

# Beyond smart tourism cities – towards a new generation of “wise” tourism destinations

J. Andres Coca-Stefaniak

## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this trends paper is to offer insights into the technological changes affecting our cities and urban tourism destinations, and to explore avenues for further research and practice in the context of smart tourism destinations.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The literature on smart cities and smart tourism destinations is analysed in view of delivering a research agenda for a new generation of “post-smart” tourism destinations, beyond existing paradigms in this field.*

**Findings** – *Smart tourism research to date is found to be lacking in terms of addressing emerging (“post-smart”) social issues increasingly faced by global tourism cities, such as growing inequalities between host communities and visitors, wellness (e.g. slow tourism and slow cities) and resilience and mental health (e.g. digital detox), among others.*

**Practical implications** – *A post-smart approach to tourism city management and marketing calls for rethinking of existing tourism and urban policies that address wider sustainability issues exemplified by the urban transitions debate as well as adopting a more holistic networked approach to smartness involving entire regions. This also calls for the development of a new research agenda in urban tourism through a new prism – the post-smart “wise” tourism destination.*

**Originality/value** – *A new tourism futures construct – the “wise” tourism destination – is posited. This is done within the context of a new (“post-smart”) generation of tourism cities. It is argued that “wise” tourism cities will require novel attributes and adopt a visionary strategic positioning well beyond today’s smart tourism destination paradigms. Additionally, a tentative research agenda for “wise” tourism cities is discussed.*

**Keywords** Smart tourism, Smart cities, Tourism cities, Urban transitions, Wise destinations

**Paper type** Trends paper

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## Introduction: the rise of the smart tourism destination

The pace of technological change affecting the world today is unprecedented, with advances in computing power over the past five decades following largely Moore’s Law (Li *et al.*, 2019), which is exponential in nature. Scholars have posited that disruptive technologies (Bower and Christensen, 1995) have been key catalysts in what has been termed as humanity’s “fourth industrial revolution” (Schwab, 2017) led by major advances in technology, which arguably affect (nearly) every single aspect of people’s daily life (World Economic Forum, 2016). The application of “smart” principles to urban environments is a well-established sphere of knowledge, spanning three decades of research and practice in smart cities (Vanolo, 2014; Cocchia, 2014; Ramaprasad *et al.*, 2017; Lytras and Visvizi, 2018; Ismagilova *et al.*, 2019), focussing on a myriad of urban management aspects, including energy management (Calvino *et al.*, 2016), environmental sustainability (Ahvenniemi *et al.*, 2017), transport infrastructure (Lyons, 2018) or governance (Meijer and Bolivar, 2016), amongst other strategic challenges. In spite of this, topics such as the

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marketing and branding of smart cities on their own merits of “smartness” remain in their infancy (Molinillo *et al.*, 2019) and a rich vein for further research (Coca-Stefaniak and Seisdodos, 2020).

Against this backdrop, a parallel concept has started to emerge in tourism – the smart tourism destination (Buhalis, 2000). In a parallel vein to that of smart cities, the concept of smart tourism destinations has evolved over time from an initial focus on technology (Huang *et al.*, 2012; Wang *et al.*, 2013) to the enhancement of tourists’ and visitors’ experiences (Guo *et al.*, 2014; Zhu *et al.*, 2014; Buhalis and Amaranggana, 2015; Boes *et al.*, 2016; Trunfio and Campana, 2019; Buhalis, 2020). Similarly, special issues on this topic have been published in 2019 in *Tourism Review* (Koo *et al.*, 2019), the *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology* (Rasoolimanesh *et al.*, 2019) and, three years earlier, in the *International Journal of Tourism Cities* (Boes *et al.*, 2016). However, as smart cities research and practice continue to evolve, it is becoming increasingly apparent that smart tourism destination research has a lot more to offer than a mere focus on experience design or even sustainability, including the strategic dilemma of what contribution (if any) smart tourism destinations should make to place marketing – a topic explored further in a special issue on *Overtourism and the Marketing of Smart Tourism Destinations* recently published in the *International Journal of Tourism Cities* (Coca-Stefaniak, 2019). This article ponders some of the options ahead in this context and posits the need for a new generation of *post-smart* tourism destinations with a broader strategic positioning agenda beyond mere “smart” principles – the wise tourism destination.

### The next generation of smart tourism destinations

Although a focus on experience design and delivery is likely to remain at the heart of smart tourism destination research for the foreseeable future, the convergence of smart tourism destination research with that of smart cities (Jasrotia and Gangotia, 2018) is likely to result in a refocussing of tourism research in this field, including a combination of more people-centred developments (Lara *et al.*, 2016; Johnson and Samakovlis, 2019) with more radical and contested approaches such as degrowth (March, 2018) to address issues such as overtourism (Dodds and Butler, 2019), local community alienation (Moreno-Gil and Coca-Stefaniak, 2020) and altogether more sustainable futures for urban tourism destinations (Miller *et al.*, 2015; Wise, 2016; Maxim, 2016; Potsma *et al.*, 2017). In fact, this focus on sustainable futures is being increasingly adopted as a prerequisite of “smartness” with a growing consensus on this front among scholars in urban research (Yigitcanlar *et al.*, 2019) as well as tourism (Vargas-Sanchez *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, the traditional domination of the “smart” concept by urban environments has been challenged recently by a new paradigm that revolves around rural locations with the emergence of the “smart village” concept (Visvizi and Lytras, 2018; or de Viron and Mudri, 2019), which is also set to become a rich vein for smart tourism research.

