

Using an Immediate Approach in Researching the Tourist Experience

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Abstract

This note introduces a multiple research method approach in capturing immediate real time experiential, visual, and spatial data on tourist experiences. Immediate experiential data is captured using the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) modified for hand-held smartphones. Immediate visual data involves the collection of digital photographs taken by the tourist at the destination. Immediate spatial data is collected using Global Positioning System (GPS) technology which captures routes taken by the tourist. Post trip interviews and email surveys are also employed to provide the ability to compare immediate experiences with recollected experiences. Recommendations are made on how to further refine these research methods using an immediate approach to gather meaningful and in-depth information on the tourist experience.

Keywords: Tourist Experience, Experience Sampling Method (ESM); Photography; Global Positioning System; In-Situ Tourism Experience Logger (ISTEL)

1 Introduction

The tourist experience is an important yet under researched component in the social sciences and is of particular relevance to tourism researchers, managers, and destinations which provide “experience” as the main tourism product. The tourist experience is everything that happens at a destination (Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003), encompassing a complicated variety of elements and event. Despite over three decades of research on this area, there are numerous gaps in the literature. Research tends to focus on satisfaction-dissatisfaction criteria or post-trip assessments. Rarely have studies looked at immediate tourist experiences, despite findings which indicate that the evaluation of experiences can change over time (Lee *et al.*, 1994).

This current research deviates from more traditional studies by focusing on an immediate approach, using multiple research methods and employing new technologies in data collection. The immediate tourism experience is captured using experiential, visual, and spatial approaches. The immediate experiential approach employs In-Situ Tourist Experience Log (ISTEL) software, a modified version of the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) on hand-held smartphoiness. The immediate visual approach involves the collection of digital photographs from tourists which provide data on visual experiences that individuals wish to preserve. The immediate

spatial approach uses Global Positioning System (GPS) data to examine spatial aspects of the experience. Research using more traditional recollection methods, such as post trip interviews and email surveys, provide a basis for comparison and allow for insight into how the understanding of the tourist experience changes over time. This research note will introduce these approaches in measuring the experience of tourists and evaluate the use of these data collection techniques in the field. The focus is on the operationalisation of the methods rather than analysis and results.

2 Measuring the Tourist Experience

The immediate approach involves collecting data on real time reactions. This allows for a better understanding of how tourists perceive their own experience and can provide a more valid measure than the recording of recollected experiences (Larsen, 2007). Current reactions to experiences can capture raw emotions and thoughts which have not yet been processed and contextualised within a whole travel event. The use of different methods allows for cross examination or triangulation of the phenomenon under study. In this research, the collection of immediate data involves three approaches: the experiential approach, the visual approach, and the spatial approach.

In leisure studies, capturing immediate experiential data is often done using the Experience Sampling Method (ESM). This method uses a systematic approach involving the repeated administration of self reports designed to capture the perception of current experiences by prompting subjects to answer questions within a natural setting (Hektner *et al.*, 2007; Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1983). Previous ESM studies have involved the use of electronic pagers which signal participants to fill out paper self reports (Borrie & Roggenbuck, 2001; Fave *et al.*, 2003). Recently there has been a move towards more computerized data collection as this can allow greater flexibility in question presentation, more precise control of timing, the ability to track compliance, and reduction in human error when managing data (Hektner *et al.*, 2007). In this study the ESM is modified for hand-held smartphones using In-Situ Tourism Experience Log (ISTEL) software. The ISTEEL software is designed to alert participants throughout the day at random intervals via device vibration. Upon upholstering the device, participants are prompted to complete a tourist experience log involving questions on current experiences that are answered using a combination of pull-down lists and prompted voice recordings. Data is stored on the smartphone as audio or text files allowing more flexibility in the timing and location of the data collection and more streamlined data transfer to analysis software. This computerised method differs from previous ESM studies as it does not require the participant to carry around paper questionnaires. It also minimises interruptions of experiences as the data collection tool is small and portable. The act of completing a log is similar to texting and talking on a mobile phone, which can be done even while participating in more strenuous trip activities such as hiking. The data is then downloaded and subject to content analysis based on the research question to determine patterns, relationships, and major themes in the individual interpretation of immediate experiences.

Using an immediate visual approach involves the collection of tourist photographs taken during the tourist experience and the assessment of these images. This visual data can illustrate the travel environment and help to further understand the experience itself. There have been very few studies which empirically investigate tourist photography as a phenomenon though the relationship between photography and tourism is stressed as an important one (Chalfen, 1979; Scarles, 2009). Cameras produce material which visually captures actual experiences in ways that words can not. The integration of photography in tourist experience research involves the use of static images to provide information on the elements the tourist sees as important enough to preserve as part of trip memory or to show others upon returning home as evidence of their experience. So as to not bias individual choices in photography during a trip, in this research participants are only approached once the trip has ended. In collecting digital images, the data is already coded with time and date information allowing it to be connected to spatial and experiential data, before being subject to a process of visual analysis which examines the content and context of the images captured by tourists.

