



LAPIN YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY OF LAPLAND



University of Lapland

This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version usually differs somewhat from the publisher's final version, if the self-archived version is the accepted author manuscript.

Smart and Sustainable Destination Experiences

Haanpää, Minni; Hanni-Vaara, Päivi

Published in:
Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2023

DOI:
[10.1007/978-3-031-25752-0_18](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25752-0_18)

Published: 01.01.2023



Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Haanpää, M., & Hanni-Vaara, P. (2023). Smart and Sustainable Destination Experiences: A Content Analysis on Finnish Tourism Experts' Perspectives. In B. Ferrer-Rosell, D. Massimo, & K. Berezina (Eds.), *Information and Communication Technologies in Tourism 2023: Proceedings of the ENTER 2023 eTourism Conference, January 18-20, 2023* (pp. 160-165). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-25752-0_18

Document License
CC BY



Smart and Sustainable Destination Experiences: A Content Analysis on Finnish Tourism Experts' Perspectives

Minni Haanpää^(✉)  and Päivi Hanni-Vaara 

University of Lapland, Rovaniemi, Finland
{minni.haanpaa, paivi.hanni-vaara}@ulapland.fi

Abstract. This paper discusses how Finnish tourism experts such as tourism entrepreneurs, destination management organizations (DMOs), development project personnel, and third-party organizations explain and shape the smartness of tourism destinations in Finland. We especially explore how the experts view the nexus of smartness and the experiences of tourists. The method used in this research is qualitative inductive content analysis. The preliminary findings show that the destinations aim to provide sustainable experiences with a balance between physical and digital services. However, the conditions such as scant mobility services and sometimes harsh nature conditions set challenges to developing smart tourism experiences. Smartness is still seen as a way to improve different aspects of social, cultural, and ecological sustainability.

Keywords: Smart tourism · Tourism experience · Sustainable destination

1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss how smart destination development is understood and perceived in relation to tourist experiences by tourism experts in Finland. Before COVID-19, Finnish tourism exports were growing rapidly, which is largely explained by the increase in the number of foreign individual tourists. Finland's major tourism attractions for international travelers are remote destinations, nature, and nature-based experiences. These are oftentimes located in sparsely populated areas with variations from snowy to snowless seasons. Currently, digital solutions for individual foreign tourists are underdeveloped. For example, relevant information on travel modes, timetables, and services at the destinations is fragmented across several different websites, applications, and services. Therefore, accessing nature attractions and finding relevant services could be facilitated with novel digital solutions.

However, this development has implications for the experiences of tourists. In this paper, based on the interviews of Finnish tourism experts, we discuss the development of physical and digital environments in tourism destinations and how the experts view them affecting these experiences. As digital transformation globally reshapes the roles of different tourism actors from company-oriented to co-creative value-based business [1–3],

how do the experts see the possibilities in developing service concepts which acknowledge not only the traveler but value their information and collaborate with the traveler throughout their journey enriching the experience in the different touchpoints [4]? The concept of smart destinations and the experiences they create has been extensively studied in urban contexts. In this study we investigate smart destination development and its possibilities and consequences in peripheral, sparsely populated contexts which has been a less studied phenomenon. We thus ask: how can smartness enhance accessibility and service levels of rural, sparsely populated, peripheral travel destinations? Besides enriching the experiences of travelers, we are interested in how the experts see the possibility of smart solutions to promote sustainable choices for travelers as part of these experiences. For example, finding alternative modes of transport to a private car or travel chains connecting different modes of transport can be impossible in the current situation.

2 Theoretical Background

The theoretical framework of this study combines theories discussing smart tourism, smart destinations, and the blending of physical and digital experiences, as phygital experiences [5] in order to analyze the development of smart destination experiences in peripheral destinations.

Smartness is often reflected in technology, as an independent agent, having the capability, intelligence, and ability to connect with the help of devices like smartphones [5, 6]. However, it is crucial to also consider the elements besides technology enriching the total experience of the traveler. Thus, smart tourism can be categorized being a combination of technology and human [7]. We understand smart tourism in smart destinations as “improving tourism services and experiences through innovative digital solutions” [8] where the services are provided by multiple human and non-human agents, such as social robots informally called chatbots [2].

