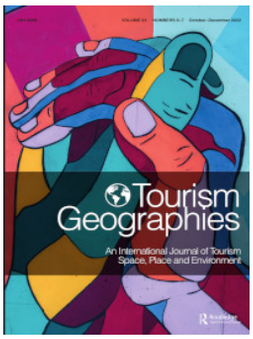

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Digital technology, tourism and geographies of inequality

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ABSTRACT
Tourism is undergoing major changes in the advent of social media networks and other new forms of digital technology. This has affected a number of tourism related processes including marketing, destination making, travel experiences and visitor feedback but also various tourism subsectors, like hospitality, transportation and tour operators. More radical than the change in technology itself, the COVID-19 pandemic has hastened questions of digitality and virtuality to the fore in tourism (and not just there). An already substantial and growing body of research has investigated these developments, both regarding tourism processes and industry subsectors and it has grown substantially since the pandemic. Still, largely overlooked are the effects of these changes on questions concerning inequality. This paper provides an overview of recent discussions on this topic, presenting an analysis of extant material and provides ideas of where to take the research further.

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Introduction

Tourism is undergoing major changes in the advent of social media networks and other new forms of digital technology. This has affected a number of tourism related processes including marketing, destination making, travel experiences and visitor feedback but also various tourism subsectors, like hospitality, transportation and tour operators. More radical than the change in technology itself, the COVID-19 pandemic has hastened questions of digitality and virtuality to the fore in tourism (and not just here) (Vila-Lopez & Küster-Boluda, 2022). An already substantial and growing body of research has investigated these developments, both regarding tourism processes (Munar, 2011; Tham et al., 2013; Mkono & Tribe, 2017) and industry subsectors (Leung et al., 2013; Molz, 2012; Giddy, 2019; Gretzel & Fesenmaier, 2009; Hvass & Munar, 2012) and it has grown substantially since the pandemic (Gretzel et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). Still, largely overlooked are the effects of these changes on questions concerning inequality, including the question whether digitally enhanced tourism allows for a more equal distribution

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of costs and benefits of tourism, whether it makes tourism more accessible for consumers, and in particular how it relates to geographies of inequality, referring to the differences of wealth between and within regions and places.

Tourism and inequality revisited

When we initially discussed bringing together the state of the art in this area for the following collection, we aimed to chart this relatively unexplored territory concerning the influence of technologically enhanced travel and tourism on development and inequality. This builds on early work on the topic, which focused on viewing digital technologies in tourism from a critical lens (Inversini et al., 2020). As COVID-19 recedes, at least for now, as a matter of concern, our call seems to be even more urgent, as multiple crises following the pandemic have exacerbated global inequalities, inter alia global military confrontation and resource wars, as well as protracted economic upheaval, while the climate crisis looms large over it all.

In all these crises, tourism is facing ever new challenges (Brouder et al., 2020; Sigala, 2020). Innovation around the use of digital technologies has accelerated and new technology has been adopted in unprecedented ways (Zhang et al., 2022). As the limits to an age of global travel and connectivity become ever more obvious, we also continue to connect and do so in new ways. As corporeal travel continues, digitality brings new forms of living and working, as the now proverbial WFH (work from home) has borne a new market for 'workcations', where virtual workers decide freely from where to connect. Holiday destinations have attempted to attract new mobile working nomads, partly to replace losses in traditional visitor numbers. While such arrangements are providing income and economic activity to these destinations, they also highlight and exacerbate inequalities: lower paid jobs are rarely doable 'from home' and affluent mobile 'workcationers' extend housing shortages in places they choose their second homes or temporary rentals (Bonacini et al., 2021; Patel et al., 2020).

