posit that social media foster a self-directed tourist gaze that moves the self into the foreground and the destination into the background. This means that it is not enough to get a picture of oneself with the Mona Lisa; instead, the self must be featured in the visual in interesting ways to make it shareworthy. The focus on the self requires closeness to the object and elaborate posing (Kozinets et al., 2017). As a result, the consumption of and interaction with the attraction or destination has changed. Also noteworthy is the extensive and sophisticated editing of visuals that social media encourage and facilitate (Dinhopl and Gretzel, 2015). Consequently, visuals on social media are carefully framed and significantly altered to fit the aesthetics of the platform and to encourage engagement from others. The need to frame the experience for social media purposes has also inspired the use of tripods, selfie sticks and wearable cameras, which add possibilities for the tourists but bring about additional management challenges for attractions. Overall, not only the picture is framed but also the experience. Even the mundane needs to look extraordinary.

Gretzel (2017b) argues that social media spur creativity in tourists in their quest to impress. The desire to capture the best shot from the best angle to achieve social media fame can also encourage reckless behaviour and unsustainable practices (Pearce and Moscardo, 2015). Concerns include potential crowd stampedes at festivals because of bottlenecks created by selfie-takers, serious damage to heritage monuments as a result of tourists climbing them to capture unique selfies, and, in some instances, the deaths of selfie-takers who take risks and fall from cliffs and bridges, and the deaths of locals who try to save the selfie-taking tourists.

*Social media as panoptic forces*

Travellers who present themselves and their travel experiences on social media are subject to the gaze of social media audiences (Magasic, 2016). These audiences not only praise but are also quick to shame and punish. Their disciplinary surveillance is often extended to traditional media, which are eager to report on trending social media phenomena (Hess and Waller, 2014). Lo and McKercher (2015) as well as Balomenou and Garrod (2019) propose that travelling with these social media audiences in mind influences photographic practices and social media sharing, as impressions have to be carefully managed. This means that, although social media are assumed to encourage spontaneity and portrayals of experiences in real-time, posts are typically scrutinized to avoid being shamed or, perhaps worse, ignored. User-generated content on social media thus represent ideal selves and experiences that are socially acceptable, unless the goal is to create engagement by shocking one’s social media audience. Dinhopl and Gretzel (2018) describe this networked gaze as being omnipresent and powerful as a disciplinary force, shaping both social media-related behaviours and real-life experiences because tourists seek out experiences that will particularly look good on social media or they rehearse these experiences to later receive the approval of others. It is important to social media users that posts add to their individual and social identity projects in positive ways, because their reputations are at stake. Dinhopl and Gretzel (2018) explain that some social media users might not post at all, so as not to jeopardize their ability to belong to an online tribe; however, what they see posted on social media platforms still critically influences how they behave and structure their experiences.

*Social media as persuasive technologies*

Because of the business models underlying most social media platforms and applications (Gretzel, 2018a), such media are designed as persuasive technologies (Fogg, 2002). This means they integrate techniques of persuasion to encourage particular behaviours, mostly to ensure that users feel the need to check their social media feeds and post regularly. For instance, TripAdvisor awards travel reviewers with so-called “badges” to psychologically reward them and to motivate them to produce more reviews, while Facebook uses notifications to condition users to stay engaged. Indeed, social media use can be so rewarding that it can become addictive. The fear-of-missing-out (FOMO) spurred by social media further fuels their addictive potential (Blackwell et al., 2017). Tourism marketers are aware of the power of social media and have been known to amplify the persuasiveness of social media by “gamifying” content and encouraging playful interaction with social media, such as through travel personality quizzes or social media supported treasure hunts at destinations (Xu et al., 2014).

*Social media as social forums*

Social media support various types of sociality in general, including in relation to tourism (Munar et al., 2013). This sociality goes beyond known and unknown consumers and can extend to destinations and tourism companies. As indicated above, connections are also possible with specific events, contents or conversation threads through “following”, “tagging” or “hashtagging”. Overall, social media represent a complex, networked conversation space, which supports diverse types of affiliations and exchanges, and enables feelings of belonging and community. A critical aspect for travel and tourism is that social media facilitate sociality across time and space, e.g. allowing patrons of a hotel to share their experiences with potential guests, connecting locals and tourists in travel forums, and permitting the sharing of experiences with those who stay at home, as described by White and White (2007).

Social status in the world of social media is gained via two routes: 1) through affiliation and engagement; and 2) through reputation. The first route gave rise to the ‘influencer’ phenomenon, with influencers on social media referring to accounts that either have a very large following or a highly-engaged audience (Gretzel, 2018b). Starting with travel bloggers and now including YouTube vloggers and Instagram influencers, travel influencers have become an important stakeholder in the tourism information ecosystem. Social status can also be achieved through high engagement on social media, e.g. reaching status through frequent check-ins on Foursquare or earning a Destination Expert designation on TripAdvisor. The second route is mostly based on the reputation attained via ratings and reviews. While this kind of reputation was once reserved for businesses, attractions and destinations, it is now also applied to individuals. Everyone and everything is rated and reviewed, spurring a so-called “reputation economy” in which a positive reputation can be monetized. The reviewing technologies and rating culture introduced by social media constitute a critical element of peer-to-peer and sharing economy applications.