Thus, smart destinations are bridging the physical and digital experiences as a joint entirety and, forming an interplay between the systems of insights and systems of engagement [7, 9]. The systems of insights represent data; collecting, exploiting analysis, and harnessing the insights into practices [9]. Moreover, the systems of engagement refer to the technology-driven architectures that are interconnected with the travelers’ touchpoints by personalizing and enriching them through augmenting, gamifying and targeting the experience [9]. Hence, travelers’ experiences become phygital, being allocated in several places and spaces simultaneously, not only inside the smart destination. For example, standing physically in a tourism destination while simultaneously checking digitally work-related emails [5].

Accordingly, Debnath et al. [10] emphasize sensing as a relevant element when interacting and living with the traveler throughout each touchpoint of the tourism journey. The destination creates inclusiveness, well-being, and sustainability for the whole tourism society when it prioritizes the systems of insight and engagement in the center of the phygital service touchpoints [5, 9]. Gretzel et al. [6] describe that the functionalities like adapting, adjusting, and fitting the technology to the destination culture, characteristics, and environment create value for the whole tourism ecosystem. When the tourism society and ecosystem are involved in an ongoing process and controlling the information,

engaging and communicating with the travelers, it has better possibilities in healing and predicting forthcoming, and even preventing disruption [6, 9, 10].

In practice, mobile-supported, digitally enriched travelers' journeys utilize, for example, artificial intelligence (AI) and big data where geographical information of the destination is informed. For example, augmented reality (AR) offers possibilities in immersive multisensory digitally mediated stories and gamified services that enrich the travelers' experience throughout the touchpoints whether they occur pre-, onsite, or post-experience [4, 7, 11, 12]. AI is found to inspire and intensify the travelers' experience with the destination culture, like local heritage, traditions, and stories of the destination.

3 Methodology

The data of this study has been collected as a part of a research project focusing on the digitalization of tourism mobility and services. The data consists of 17 semi-structured interviews. Their duration ranges from half an hour to 1,5 h. The informants were chosen according to the project's focus: they actively contribute to destination development either on the national level or in one of the two pilot areas of the project. They were representatives of destination management organizations (DMOs), development project personnel, and third-party organizations that are supervising the interests of tourism experts, and tourism entrepreneurs. The interviews had three major themes: the informants were asked to explain their viewpoints on the future traveler and the operating environment of tourism. Moreover, they were asked to anticipate the near future development of the destinations (this being either Finland or the destination they operate in, depending on their position).

The method of analysis used is qualitative inductive content analysis. The analysis included interplay with theory, data, and the researcher's interpretation in observing the visible, and the latent contents of the data provided by the informants [13].

4 Preliminary Findings

"Well yes, it has been under construction for a long time, or we have discussed at least for 5 years, about the digitalization of accessibility and that place related information, and you could follow where your bus stop is and where it [the bus] is coming..." The preliminary findings show that the informants view smart destination development as the future for peripheral destinations. However, there are differences in how destinations and organizations perceive and implement smartness and sustainability elements in the smart destination context.

Experiencing smartness is connected to local conditions. For example, the annual cycle of weather conditions in Finnish Lapland imposes different challenges for digitalized services compared to a snowless season. As a result, it is important to ponder how and when travelers can safely use, for example, only their smartphones to navigate when hiking in nature. Namely, when the weather is snowy, and the temperature is about -20 degrees below zero, the battery of the smartphone gets down quickly. By compensating the services with a variety of physical and digital elements, like providing physical

maps alongside the use of smartphones, the destinations create practices that support sustainability and trust for the whole destination ecosystem.

”And maybe because our destinations are a bit uncharted, then that’s the reason why the last confirmation is wanted from the reception anyway. To ask from the local person. And surely, the information is available better and more easily from the web and you can make bookings and other stuff there, be it mobile device or whatever. And you get the info of all the confirmations. But somehow still, the foreigner wants the personal confirmation.” The local conditions also relate to the issue of trust. According to the interviewees, travelers oftentimes trust the information and knowledge provided by the locals after arriving at the destination. How can the experience of smartness inside the destination be created as an interplay between physical and digital elements? And again, are there ways to present local knowledge and create insights digitally – even pre-travel?

Generally, the preliminary findings show that the objectives of development are set in balance with the destinations’ ecological, cultural and social traditions as well as physical conditions. Smartness is seen as a possible way to improve sustainability in destinations by the informants. It is seen that digitalized services, even tiny concepts, can steer the behavior of the traveler to understand and value local habits and the way of living. Moreover, digitalized and immersive services are seen as a resource as they are releasing entrepreneurs’ hours from daily operations in the long run. Further, these resources are found to support the well-being of entrepreneurs.