Digitalisation

Far from being able to cover all of these emergent questions in this collection, the assembled contributions provide a springboard for wider reflection. Digitalisation is not a new topic. Looking back at the wake of the digital revolution and its emerging possibilities, early debates in tourism studies have been dominated by a belief that new technologies are able to overcome, or at least reduce, inequality (Guttentag, 2010). Concepts such as the digital divide understand these technologies as tools, suggesting it is only a question of access, while at times neglecting the effects and affordances of specific technologies as well as their production context (Minghetti & Buhalis, 2010). Rather recently, as a critical attitude towards digital (media) technologies is growing on a more general level in the social sciences, also tourism studies has begun to discuss topics such as new visibilities and readabilities - this includes the power of digital technology to allow visitors to access information, transport and hospitality services around the world in ever more convenient ways (Baka, 2015; Jeacle & Carter, 2011; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014).

These tendencies, arguably, have emancipatory potential, inter alia by increasing the visibility of neglected groups, neighbourhoods or areas, by lowering barriers of entry into tourism service provision for low-income groups or by democratizing the designation of what is considered valuable heritage (Ioannides et al., 2019; Fang et al., 2016; Cheng, 2016; Yagi & Frenzel, 2022). They also, however, may have homogenising effects, for example by subjecting formerly excluded spaces to global regimes of real estate speculation or by undermining existing labour market regimes and standards in the transport and hospitality industries (Martin, 2016, Giddy 2021). These latter effects have played a part in triggering anti-tourism protests in a range of cities across the world (Colomb & Novy, 2016) and fostered a debate on the connections between tourism and gentrification (Gonzalez-Perez, 2019; Gravari-Barbas & Guinand, 2017; Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). This discussion is apparent in the wide body of work, which emerged leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, on the concept of 'overtourism' (Jover & Diaz-Parra, 2022; Koens et al., 2018). This much used term refers to the growth of tourism past the carrying capacity (as perceived by relevant stakeholders, or measured in numbers) of places, most often due to poor tourism management in the name of increased economic growth (Dodds & Butler, 2019). It revolves around various dynamics related to the debate between residents' rights to their city, the growing number of leisure tourists, globally, and the increasing drive among tourists to have 'authentic' local experiences (Milano et al., 2019). Overtourism has, as is clear from the below work, been exacerbated in many regions throughout the world by digital platforms, often resulting in increasing local inequalities (Jover & Diaz-Parra, 2022).

And while overtourism vanished during the lockdowns of the pandemic, and cities such as Venice were mostly occupied again by its long term residents, we saw the return of the issue without much delay, as travel restrictions eased (Fontanari & Traskevich, 2022). Domestic travel received boosts, second home and VFR travel, including the aforementioned new phenomenon of workcation, brought tourism and overtourism back.

This collection interrogates these phenomena along two vectors: mobility and inequality. This addresses a number of gaps in current research:

- Firstly, to date, much research on new digital technologies is focused primarily on technological innovation, leaving underexplored spatial questions such as the distribution of wealth, the shaping of spaces and experiences, and the effects of representation.
- Secondly, while there is a lot of research emerging on travel and tourism and digital technologies, and while a substantial body of work is concerned with tourism and inequality, rarely are the linkages explored between digital technology, mobility and inequality.
- Thirdly, the collection enables the examination of the controversial role of digital technologies in constituting, re-configuring, representing, commodifying, protesting, and alleviating poverty.

The presented contributions highlight some of the above mentioned dynamics, dilemmas and paradoxes in developing and understanding of the role of digital

technologies in the tourism-poverty nexus. They cover a number of different applications of digital technologies and their relevance to a range of tourism destinations throughout the world. This also includes several different methodological approaches to increasing an understanding of the role of digital technologies in issues surrounding tourism and inequality. Some contributions focus on different concepts around digital technologies, tourism, and inequality by analyzing dynamics on a range of different digital platforms. Others focus on perhaps the most discussed case in this context, and provide additional commentary and insight on controversial short-term rentals, with a focus on the Airbnb platform. Discussions surrounding Airbnb in this collection venture from New Orleans, to Barcelona, to Vienna and Berlin, demonstrating the potential impacts throughout the globe and in a wide range of cityscapes.

In the next section we like to look in more detail at the different themes emerging from the contributions.

