

Title: The Curious Case of Tinder Tourism

Author: Garth Lean & Jenna Condie

Affiliation: Western Sydney University

Contact: g.lean@westernsydney.edu.au

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Abstract:

Like all facets of social life, digital technologies have become deeply entwined in the performance of travel and tourism. Yet their investigation has largely been restricted to reflecting upon their use in place marketing/promotion and facilitating visitor experiences (e.g., interpretation in museums, self-guided walking tours, etc.). As such, there is a significant, and rapidly expanding, gap in knowledge surrounding how digital technologies are reshaping travel experiences, including social interactions and connections during travel and tourism.

The TinDA (Travel in a Digital Age) project was established in 2015 to examine the ways in which digital technologies mediate travel experiences and mobile lives. This paper presents the findings of an interdisciplinary, mixed-methods study investigating the commonplace use of location-aware social discovery applications (or apps), such as Tinder, Grindr, Backpackr, and WeChat, during travel. It also reflects upon a second area of enquiry exploring women's experiences on Tinder. The paper argues that the use of these apps during travel is embedded within a broader shift toward increasing digital connections and intimacies in a mobile world. In the context of travel and tourism, location-based discovery apps represent a quest for alternate ways of encountering 'local', 'difference', and 'other', comparable with the rise of other digital platforms such as Airbnb and Couchsurfing. Beyond intimate encounters, data from the project suggests that travellers use the apps to connect (in all manner of ways) with people and places and to discover local knowledge. These apps have quickly become common travel tools for young travellers. While experiences reported in the travel study have been largely positive, the apps raise a number of concerns, particularly relating to issues of gender, sexuality, and safety/security. They also serve to blur boundaries between social networking and dating, 'traveller' and 'local'/'host', 'here' and 'there' (especially via features such as Tinder's 'Passport' function that allow travellers to change their geolocation), and online/offline (as the online becomes increasingly embedded in the physical experiences of travel).