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Obliquity in Tourism Economics: Smart and Sustainable Tourist Destinations

Obliquity describes the process of achieving complex objectives indirectly. The recent emergence of the concept and paradigm of intelligent or smart tourist destinations has given rise to a proliferation of initiatives to convert many tourism destinations into smart tourism destinations. Such initiatives are often driven by publicly and privately financed technologically-based companies, In theory, the concept of the smart tourist destination includes different levels of action in the environmental, social and technological fields, directed at enhancing the satisfaction and experience of tourists. However, in many practical applications of the concept, only the latter level is addressed, and the other dimensions are neglected. This article argues that smart tourism destinations represent the first real opportunity to make the concept of sustainable tourism operational. This argument is based on the fact that, for the first time, the intensive use of technology involved in implementing a smart tourism destination will enable the continuous measurement of aspects related to sustainability which, until now, in the absence of this technology, were difficult or impossible to measure, and therefore, manage.

Keywords: Obliquity, Smart tourist destinations; Sustainable Tourism; Technology.

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Introduction

According to Kay (2011:3), obliquity "describes the process of achieving complex objectives indirectly". The recent emergence of the concept and paradigm of smart tourist destinations has given rise to a proliferation of initiatives to convert many tourism destinations into smart tourism destinations. Such initiatives are often driven by publicly and privately financed technologically-based companies. The concept of the smart tourist destination is defined as "a knowledge-based destination, where information and communication technologies are used to provide a technological platform on which information and knowledge relating to tourism activities could be instantly exchanged" (Jovicic, 2016:451). It includes different levels of action in the environmental, social and technological fields, directed at enhancing the satisfaction and experience of tourists. However, in many practical applications of the concept, only the latter level is addressed, and the other dimensions are neglected.

This note argues that smart tourism destinations represent the first real opportunity to make the concept of sustainable tourism operational, doing so in an oblique manner, specifically in the case of mass tourism destinations. Focusing solely on the practice of implementing technology to improve the satisfaction and experience of tourists means renouncing important advantages that a full application of the concept would generate. This argument is based on the fact that, for the first time, the intensive use of technology involved in implementing a smart tourism destination will enable the continuous measurement of aspects related to sustainability. In the absence of this technology, these aspects were difficult or impossible to measure, and therefore, manage.

The inherent flexibility of tourist destinations

Tourist destinations are flexible and dynamic entities. Their theoretical conceptualisation has become more complex, evolving over time from a classic, original idea based primarily on the geographical component towards its association with an industrial district; complex, flexible and open systems with stakeholders; adaptive systems dominated by non-linear relationships; and today's concept of a smart destination (Jovicic, 2016). On a territorial level, the delimitation of destinations – national, regional, local, etc. – has given rise to different entities with different management problems and needs. With respect to time, destinations are alive, they evolve, and their life cycles develop in unison with the tastes and needs of the tourists who visit them and the values and decisions of their residents and managers (Butler, 1980; 2009).

Some authors consider that the life-cycle concept can be applied to products but not destinations, given that the latter can comprise several tourist products in different stages of their life-cycles (Suchet, 2015). This is why sustainable and competitive management of a destination is necessary to maximise efforts to generate a balanced range of products, by replacing the more mature products with new emerging services (McKercher, 2005). Nevertheless, it seems obvious that massification and the stretched carrying capacity in some of these destinations are currently giving rise to tourism demand management strategies, which include intelligent destinations oriented towards sustainability (Perles, Ramón, Vera & Ivars, 2017; Perles & Ramón, 2017).

When applying intelligence to tourist destinations, their dynamic and flexible nature must be respected. Therefore, it is inadvisable to adopt standardised solutions proposed by consultants and technologically-based companies, which, for the sake of their own interests, propose the indiscriminate application to all types of destination.