Methodological innovation

The first point concerns methodological innovation. We see an advancement here of the apparatuses available in various forms of data analysis related to the technologies' platforms themselves. Listings of data from short-term booking platforms, which are geographically specific, allow for an analysis of the impacts of these new forms of hospitality provision but also pose new challenges as not all data is openly available. As used by Kadi et al. (2022) and by Robertson et al. (2020), quantitative approaches to what has been dubbed 'big data' play an ever more significant role in geographical tourism research. Making use of data from social media platforms is of decisive importance for research in tourism geographies and beyond. While these are now much accepted insights, the collection also shows how different data can be usefully combined, and how traditional methods, such as interviews, still have a significant role to play in understanding social processes. Indeed Oh (2021) looks at a whole set of different social media platforms to evaluate the representation of Jeju Island in Korea. Morales-Pérez et al. (2020) combine data from Airbnb rentals in Barcelona with social media data of resistance networks from Twitter, analysing the convergence of clusters in rentals and the geolocations of those resisting the touristification associated with Airbnb. Giddy (2021) discusses the ride-hailing platform Uber, but uses the traditional qualitative interview to extract a better understanding of working conditions and work lives of those providing the rides.

Value creation in tourism

Much of the discussion of tourism's role in inequality relates back to the questions: Who is involved in value creation? Who can capture value under the dominant market conditions and who 'should' actually benefit? This is particularly relevant in the digital domain which is increasingly important and dominant in tourism. Conceptual work is needed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these questions related to the specific forms of value creation in tourism under such conditions. Frenzel and Frisch (2020) extend some of this work and explore how tourists take an active part in making places attractive for tourism. Drawing on the concept of tourist valorization

and recent sociological research on valuation, they suggest a wider conceptualization of the ways in which tourists influence the value of places by distinguishing three conceptual dimensions of valorisation in tourism: Practices that augment or reduce value (tourist valorisation), judge value (evaluation) and harness value (value capture). The authors pay specific attention to the role of digital technologies and how these technologies enhance the ability of tourists to valorize and evaluate with specific geographical consequences, and at the same time provide new avenues for value capture in the form of digital enclosures. As a consequence, they argue for a more theoretically grounded analysis of how digitally enhanced tourism influences the geographies of inequality for future research.

Oh's (2021) work on the representation of a small fishing village on the South Korean island of Jeju ties in well with this approach. In her paper, Oh (2021) highlights the quick rise of tourism in Woljeong, which, until recently, had been a small, relatively unknown fishing village. However, due to its aesthetic landscapes, which have been promoted widely on the social media platform Instagram, the village has undergone numerous major transitions to account for the influx in tourists. In the wake of tourism growth, gentrification and overdevelopment have changed its socialscape and caused several problems for local residents. Oh illustrates in her work the potential of social media for affecting the development and physical structure or spaces primarily occupied by local residents, by emphasising the aesthetic value of the beach environment (and thus also the value of specific tourist gazes). This perpetuates some of the issues which have been caused as a result of touristification in this particular case and provides insight into possible negative consequences of places being 'discovered' or valorised by social media influencers and users. This can lead to de-valorisation, and following Frenzel and Frisch (2020) this may be the result of value capture practices that follow valorisation. Value capture practices may at times ignore the carrying capacity of a place, as they are mostly driven by growth agendas. They thus risk rendering valorization into overtourism.

New industry structures: the platform economy

New technologies bring new industry structures: companies such as Uber or Airbnb, as well as media companies such as Meta are restructuring the ways we travel, we are incited to travel, experience and consume places, and how we produce tourist attractions. These new actors have emerged with an air of rupture, and innovation, and are seen, quite rightly, as revolutionary (Fontanari & Traskevich, 2022). However, there is a need for more critical research on these new organisations, and academia has a special responsibility to guide policy in reigning into the unwanted effects of new ways of producing tourism (and much more) in order to ensure they serve more than their shareholders, but become conducive to the public good (Gibson, 2021).

