

Yiqi Shao

Professor Collin Cook

UWS

Nov.28 2024

Social Media and Modern Travel: Liberation or Constraint of Personal Experience

In the digital world of the 21st century, travel has undergone a major transformation, moving beyond traditional ideas of mobility, experience, and cultural exchange. Social media platforms have become powerful tools that fundamentally change how we plan, document, experience, and reflect on our journeys. This research explores the complex relationship between digital technologies and modern travel, carefully examining how social media both inspires and limits our global exploration.

The technological revolution has completely changed how we think about travel. Digital platforms have connected people across the world in ways never seen before, breaking down traditional geographic limits and creating new ways for people to interact and share experiences. As Jansson in his article "Rethinking the Networked Society: Concepts, Practices, and Debates" points out, these platforms are reshaping interpersonal and cultural connections, redefining how travelers perceive and interact with the world. The old way of traveling—where you first get inspired, then plan, and then go on a trip—has been replaced by a more complex and interactive, and more convenient process. Now, travel is a continuous conversation, with people sharing moments during their travel instantly, getting recommendations from some travelling

platform, and engaging in global discussions about different destinations and cultures with tourists from other countries. For example, platforms like TripAdvisor and Airbnb allow travelers to leave reviews that directly influence future visitors' choices. In my opinion, while these platforms democratize information, they also risk homogenizing travel experiences, as people tend to follow highly rated paths rather than exploring lesser-known alternatives.

The digital age has completely changed how we access travel information. In the past, only a few experts like professional travel writers and official tourism organizations controlled what people knew about destinations. These groups decided which places were worth visiting and told stories about different cultures from a limited, often biased point of view. Now, digital platforms have broken down these old barriers which restrict people from accessing more information, giving everyday travelers the power to share their own experiences and perspectives immediately when they are travelling.

Today, a student in Asia can share detailed insights about Iceland landscapes, a retired teacher in rural areas can write a comprehensive guide to Vietnamese street food, and a young professional in Brazil can offer a personal account of traveling the ancient Silk Road. This shift goes beyond the modern way of sharing travel details through the social media which I mentioned above—it fundamentally changes how we create and understand global knowledge and cultural stories.

The way we experience travel has also changed dramatically. Researchers

have noticed a new trend called "performative travel," where travelers now exist in two worlds at once: the physical place they're visiting and their digital online presence. Travelers are no longer just exploring new locations; they're also carefully crafting their experiences to share with online audiences, constantly thinking about how their trip will look on social media. A striking example of performative travel can be seen on Instagram, where influencers stage elaborate photo shoots at iconic locations like the Eiffel Tower or Santorini, often prioritizing aesthetics over authentic engagement with the destination. They may refine their travel experiences on the social media in order to leave a good impression on other users of the platform. Personally, I feel that this trend reduces travel to a performance for others rather than an enriching personal journey, which undermines the true value of exploration.

Recommendation algorithms now play a crucial role in how we discover and choose travel destinations, echoing Dwityas and Briandana's argument that social media platforms actively shape traveler preferences during the decision-making process. Social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube use advanced technology to not just show us travel content we might like, but to actually shape our travel preferences. These systems learn from our online behavior and create personalized travel recommendations that gradually narrow our travel choices while simultaneously introducing us to new global experiences. For instance, YouTube's travel vlog recommendations often lead users to popular destinations like Bali or Iceland, perpetuating tourism in already crowded areas. I believe that while these algorithms can broaden exposure to new places, they also need to promote sustainable

and less popular destinations to prevent over-tourism.

However, the impact of social media on travel can be particularly harmful to the environment, as Hall in his article "Rethinking Sustainable Tourism in the Age of Digital Connectivity" emphasizes, pointing to the ecological toll of viral tourism and the need for sustainable digital practices. When a location goes viral online, it can quickly become overcrowded, causing serious damage to local ecosystems. A perfect example is Maya Bay in Thailand, which became famous through movies and social media. The massive surge of tourists was so destructive that authorities were forced to completely close the beach to visitors. Now, a destination's popularity is directly tied to its online visibility, often prioritizing stunning photos over sustainable tourism practices. From my perspective, this highlights the need for stricter regulations on tourism driven by viral trends, as well as increased traveler awareness about environmental conservation.

The economic landscape of travel has also changed dramatically. Instead of traditional advertising, tourism now relies heavily on social media influencers, a phenomenon analyzed by Oliveira et al, who highlight how digital storytelling and motivations for self-expression drive the sharing of travel experiences. A single viral video can instantly transform an unknown location into a global hotspot, creating both exciting opportunities and challenges for local communities. Places that were once economically overlooked can now gain worldwide attention through clever digital storytelling. However, in my view, while influencer-driven tourism can democratize travel, it also risks commodifying unique cultures and diluting their authenticity.