*Social media as political means*

Literature on social media is increasingly recognising not only their social, psychological and economic significance, but also their political power. Miller (2017: 251) explains that social media “help foster social change by creating a conversational environment based on limited forms of expressive solidarity as opposed to an engaged, content-driven, dialogic public sphere”. Importantly, social media have been identified as tools that support activism because they allow for more fluid membership and asynchronous participation in movements (Cammaerts, 2015). In a nutshell, social media make activism more accessible. Furthermore, the archival function of social media platforms and persistence of social media content allow activism to be sustained over time. The network ties visible in social media and the ability to identify and target like-minded others help activism spread more quickly, beyond individuals and beyond local communities. The literature also identify unique constraints to social media activism, such as government or company control over social media platforms and the need to reach beyond like-minded others to realize change.

Vegh (2003) categorizes social media activism efforts into the following three types: 1) awareness/advocacy; 2) organization/mobilization; and 3) action/reaction. Awareness/advocacy focuses on distributing information via social media, while organization/mobilization involves using social media to recruit supporters and to coordinate online and offline events, and can also include crowdfunding campaigns. Action/reaction involves using social media to encourage particular actions, ranging from requests for likes and reposts to encouragement of so-called hacktivism, e.g. the spamming or hacking of a company’s social media platform. Social media activism is sometimes referred to as “clicktivism” or “slacktivism” (Karpf, 2010), suggesting that it might not translate into real commitment and offline actions, and emphasizing the ease with which support can be rallied via social media.

Social media enable forms of activism that were previously difficult in tourism contexts because of the myriad of stakeholders involved in tourism and the often substantial geographic distances between them. A wide variety of social media activism types apply to tourism, ranging from individual actions against companies to large-scale consumer boycotts and social movements like #antitourism (Gretzel, 2017c). Examples of such activism include the use of YouTube videos to highlight overtourism problems in Barcelona, which have been significant in fuelling the residents’ anti-tourism movement (Karyotakis, 2018) and the sharing of photos of trophy-hunters on social media as part of the anti-trophy-hunting movement. The current overtourism sentiment is largely sustained via discussions and calls for action on social media.

**Challenges**

Just as answering the question “Do guns or people kill people?” requires a comprehensive understanding of the underlying socio-technical forces, answering the question of “Do social media cause overtourism?” requires a discussion beyond simple deterministic or technology neutral arguments.

*Social media as catalysts of overtourism*

Justin Francis, the chief executive of Responsible Travel, has been quoted extensively for blaming social media for at least part of the problem of overtourism. He reportedly said that,

[s]eventy-five years ago, tourism was about experience seeking. Now it’s about using photography and social media to build a personal brand. In a sense, for a lot of people, the photos you take on a trip become more important than the experience. (Manjoo, 2018).

The above discussion on social media affordances and impacts supports this argument in critical ways: First, the persuasive power of social media technologies encourages users to post, and travel experiences lend themselves perfectly to the purpose of producing and posting lots of shareworthy content, especially on visual platforms like Instagram and location-based applications like Foursquare and Snapchat. In essence, social media are networks of desire that fuel the creation and consumption of content (Kozinets et al., 2016), and travel-related content is particularly attractive.

Second, travel is indeed an important element of the personal and social media-based identity of many individuals and the travel lifestyles modelled by travel influencers can motivate social media users to pursue travel, so as to at least get a glimpse of what such a life might be like and be able to impress others. In addition, seeing one’s friends post about their vacations creates so-called Facebook envy. Social-media induced FOMO and “you only live once” (YOLO) sentiments further contribute to the desire to travel and can give rise to travel trends such as “last chance tourism”.

Third, social media not only present up-to-date rich experiential information that supports decision-making processes, they also present ratings and reviews and often use this information to create lists of top destinations and attractions. Such lists provide information seekers with a convenient decision heuristic and exert social influence. Many of the lists are automatically generated based on ratings (for instance, the TripAdvisor “Top Things to do”) or are curated and disseminated by influencers. Checking places off these lists then becomes an important pursuit for some social media users, as it allows them to build reputation, feel closely connected to the influencers and their audience, and obtain approval from their own social network. The travel blogger Nomadic Matt writes that this is comparable to effects that other media, such as films and travel guidebooks, have had but he argues that “social media has an amplifying effect that didn’t exist in the past. It makes it easier for everyone to find – and then overrun a destination” (Nomadic Matt, 2018).