Julia Giddy (2021) provides a good example of what type of research can support such an endeavor. Her study focuses, within a decent work framework on the e-hailing service Uber, and its drivers' perceptions of their employment characteristics in a Global South context, through the specific example of South African cities. Giddy highlights some of the disjointed promises portrayed by Uber as a path to economic upliftment among those most vulnerable in South African cities. Given the data collected and when viewed in conjunction with secondary sources, she concludes that

it cannot be considered a form of decent work. Long working hours, minimal pay, a lack of agency and communication with the platform company as well as serious safety concerns are some of the major shortfalls of the working conditions faced by Uber drivers, particularly in South Africa. The paper calls for reforms from the company, which consistently fights against its status as an employer and manipulates legal systems to avoid ensuring proper workers' rights, but also calls for more concrete action by governments to ensure worker protection. Not only one of the first studies of Uber in the context of tourism geography, Giddy's contribution shows how important it is to evaluate local cases with regards to each platform.

Arguably the most prominent platform discussed in the context of digital technology, tourism and inequality is the short-term rental platform Airbnb (Gonzalez-Perez, 2019; Wachsmuth & Weisler, 2018). Globally there is a huge impact on changing and gentrifying neighbourhoods often to the perceived detriment of residents. Four contributions presented in this collection advance this debate with focused case studies in different contexts. Robertson et al. (2020) discuss the impacts of short-term rentals growth in the city of New Orleans. They hone in on one of the most contentious aspects of the rise of digitally-mediated short-term rentals, and that is issues around gentrification and impacts on local rental housing markets. They highlight the impacts of such platforms in the transformation of neighbourhoods, particularly on areas and communities which were, historically, outside of tourism hubs. The authors confirm that wealthier residents and developers have been buying up properties in low-income neighbourhoods to generate short-term rental income, while at the same time excluding low-income residents. In a city which has some of the highest rates of inequality in the United States, such developments further increase inequality. Under such circumstances, the relevance of these results for other urban contexts, particularly those with high income inequalities, become obvious and poses questions for policy makers on how to better manage these platforms while their frequent inaction also warrants further scrutiny.

Morales-Pérez et al. (2020) discuss the influence of Airbnb in exacerbating socio-spatial inequalities in Barcelona. Much work has been done on the impact of tourism gentrification in Barcelona, which is reiterated here. However, their study delves into an understudied perspective by highlighting social movements' attempts to minimise the impacts of tourism and a focus on local communities' resistance to the increase in Airbnb properties. They ask whether social resistance movements' presence and rhetoric in digital platforms actually is able to influence policy debates, by analysing thousands of tweets related to the topic. Understanding these perspectives is key in helping to understand how policy makers can be prompted to develop effective regulation which will assist in reducing the impacts of tourism and its role in increasing inequalities in the city.

While these critical studies have highlighted the need for policy response to deal with reinforced inequalities, Airbnb and similar platforms may also enable more inclusive forms of tourism, particularly in its conceptualization as a 'home-sharing' platform. This concept is often propagated by the company as a significant benefit of its adoption, but much work to-date, has rather demonstrated the ways in which it has just become another mechanism for developers to extract value from rental housing markets. Kadi et al. (2022) discuss the case of Vienna, Austria, which has a

rising Airbnb market and is often overlooked in literature, which tends to focus on top-tier tourism cities. Using quantitative approaches, they determine that, as is the case in many other studies, there is an uneven geography of short-term rentals on the Airbnb platform in Vienna, with commercial developers playing a significant role, particularly in the central areas of the city. They provide a methodological framework for analyzing the impact of short-term rentals via Airbnb, which can be applied in other contexts. Their findings are contextualized within current debates on inclusive tourism and the ways in which Airbnb's promotion as a mechanism for enhancing inclusive tourism does not really play out in practice.

Natalie Stors (2022) takes a more conceptual view and discusses how Airbnb has transformed urban tourism, particularly from a geographic perspective. She demonstrates the ways in which Airbnb has expanded the geographic reach of tourism, by offering tourist accommodation in parts of the city which, previously were not considered tourism spaces. Stors does so through an investigation into the dynamics of Airbnb in Berlin. She goes on to analyze the ways in which 'new' tourism spaces are created in this way and emphasizes the social construction involved in developing these tourist spaces through a lens of place making, representations and performances. This is done through an analysis of Airbnb listings in the Berlin neighborhood of the Reuterkiez.