Finally, the preliminary findings show that the systems of insights and systems of engagement [9] involve travelers, tourism destinations and tourism intermediaries. Namely, COVID-19 introduced travelers and tourism destinations to the fact that trust in gaining correct and updated information on travel-related elements creates well-being, especially in constantly changing situations. The data shows that intermediaries are taking back their seats in tourism supply and value chains as the correct information is crucial and creates social sustainability for the whole ecosystem.

5 Conclusion

Our study contributes to the discussions of designing smart tourism experiences. Theoretically, it highlights the need for situated theorization inside the smart tourism discussion: the prerequisites and conditions in sparsely populated areas differ greatly from their urban equivalents. Our empirical findings reveal how local conditions, be they natural, cultural, or social, affect the way of experiencing, and thus designing, smartness in destinations. Further, our empirical data brings insights into experiencing and designing smart tourism in sparsely populated areas. And finally, we provide insights into how tourism experts perceive the nexus of smartness and sustainability when developing and managing destination experiences. However, this study is not without limitations: as this study is qualitative and looks at one national context, more research is needed from other destination contexts in order to compare and generalize the results. The future studies could explore other country contexts but also ask directly from the travelers about their experiences on peripheral smartness.

Acknowledgments. This research work is supported by the FIT ME! Foreign Individual Traveller Hospitable Mobility Ecosystem project funded by Business Finland [14].

References

1. García-Rosell, J.C., Haanpää, M., Janhunen, J.: ‘Dig where you stand’: values-based co-creation through improvisation. *Tour. Recreat. Res.* **44**, 348–358 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2019.1591780>
2. Hanni-Vaara, P.: Human or nonhuman agent? Experiences of empathy in a digital customer tourism journey. In: Sarantou, M., Miettinen, S. (eds.) *Empathy and Business Transformation*, pp. 231–245. Routledge, New York (2022)
3. Pesonen, J.: Asiakassuhde-elämyksiä matkailijoille. In: Konu H., Pesonen J., Reijonen H. (eds.) *Matkailuliiketoimintaa teoriasta käytäntöön*, pp. 69–98. Vastapaino, Tampere (2020). [Customer relationship experiences for tourists]
4. Stankov, U., Gretzel, U.: Tourism 4.0 technologies and tourist experiences: a human-centered design perspective. *Inf. Technol. Tourism* **22**(3), 477–488 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40558-020-00186-y>
5. Zillinger, M.: *Tourism revisited: The influence of digitalisation on tourism concepts*. ETOUR working paper 2021:1. Mid Sweden University (2021)
6. Gretzel, U., Werthner, H., Koo, C., Lamsfus, C.: Conceptual foundations for understanding smart tourism ecosystems. *Comput. Hum. Behav.* **50**, 558–563 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.03.043>
7. Koo, C.: Understanding of human nature, smart tourism & metaverse. In: 29th Enter Conference Panel 1, Nankai (2022)
8. European Commission: *Smart Tourism Destinations*, <https://smarttourismdestinations.eu/>. Accessed 15 Oct 2022
9. Mele, C., Russo-Spena, T.: The architecture of the phygital customer journey: a dynamic interplay between systems of insights and systems of engagement. *Eur. J. Mark.* **55**, 72–91 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1108/ejm-04-2019-0308>
10. Debnath, A.K., Chin, H.C., Haque, M.M., Yuen, B.: A methodological framework for benchmarking smart transport cities. *Cities* **37**, 47–56 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2013.11.004>
11. Reichstein, C., Härting, R.C.: Potentials of changing customer needs in a digital world: a conceptual model and recommendations for action in tourism. *Procedia Comput. Sci.* **126**, 1484–1494 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2018.08.120>
12. Yung, R., Khoo-Lattimore, C., Potter, L.E.: Virtual reality and tourism marketing: conceptualizing a framework on presence, emotion, and intention. *Curr. Issue Tour.* **24**(11), 1505–1525 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2020.1820454>
13. Graneheim, U.H., Lindgren, B.M., Lundman, B.: Methodological challenges in qualitative content analysis: a discussion paper. *Nurse Educ. Today* **56**, 29–34 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2017.06.002>
14. *Matkailuliikkuminen. FIT ME! Foreign individual travelers’ hospitality and mobility ecosystem*. <https://matkailuliikkuminen.fi/>. Accessed 15 Oct 2022

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