The immediate spatial approach involves tracking and mapping travel behaviour to provide insights into spatial decision-making. Shoval and Isaacson (2007) discuss challenges in collecting data on spatial behaviour such as the disruption to experiences and the accuracy in recording spatial activity details when using recollection methods. These challenges can be addressed using Global Positioning System (GPS) tracking technology. The accuracy of this spatial data collection method is a vast improvement over traditional methods such as travel behaviour questionnaires (Xia *et al.*, 2008) as it can capture continuous travel movement without relying on participant memory or observation. Though GPS data provide information on locations and times, data are unable to reveal more in-depth information on other aspects such as travel experiences. Therefore the use of GPS data in tourist experience research is an excellent tool when accompanied by other research methods. In this research, location information captured using GPS devices provides a spatial component in examining immediate experiences as the time stamped location will connect spatial data to verbal experiential reactions and visual data.

Though the focus of this study is on immediate research methods, recollection approaches provide comparisons between on-site experiences and experiential memory. Memory is an important element associated with the tourist experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). It is even stressed as being the most influential aspect of tourism experiences, as memory will be what remains after the experience has ended, exerting a strong influence on the perception of destinations (Larsen, 2007). In this research, short term tourist experience memories are captured using semi-structured interviews three to four months after participants return home while long term tourist experience memories are captured using open ended email surveys 16 months after participants return home. This allows for the methodological evaluation of how the understanding of experiences changes over time.

3 Evaluating Immediate Approaches to Research

The research methods outlined above were employed using a purposive sample of 21 educational tourists from Canada who travelled on a 10-day group tour to Peru in August 2008. Each participant was given a smartphone which was equipped with ISTELE software. The ISTELE data collection method produced 824 logged events. Several members were also given GPS devices to carry with them which collected spatial information on group location for the full 10 days. Twelve participants provided a full set of unaltered digital photographs from the trip, leading to a collection of 5,245 images. In-depth interviews were conducted with all 21 participants three to four months after their visit and an email survey was sent out 16 months after the trip and returned by 15 participants (71% response rate).

In employing these methods, several challenges were encountered. Firstly training needed to be provided so the participants could correctly use the smartphone and ISTELE software. This study employed a research assistant to carry out a training exercise which required time with participants and additional cost but in the future, this could be addressed using training software on the device itself that explains the programme and trials its use. Training software would allow this data collection approach to be more widely adopted in other tourism studies. Human error in using the devices did account for some loss of data at the beginning of the trip. Secondly, there were concerns regarding data storage and potential problems with devices. To address this, a research assistant was sent on the group tour to offer technical support, download and backup data, and remind participants to charge their devices. Despite these precautions some data was lost due to technical errors on individual devices and downloading errors in the field. Most errors involved losing records of the logged events including text files associated with closed questions though the voice recordings still existed, which could be manually logged as a partial event and time stamped with some degree of accuracy. More pre-trip testing of devices may have helped to minimize these errors and having several spare devices available to participants would be beneficial should their original device encounter problems. The third challenge involved the perceived interruption of experiences. One of the closed ended questions asks if the participant feels involved, detached, or neither of these and one participant discussed how when they recorded on their smartphone, they were no longer engaged in group activities so the act of data collection led to feelings of detachment, which may skew answers to this question. The use of the ISTELE was meant to minimize interruptions during the experience by allowing for a more streamlined and portable approach to data collection. However, as it was necessary to have participants log their events during experiences some feelings of interruption were expected though the programme did allow for participants to skip or snooze the log if they were unable or unwilling to participate in data collection at that moment. A fourth challenge was that some of the questions were not answered in great detail. In future studies, modifying the software to detect shorter recordings which would then trigger prompting questions could encourage longer more in-depth answers. Though visual photographic analysis yields interesting results regarding choices in subject matter and image attributes, in the future, it would be beneficial to look through the photographs with the participant photographer so that he or she could discuss why the

image was taken and what it represented. This would limit the subjective assessment of image purpose during visual analysis.

4 Conclusion

Even in this early stage, this research demonstrates that the tourist experience is complex and can not be fully understood using recollection research methods alone. The immediate experiential, visual, and spatial approach to data collection in combination with recollection methods allows for a more comprehensive and rich data set which can achieve a greater understanding of tourist experiences during and after a trip. The research methods discussed can advance the study of tourist experiences and be employed by practitioners to address more complex questions involved in managing experiences at destinations.

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