Particular emphasis is put on the question how Airbnb hosts market their previously ordinary residential neighborhood as something that would be attractive to tourists. In doing so, they highlight the authentic nature of the place and local experiences which are desirable to many urban tourists, again highlighting the workings of tourism valorisation (Frenzel & Frisch 2020). The outcome are 'new' urban tourism areas, with a very different feel to those traditionally experienced in a top-tier tourism city. The production of tourism is longer the domain of city marketing and tourism developers, but now includes the myriad activities of hosts who have a vital interest in representing their neighbourhood in ways they believe enhances its attraction.

Can we travel less, and justly so?

As we remember COVID-19, we need to reignite debates about the limits to corporal travel, long on the agenda, but now more urgent than ever. Climate change is seriously accelerated by tourist travel. During the pandemic we have learned to reduce our travel to zero. No one wants to return to this, but how can we use the myriad insights into the benefits of virtual travel? As John Urry demanded as early as 2003, the real challenge is to start using corporeal travel for only those types of journeys where the bodily experience cannot be replaced (Urry, 2003).

With challenges to global supply chains, and staffing, travel companies and airports have struggled recently to cater for a renewed desire to corporeally travel, but these are not just operational issues. Inequality as the conflict between corporate profit and wages lie at the bottom of it. Inflation will increase costs of corporeal travel and pressure on wages in the industry is a direct result. Rising prices are, at the same time, a silver lining of the current situation as they will lead to a reduction of air traffic, however likely to reduce growth which brings challenges on its own right. While a reduction in corporeal travel is needed, it needs to be socially just and

equitable. We need a critical discussion about who actually has the right to mobility in the future rather than leaving the answer to market dynamics only. We also need to consider much more actively the possibilities of virtual travel. However will such alternatives create full replacements or further incentives to corporeally travel?

Griffin and Muldoon (2020) look at how virtual reality experiences affect the desire to physically visit places of poverty and how their perception of travellers' respectives of places change. This builds on earlier research by Linke (2012), which discussed representation of poverty across platforms and media (2012). In an exploratory study Griffin and Muldoon (2020) participants, who voiced interest in slum tourism, were provided with a virtual reality tour of a slum in Manila, Philippines. According to participants, the experience was sufficiently immersive that they felt communities were adequately represented in these video experiences. The authors highlight some of the concerns and challenges with these types of experiences, which could provide a way forward for slum experiences, minimising potential damage to the community and reducing associated costs of corporeal travel such as carbon emissions. However, the benefits to virtual 'host' communities is questioned. One of the primary drivers discussed amongst proponents of slum tourism is the potential economic benefits to host communities, which would likely dissolve with virtual experiences, unless ways are found to monetize this form of experience. This, thus, appears to wholly objectify these communities with little benefit to slum dwellers, perpetuating issues of inequality and concerns over valorization. In some more recent work, following the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual tourism in favelas has been considered and promoted as new types of virtual mobilites (Moraes et al., 2022).

Conclusion

This collection speaks to the long held hopes and concerns of tourism's ability to positively or negatively affect geographies of inequality. For many social and cultural geographers of tourism, such questions are the core of their interest in tourism research. In the last few decades we have seen significant changes to tourism, its production, consumption and the systems supporting it, caused by an increasing role of digital technologies. This collection sheds new light on the effect of this megatrend on what Regina Scheyvens has called the tourism and poverty nexus (Scheyvens, 2007; Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008), or more generally, the role tourism may play in relation to inequality (Frenzel & Koens, 2012).

This work is not completed and we want to end our piece with a call for more research in this domain. We hope to provide a new impetus of social and cultural geographies of tourism to revisit the role tourism can play in alleviating poverty, in enabling wider and more inclusive offers of tourism experiences, and to address the garling inequalities that current tourism still often enhances rather than ameliorates.

Disclosure statement

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