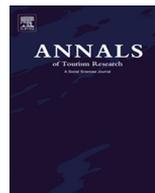




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Research Note

Current sharing economy media discourse in tourism



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This research note documents the current trends relating to sharing economy in tourism. It attempts to consolidate the new but fragmented and under-developed discourse on what impacts sharing economy has for tourism, and what further research inputs are required to harness the potential of sharing economy in tourism. By discourse, this note refers to the sense of “a large-scale, ordered, integrated way of reasoning/constituting the social world” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, p. 1125)—sharing economy in this case. Sharing economy describes the phenomenon as peer to peer sharing of access to under-utilised goods and services, which prioritizes utilization and accessibility over ownership, either for free or for a fee (e.g. Airbnb) (Schor & Fitzmaurice, 2015).

From international hotel chains to policy makers and academics, sharing economy has become the subject of attention and, to a degree, fear. The rapid and disruptive growth of sharing economy has left many unprepared and insufficient time for the tourism academic discourse to develop and mature. Researchers and practitioners kept to popular media for immediate and wide knowledge on sharing economy. While there are a number of articles that have been recently published in the tourism domain, the discourse in academic literature still remains under-developed and fragmented (Cheng, 2016). For instance, there is a currently naïve understanding of sharing economy as a concept within the tourism community (Dredge & Gyimóthy, 2015). Thus, there exists the need to document the current trends of sharing economy in the tourism academic community.

Tourism scholarship is not fully able, in its current state, to reveal the extent the sharing economy plays in relation to tourism (Heo, 2016). In particular, it fails to address complex social-cultural and social-economic categories, such as host-guest relationship, consumption practices and behaviors (Cheng, 2016). An opportunity for this kind of inquiry emerges in the context of understanding the current media discourse. Specifically, a close analysis of relevant news articles concerning sharing economy in tourism offers insights from which can be gleaned future trends and research directions to advance tourism researchers' and practitioners' understanding of the role sharing economy plays in the future of tourism field.

With this in mind, a total of 302 news articles from 47 international/national leading newspaper outlets (e.g. Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, and New York Times) from 2011 and 2015 concerning sharing economy in tourism were analysed by using the qualitative analysis software Leximancer as the concept of sharing economy did not enter the wide public discourse until 2011 (Martin, 2016).

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with elite economic and social capital. Within these two themes, our analysis reveals that regulatory authorities and sharing economy start-ups have not aligned well with each other. The loose or no engagement of many start-ups and regulatory authorities at an early stage has led to a perception by many potential regulators of these start-ups as exploitive of loopholes instead of developing a legitimate business model (Cannon & Summers, 2014). For instance, policy makers in Frankfurt, Calgary and Massachusetts have taken action against Uber's practices (Cannon & Summers, 2014; Cheng, 2016). However, other authorities support the growth of sharing economy practices in their cities, such as Amsterdam, which promotes itself as a "sharing city" and has passed "Airbnb friendly legislation" (Sharenl, 2015). Essentially, this creates contested social, economic, and political power in mobilizing our tourism system. This contest is often characterized by sophisticated rhetorical strategies (usually concerning perceived social and economic risks) employed by both existing tourism service providers and start-ups in protecting their respective 'turf' (e.g. taxi industry and Uber). Another concern arising from this analysis is the sharing economy's relationship to sustainable practices and innovation in tourism. It is debatable whether sharing economy is a potential pathway to a more sustainable form of tourism consumption leading to equitable and sustainable economy or just a negative expression of neoliberalism (Martin, 2016).

The themes of 'people's mobility' and 'start-up' highlight the future dynamics of sharing economy in its ability to change tourist behaviour. The theme "people mobility" represents the impact of sharing economy on people's mobility, including choices of place to visit, community facilities and infrastructure, and integration of online and offline behaviour. It empowers tourism in far-reaching destinations and increases potential length of stay by creating a temporary extension of infrastructure. Essentially, in a broader academic perspective, it is unclear for the time being how sharing economy redefines the roles of tourists and locals compared to those of the conventional market economy.

'Start-up' offers another area of interest given their growth within sharing economy, their strong relationship with private crowdfunding, and the need for effective management of these companies and their providers (e.g. Uber: Drivers and Airbnb: Hosts). Importantly, it raises questions as to the impact of new players on traditional tourism service providers. It highlights the response of traditional tourism service providers, some of whom have innovated and redefined their current models, such as lastminute.com, who has started their service using locals selling local guided tours (Sigala, 2015).

This research note is a starting point for tourism researchers to reflect on the growth of sharing economy and invite future discussion on how we could better respond to such trends. Here this research note presented a small step in this larger endeavor to uncover the complexity of sharing economy in tourism.

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