The sustainability of tourist destinations

Sustainability in tourism is a desideratum dating back to the ecological movement of the 1960s and 1970s and emerged almost at the same time as the concept of sustainability itself, at the end of the 1980s. Since then, there have been countless theoretical debates and an abundance of literature about what sustainability is; how it should be understood and the best way of applying it (Sharpley, 2000; Berno & Bricker, 2001). Defined as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (UNWTO, 2005:11-12), the latest conceptual advances go hand in hand with the perspective of the circular economy (EMF, 2015). However, there have been very few successful experiences in the application of true sustainability in tourist destinations, particularly, in the consolidated and mass tourism destinations (Wall, 1992; Berno & Bricker, 2001).

The breadth, complexity, and evolution of the concept make it difficult to understand or manage, and it can be confused with other concepts such as resilience (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2005; Lew, Ng, Ni & Wu, 2016). Moreover, for some authors, it is possible that both the definition and the practical implementation of sustainable tourism are quite far removed from the original concept that inspired them; sustainable development. Sharpley (2000:11) analyses the relationship between tourism and sustainable development concluding that

> sustainable tourism development policies do not fully embrace the three fundamental principles of sustainable development. Although the notions of futurity, equity, and holistic perspective are evident in specific tourism development principles, their focus is inward and product-centered, giving primacy to ecological sustainability over the developmental contribution of tourism. Furthermore, the structure of international tourism more accurately reflects the dependency theory of development. These weaknesses are also evident in relation to the more specific development/sustainability objectives and requirements for sustainable development.

In this sense, we could argue that direct approaches -in contrast to an oblique approach- to sustainability have generally failed (Garrod & Fyall, 1998; Robinson, 2004;

Lansing & De Vries, 2007). This would be expected in the case of complex environments (Kay, 2010) as is the case of many tourist destinations, with many authors advocating the re-conceptualisation of the term (Saarinen, 2014; Moscardo & Murphy, 2014).

The reasons for these difficulties are highly diverse. But the most relevant are related to both the poor alignment between the academic debate and the needs and interests of the tourism industry and also to the lack of any real handbooks on sustainability. Therefore, despite its high level of diffusion and presence in the rhetoric of governments, businessmen and women and other tourist destination managers, its use has remained merely rhetorical, with no permeation in the daily management or actions necessary to enable its development in destinations.

The smart tourist destination

According to Gretzlel, Sigala, Xiang & Koo (2015:180), smart destinations "apply smart city principles to tourism destinations and not only consider residents but also tourists in their efforts to support mobility, resource availability and allocation, sustainability and quality of life and visit". Thus, the many aspects of smart tourism destinations include sustainability. Without sustainability, a destination cannot be conceptualised as a smart tourism destination. In addition to sustainability, other elements encompassed by the smart tourism destinations are technology – connectivity and sensorisation, the intelligent information system and innovation – and the governance of the destination (Gretzlel, Sigala, Xiang & Koo, 2015; Agencia Valenciana de Turismo, 2015; Segittur, 2015).

The concept is therefore ambitious: if it has not been possible, to date, to attain this sought-after sustainability, it would seem complicated to implement an even wider framework, namely intelligence, in which sustainability is simply one of its elements. However, this vision is simplistic as it does not take into account the potential interactions that the intensive use of technology can have in the formula.

In this context, the opportunities arising from aspects such as sensorisation or big data, with the monitoring and measurement of all types of tourist behaviour and subsystems of the destination (water, waste, urban mobility management, etc.), can contribute to determining the real benefits and costs of each tourism development model. The profitability of these models and their influence on the decisions about which of them is likely to be favoured by the policy-makers can be established. However, utmost care should be taken in the practical application of these principles or theoretical opportunities, as it would not be the first time that exaggerated expectations were placed on technology as an element to achieve sustainability. In this respect, Sharpley's (2000:13) criticism is relevant when he comments that "on the one hand technology has provided the means for reducing certain environmental impacts, such as noise reduction and fuel efficiency in jet engines. On the other hand, technological advance has, paradoxically, contributed to the continued growth in tourism, not only increasing tourist numbers but also access to more distant and fragile environments".

