

Press Release

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PolyU Study Finds Smartphones Transform the Travel Experience

The increasingly widespread use of smartphones has “transformed the tourist experience” by altering how people plan, experience and feel about travel, according to Dr Dan Wang of the School of Hotel and Tourism Management (SHTM) at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and co-authors in a recently published paper. The researchers identify various beliefs and situational and contextual factors that explain travellers’ use of mobile technology. In short, they argue that “mobile systems have become important tools enabling tourists to navigate an uncertain world”.

Over the past few years, according to the researchers, smartphones have evolved into “fully functional computers” and information technology has become “woven into the fabric” of our everyday lives. Having a constant connection to the Internet has become an expectation, with information always available on demand. This change in the way we access information is particularly noticeable for travellers, as smartphones “support tourists’ need for mobility and information/communication on-the-go”.

In the past, the researchers explain, travel tended to be regarded as a three-stage process involving pre-trip planning, the trip itself and the documentation and sharing of experiences and photos after returning home. Information technology in general has influenced each of these stages, but mobile services and location-based technology have the greatest potential to influence tourists’ behaviour in all three stages.

Despite these widespread changes, the researchers note that we still know little about how people’s travel behaviour has evolved in response to the “increasing penetration” of mobile technology, and how it has altered their experience of and feelings about travel.

As a way of developing a more “holistic understanding” of how smartphones have influenced tourism, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 24 US tourists to obtain “rich descriptions of how people actually use their smartphones for travel”. The broad objective was to explore the “thinking and reasoning” behind tourists’ smartphone use and their “feelings during and after use”.

All of the tourists interviewed had taken a minimum of three leisure trips of at least 50 miles away from home in the past 12 months, and they each owned a mobile phone with an unlimited data plan that allowed them to freely access the Internet. They ranged in age from 18 to 70, although half were aged 18 to 30.

The researchers asked the tourists about the use of smartphones in their everyday lives and how that did or did not change on their most recent trip. They also inquired about how smartphone use had changed the way that travel was planned and experienced.

The most immediately striking result of the interviews is that the researchers identified 25 different ways in which the tourists used their smartphones, grouping them into the broad categories of communication, entertainment, facilitation and information search.

The communication category included making phone calls, sending and receiving emails and text messages and using Facebook. The entertainment category included the most popular activity – taking and sharing photos through social networks, emails or text messages. It also included listening to music, playing games, surfing the Internet and watching movies.

The researchers note that the tourists also used their smartphones for activities such as “managing their itineraries, checking the weather, checking-in for flights, and purchasing tickets”. Some of them used navigation apps to find their way around and also to “understand the environment for safety reasons”.

Smartphones were useful both before and during their trips, facilitating information searches on topics such as transport, accommodation, dining and things to do. The researchers note that Twitter was a source of information for some of the tourists, although they seemed to use it while travelling in a different way from in everyday life. For instance, whereas people might normally use Twitter as a news source, while travelling it seems to be used more as a source of information about the destination, helping users decide where to go and what to do.

The researchers indicate that different travel scenarios provided extrinsic motivations for smartphone use. Smartphones were useful for meeting “spontaneous needs” such as obtaining directions, arranging transport and accommodation and finding things to do. Other motivations seemed to be more related to the individual’s personality and lifestyle, including staying connected with others, keeping informed about events elsewhere and having fun. Some of the tourists mentioned that they gained a “sense of satisfaction and happiness from sharing experiences with others”. Others “actually enjoyed being in contact with work” while travelling, because they enjoyed their jobs and wanted to keep up-to-date with what was happening.

The tourists interviewed also had more intrinsic motivations for using their smartphones. Some of them used their phones just to kill time or out of habit, such as watching movies, listening to music, playing games and checking Facebook.

“Perceived convenience” was usually the first response when asked about the rationale for using a smartphone. Some of the tourists mentioned that they trusted information from Internet sources more than alternatives such as asking others. The use of smartphones in the context of travel was also related to their use in everyday life – those who were used to keeping in constant touch with friends through Facebook, for instance, were more likely to share their experiences through the site while travelling.

As the researchers show, travel planning has become easier with the help of smartphones. Some of the tourists interviewed reported that they now did less pre-trip planning because “ubiquitous Internet access” made it unnecessary to plan everything beforehand. One interviewee, for instance, said that in future she would search for a hotel once she arrived at her destination, rather than book in advance. Some others, in contrast, found that they planned more than ever, with the ease of accessing the Internet

through smartphones meaning they could plan their trips during work breaks, at lunchtimes and while commuting.

Smartphones certainly seem to have made travel itineraries more flexible. The tourists mentioned that their phones helped them to change plans while travelling if “planned activities did not meet their expectations”, and to take advantage of last-minute deals and enjoy spontaneous activities. The ease of uploading photos and updating social network sites during trips has also changed tourists’ behaviour once they return home, because in the past they would have waited until after the trip to share their photos and experiences with family and friends.

The researchers argue that smartphones allow travelling users to feel more “connected” and less isolated because they can keep up “the routines of communication” such as checking emails. Constant Internet access also seems to make users feel “less stressful” and “more secure” while travelling, such as by keeping them updated on flight changes. The interviewed tourists also mentioned that travelling with a smartphone was more fun because they could watch movies or play games when they had nothing else to do, such as while waiting for flights.

Given the significant ways in which smartphones are now used to enhance the travel experience, the researchers clearly show that “tourists carry parts of their everyday experience (e.g. habits, hobbies, personality)” over to trips. Indeed, they argue convincingly that travel is now “a ‘special stage’ for technology use whereby everyday use of technology influences the use of technology during travel”.

Wang, Dan, Xiang, Zheng and Fesenmaier, Daniel R. (2014). Adapting to the Mobile World: A Model of Smartphone Use. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 48, 11-26.

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