Social media not only heighten motivations to travel, they also foster travel to specific destinations and influence behaviours at destinations. For example, city tourism provides the diverse experiences and the connectivity needed by travellers to satisfy their social media posting needs much more than rural tourism does (Magasic and Gretzel, 2017). In addition, the social media lists of “top places to visit” further concentrate tourism demand in certain areas. Huertas (2018) specifically looks at live videos and stories and claims that they change both the perceptions of a place and social media users’ vacation behaviours at the destination. This can be seen on Pinterest and Instagram, which are full of posts that advertise the most instagrammable spots at various destinations.

A recent ABC News article (Fisher and Bullock, 2018) asked: “Are we killing tourist destinations for an Instagram photo?” This is a valid question as many instagrammable spots are small places, such as bookstores or cafes, which are usually not managed as tourist attractions and are unable to cope with sudden increases in demand. But such spots also include traditional attractions. While the Dinhopl and Gretzel (2016) analysis of the quest for the extraordinary in the context of travel photography would suggest that tourists seek out unique places away from the crowds, Gretzel (2017b) finds that, rather than depicting unusual destinations, social media tourists find ways to display the extraordinary in front of iconic attractions, for instance by framing the site or the self differently or engaging with the attraction in ironic ways.

Some commentators on tourism have argued that this is nothing new. For example, Manavis, in a recent blog post (2018) claimed that “the idea that, before social media, we weren’t ‘endlessly queuing behind backpacks of hundreds of other tourists’, as the NYT article puts it, at places like the Louvre, taking pictures of historic landmarks, and doing embarrassing poses next to graffitied walls and statues, is simply untrue”. While it is indeed true that there is nothing new about mass tourism and travel photography, social media-induced travel photography and videography is a qualitatively different kind of practice. Smartphone cameras redirect gazes, and social media audiences provide immediate feedback. “Do it for the ‘gram” has become a common dare, and this phrase is now officially listed in online dictionaries.

Thus, while social media use is not the only, and likely not the most important, reason for overtourism, it certainly encourages behaviours that lead to crowding and it perpetuates images that influence others to travel to certain places and, once there, behave in certain ways.

*Social media as tools to combat overtourism*

As persuasive technologies and panoptic forces, social media not only encourage overtourism but can also play an important role in promoting sustainable tourism behaviour (Murphy et al., 2018; Gössling, 2017; Negruşa et al., 2015). Indeed, the need of social media users to portray themselves in their best light to support their identity construction projects (Lo and McKercher, 2015) can be used to the advantage of destinations when behaviours that worsen overtourism are openly shamed and those that address it are encouraged. Alternatively, gamification through social media can be used to nudge tourists into desirable directions, e.g. by making information about overtourism playful and by rewarding destination stewardship behaviours in social media applications. Similarly, behaviour change can be encouraged through using the power of social media influencers. Zygmont (2018) explains how Switzerland Tourism actively works with influencers to target very specific tourists for lesser known destinations.

Dispersion of tourists away from the main pressure points appears to be especially critical. Almeida-Santana and Moreno-Gil (2017) suggest that social media use can indeed spur interest in multiple destinations. The World Travel and Tourism Council (2018) proposes that technologies can help combat overcrowding in various ways, including through augmented reality applications, which provide compelling experiences without the need to be close to an attraction or a particular vantage point, and through recommender systems that disperse tourists by providing suggestions not simply based on what other tourists like but on the basis of highly-personalized solutions or by specifically using lack of crowdedness as a selection criterion.

It is also important to acknowledge the indispensable role social media play in educating stakeholders and the public about the causes and consequences of overtourism. The visuals posted by tourists on social media can serve as a rich data source to identify overtourism and, if subjected to big data analytics, could be used as an early-warning system to trigger crowd management. Furthermore, social media’s role in helping residents organize and initiate virtual and real-life protests is significant in creating and sustaining #overtourism and #antitourism as social movements that reach far beyond the boundaries of individual destinations. Translating online support into real-life action remains a challenge, however.

**Conclusion**

A recent article shared widely on social media claims that “The next trend in travel is […] don’t” (Smith, 2018), but the above discussion indicates that it is possible to reduce the negative effects of tourism if technologies like social media are used strategically to encourage certain behaviours over others and to put strong social norms in place, which are then policed by social media audiences and subsequently integrated into the self-disciplinary gazes of social media-using tourists. Indeed, preventing and combating overtourism is a responsibility that is shared by all tourism stakeholders (Milano et al., 2018) and social media can provide a forum in which stakeholders can organize, exchange ideas and feedback, and work towards potential solutions. What is clear is that a discussion of overtourism, whether relating to its causes or to potential solutions, requires the consideration of social media because of how intricately this media has become linked with the business of tourism, the planning of travel and the tourism experience. Yet, it must be noted that not every tourist is on social media and that social media behaviours are not the only drivers of overtourism. Social-media based solutions will only be effective in combating overtourism when used in conjunction with other measures.

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