The sustainable smart tourist destination in practice: the case of Spain

The concept of the smart tourist destination is growing in popularity in Spain, thanks to institutions such as Segittur. There are many destinations throughout the country which have embraced the concept and have initiated projects so that they may become smart tourism destinations (Segittur, 2015). Furthermore, on a practical level, Spain is one of the countries which is making greatest efforts in terms of conceptualisation, research and development (Ivars, Celdrán, Mazón & Perles, 2017) and where highest expectations are placed in the concept to promote the competitiveness and innovation of the national tourism sector. Action has also being taken to address the different challenges, including sustainability, faced by Spanish tourist destinations (Ivars, Solsona & Giner, 2016; Fernández, López & Perles, 2016; Fernández, López, Moreno, Perles, Ramón & Such, 2017).

However, many of the initiatives that have been implemented to date have only focused on the more superficial or commercial aspects of the concept. By simply consulting the Platform for Government Contracts (the website which provides information about Spain's public procurement), or by simply googling the terms "solicitation document" and "intelligent (the word used in Spanish for this kind of destinations) tourist destination", we can appreciate the indiscriminate nature with which many actions are being implemented.

In many cases, efforts are focused on creating tourist websites which bring together all of the information of a destination in one platform to facilitate visitors' search tasks and to promote the intensive use of social mediaso as to disseminate this information. In more advanced cases, actions consist of making free public Wi-Fi available to tourists. Little more has been done.

These actions, valued by tourists, constitute a first step towards applying technology to improve the tourist experience, particularly in those destinations that are starting from scratch. However, they are far-removed from the action required to shape real intelligence in destination management – not to mention that some of these destinations are usually, due to the low incidence or specialisation in tourism, those that have fewer sustainability problems. On the other hand, consolidated destinations, where considerable problems of sustainability prevail, already have the basic tools and require other comprehensive destination management tools which, going beyond the interface and services provided to the tourist, enable a real measurement of the tourism impact and territorial management. The effective operation of these platforms in many cases depends on the collaboration and sharing of information by the stakeholders of the destination.

However, at least in the case of Spain, it can be observed that this advanced application of the smart tourism concept often clashes with the current reality of companies and institutions in the destinations. A reluctance to share information and doubts with respect

to the returns to be gained from the intensive investment in technology in tourism businesses and destinations represent a limitation for the technologies inherent in the smart tourism destinations to be used to their maximum potential (Perles & Rodríguez, 2016). In this case, there is a risk of facing a true "technological paradox" in which increasingly more sophisticated destinations with technological tools continue to work essentially under the same unsustainable principles prior to this implementation.

Conclusions

In contrast to other types of technology such as military technology, the concept of the smart tourism destination represents one of the most commendable applications of technology, as its purpose is the enjoyment and well-being of human beings. This note argues that the application of the smart tourism destination concept represents the first real opportunity to make operational what, to date, has been a mere desideratum; sustainability of tourist destinations. This is done obliquely, due to the general failure of the direct approach to this problem. The consequences of climate change and their impact on tourism undoubtedly reinforce the need to apply sustainability measures to smart tourism destinations.

However, if these measures are not applied correctly, in other words, they do not respect the necessary flexibility and dynamism of each of the destinations in question – the principles of intelligence, the concept of smart tourism destination runs the risk of becoming undermined. Consequently, as is the current case of sustainability, it will be relegated to a rhetorical use or, in the best of cases, used as a marketing element with which to differentiate tourism destinations, which are essentially the same. In this sense, this note represents a warning with respect to this issue, particularly as a careful and complete application of the whole smart tourism paradigm could condition and shape the medium-term future of tourist destinations throughout the world. However, this should be done without forgetting the

multitude of collateral aspects such as privacy or data storage which should be taken into

account in this context and represent a broad field of research for the future.

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