### Post-smart “wise” tourism cities – towards a research agenda

Smart cities and smart tourism destinations are not a panacea. In fact, the applicability of smart initiatives to places has been critiqued on a number of fronts (Kitchin, 2015; Sadowski and Bendor, 2019), including arguments positing that the smart city concept bears an uncanny resemblance to earlier constructs (Hollands, 2008), including the entrepreneurial city. The dependence of smart tourism destinations on technology and the growing influence of social media on the brand of urban tourism destinations (Mistilis *et al.*, 2014; Harrigan *et al.*, 2017; Gretzel and Collier de Mendonça, 2019; Gretzel *et al.*, 2019) have also led some scholars to question their vulnerability to new forms of terrorism (Barbe *et al.*, 2018; Coca-Stefaniak and Morrison, 2018), fake news (Cassinger *et al.*, 2018) and online data security (Silva *et al.*, 2018), which can have a considerable negative impact on the

reputation of tourism destinations in the short- and medium-term. As a result, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the future of smart cities and smart tourism destinations will be intimately linked to their resilience to future challenges [Mboup and Oyelaran-Oyeyinka (2019) and Zhu *et al.* (2019) for perspectives from Africa and China, respectively], rather than merely their technological prowess. Moreover, the on-going debate of whether cities (and a number of urban destinations that herald themselves as “smart”) should reconsider their stance and become “dumb” instead (Boulton *et al.*, 2011; Höjer and Wangel, 2015; Saxe, 2019) is unlikely to fizzle away any time soon. Regardless, and perhaps on a more serious note, issues such as overtourism (Seraphin *et al.*, 2018; Dodds and Butler, 2019; Milano *et al.*, 2019), ageing populations in technologically advanced nations (e.g. Japan, China, Germany, South Korea, Spain and Italy) and the rise of inequality in some of our global (and often “smart”) cities (Willis, 2019; Marchetti *et al.*, 2019), among other long-term strategic challenges, are the factors that will need to be addressed by a new generation of, arguably, “wise” cities – a concept first posited within the context of smart cities by Hambleton (2015) and Carrera (2016).

For this “post-smart” generation of tourism destinations, one of the key challenges to be addressed relates to a fundamental change in strategic mindset. In other words, although sustainability will remain a key issue, wise tourism cities will need to look beyond it (Young and Lieberknecht, 2019) through a more comprehensive understanding of developing trends, including the need for tourists and residents alike to switch off from digital media (Jovicic, 2019) and perform regular digital detox routines (Brabazon, 2016; Li *et al.*, 2018) to boost their mental health and resilience (Wiederhold, 2017; Hunt, 2019). In some cases, big data analytics may be part of the solution for these needs (Azevedo Guedes *et al.*, 2018). In other instances, slow tourism initiatives will help to deliver some of these post-smart urban destination thinking, which will become increasingly sophisticated (Tocci, 2017). These topics remain underresearched in tourism, particularly when considering perspectives such as urban transitions (Hodson *et al.*, 2017; Frantzeskaki *et al.*, 2017) and social innovation (Baccarne *et al.*, 2014; Sauer *et al.*, 2016).

A new generation of wise tourism destinations could be the first to address these long-term challenges, often adopting a networked – though still people-centred – approach involving cooperation across a wider regional ecosystem of smart tourism destinations in a manner not dissimilar from existing urban innovation initiatives (Ernstson *et al.*, 2010). In fact, one of the defining characteristics of wise tourism destinations will be in their ability to build on this wider more regional concept of smartness by going beyond the urban sphere and creating symbiotic relationships with nearby “smart villages” (Visvizi and Lytras, 2018), which would close the loop of smart tourism research by linking the urban with the rural using a more integrated regional approach (Gretzel, 2018). This is, again, a topic that very few studies have explored to date (Garau, 2015).

The advent of “wise” post-smart tourism cities will require research into the strategic approaches adopted by destinations culminating in a typology that helps to classify these approaches and define the salient characteristics that delineate a “wise” tourism destination. In this respect, a quantitative indicator-based approach would help to rank these destinations along the “wise” tourism city continuum. Similarly, an assessment of their approaches to delivering long-term visionary processes beyond liveability for residents or merely satisfied visitors may require novel and more interdisciplinary research frameworks. Some of these research prisms, though, already exist and include the study of transformational and inspiring experiences (Robledo and Batle, 2017) or the mechanisms involved in the development of people-centred living laboratories that foster people’s creativity and intellectual inquisitiveness (Voytenko *et al.*, 2016). However, one of the biggest challenges for these technology-savvy destinations with an advanced (e.g. big data) understanding of human nature with all its nuances will remain to facilitate processes

that empower people to achieve purposeful and fulfilling lives and, above all, addressing growing levels of loneliness among different age groups in a hyper-connected world.

In essence, wise tourism destinations will be more people-centred in their use of technology but will also seek to build their resilience by contributing to the wellness of their residents and visitors as well as adopting a wider ranging regional ecosystem approach to sustainable development and innovation. It will be attributes arising from these initiatives that will make wise tourism destinations not only more attractive to visitors as short-term destinations but also inherently more liveable and, therefore, attractive for potential new residents too. Given that these characteristics will be linked closely to the DNA or “personality” (Coca-Stefaniak, 2013) of these city-regions, this will also make their marketing much more competitive as it will be based at least partly on their uniqueness and, crucially, directly related to their smartness, even if this will be a “wiser” and more advanced type of smartness than the techno-centric approaches, which continue to prevail in today’s smart city research and practice.

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