In addition to the physical impact on attractions, social media users can also be harmed, since the digital world of travel creates unique psychological challenges. For instance, Thompson explores how millennials experience digital anxiety when their trips fail to align with the idealized images they encounter online. Constant exposure to seemingly perfect travel photos on social media leads to complex feelings of anxiety and self-doubt. Research shows that about 80% of younger travelers feel stressed when their actual trips don't match the amazing experiences they see online. People often feel inadequate when their travels don't look as exciting or picture-perfect as those shared by others. Perhaps that's the reason why many tourists try their best to take a perfect scenery photo at tourist attractions, which in order to show off that they can take a perfect photo too.

New technologies like artificial intelligence and augmented reality are making travel even more complicated. As Urry and Larsen discuss, such advancements blur the boundaries between real and virtual experiences, transforming how travelers interact with destinations. Advanced systems can now predict what kind of experiences travelers might want, sometimes even before they know it themselves. Virtual reality allows people to preview destinations in incredible detail, blurring the line between digital and real-world travel experiences.

In response to this digital overload, a counter-movement has emerged. This reflects what Mkono terms 'digital decolonization,' where travelers seek more authentic, disconnected experiences as a form of resistance to hyper-connectivity. "Digital detox" travel experiences are becoming popular as people seek to escape

constant connectivity. These aren't just typical vacations, but deliberate attempts to experience travel more authentically. Wellness retreats, remote wilderness trips, and offline travel packages show a growing desire to reconnect with travel's true purpose: personal growth and genuine cultural understanding.

Cultural anthropologists say that how we think about travel is changing. Travel is no longer just about moving from one place to another; it's now tied to identity, self-expression, and how we connect with others around the world. Every social media post becomes a way to communicate across cultures, breaking down traditional barriers like language and geography.

In the future, the best travelers will be those who use digital platforms thoughtfully. This means more than just knowing how to use technology—it's more about understanding how online stories are created, being aware of the limits of algorithms, and aiming for meaningful, authentic experiences. There users can avoid the disadvantage which the social media will bring to them. Meanwhile, they can absorb the benefits from social media, like the convenience and flexibility.

There are also ethical issues when it comes to how travel is represented online. Social media has created new challenges around cultural authenticity and fairness. Some scholars even use the term "digital colonialism" to describe how these platforms can reinforce cultural inequalities or exploit marginalized groups. For example, Indigenous communities in Australia have used platforms like Instagram to showcase their culture, but this has also led to instances where sacred traditions were

misrepresented by outsiders. In my opinion, while these platforms offer a voice to marginalized groups, there must be safeguards to prevent cultural exploitation and ensure that their narratives remain authentic and respectful.

For Indigenous communities, social media is both an opportunity and a challenge. It allows them to share their own stories, but it also risks turning their cultures into commodities or misrepresenting them. Many culturally rich destinations have to find a balance between benefiting from online attention and protecting their traditions.

Moreover, the rise of "ethical travel" discourse on social media introduces additional layers of complexity. Travelers increasingly curate online personas that emphasize cultural sensitivity, sustainable practices, and social responsibility. However, this performative ethical stance often exists in tension with the actual lived experiences of local communities. The gap between digital representation and ground-level realities becomes a critical point of scholarly examination.

Privacy concerns make the world of digital travel even more complicated. Travelers constantly have to balance personal experiences with what they choose to share publicly. Every social media post reflects a mix of personal and shared stories, and privacy feels less secure in a world where every moment can become online content. Users may sometimes unknowingly reveal sensitive information about themselves while sharing their travel experiences.

Social media's impact on global politics is also important. On one hand, these

platforms bring people together across borders, creating global communities that challenge traditional ideas of national identity and culture. On the other hand, they can also highlight and even worsen political tensions, with travel content often reflecting political conflicts or biases.

Accessibility is another big issue in the digital travel space. While social media has made travel information easier to access, it has also created new barriers. For instance, while social media campaigns like TravelForAll advocate for inclusive tourism, many remote destinations remain inaccessible due to digital and physical barriers. Things like digital skills, access to technology, and financial resources still limit who gets to participate in these global conversations. Even though social media promises to make travel more inclusive, inequalities still exist. I think bridging this gap requires a collaborative effort between governments and tech companies to ensure both digital literacy and physical accessibility for all travelers.

In the end, social media is a tool—it's neither completely good nor completely bad. Its impact depends on how we use it. It can inspire and connect people, helping us learn about the world, or it can lead to shallow, performative experiences.

To sum up, social media has changed travel in ways we can't ignore. It brings both opportunities and challenges. By staying thoughtful, being curious, and using these platforms wisely, we can embrace technology's benefits while keeping the true spirit of exploration alive.

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