

**9th Annual International Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage Conference:
Extended Abstract Template - SMART Media Technologies impact on the
Spiritual Experience of Hajj Pilgrims.**

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Biographies

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, information and communication technologies have advanced rapidly and continue to do so. Currently, the popularity and spread of SMART Media Technologies (SMT) is not only transforming the lives of tourists around the world in general, but is impacting on the experience of pilgrims on the Hajj in Saudi Arabia in particular, (Brdese et al, 2013). Indeed, the Saudi government has undertaken a number of initiatives to encourage the use of SMT in the religious tourism industry, (Majid, 2016).

Specifically, the availability of SMT services such as Hajj Apps, E-bracelets for pilgrims, free WIFI and mobile charging services in Grand Mosques (in both Mecca and Madinah), dedicated social media websites, and the ability of pilgrims to take advantage of SMART phone activities are facilitating and enhancing their technological and social experience of the Hajj (Naar, 2015; also BBC, 2016). However, arguably the introduction of 'high-tech' into the Hajj is arguably impacting on the nature of the pilgrims' experience, challenging its fundamental spirituality by transforming it into something more akin to a 'cyber experience', an experience which competes with and jeopardies the principles of the Islamic religious journey of the Hajj with its focus on worship, simplicity and no ostentatious behaviour. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore how the spiritual experience of pilgrims may be influenced by the availability and use of various SMT services. The findings suggest ways in which these technological services both enhance and impact negatively on the pilgrim's spiritual experience.

Introduction

Whilst the popularity of print media has declined, the use of SMART Media Technologies (SMT) has become increasingly pervasive around the world in the world. SMT is not only transforming the lives of people in general; participation in particular activities, such as tourism, has significantly benefitted from SMT, whilst specific forms of tourism, such as the Hajj pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia, have not been immune from the influence of SMT (Brdesee et al, 2013).

Indeed, as SMT continues to evolve, the Saudi government has taken a number of initiatives to promote the use of SMT within the country's religious tourism industry, encouraging corporations to adopt SMT innovations not only to facilitate E-commerce but also, in a sense, to creating 'SMART pilgrims' (Majid, 2016). Just a decade ago, both public and private sector telecom providers in Saudi Arabia lacked access to SMT services. However, the administration took vital steps to liberalise the Information Technology (IT) sector and to increase private sector engagement in this business, the aim being to increase the level of Internet use and computer penetration rate to 30% by 2013 (Amro, 2012). As a consequence, both the private and public sectors in Saudi Arabia are responding to the IT challenge by dynamically accepting new SMT and capitalising in the telecom sector (Aldogily 2009; Alzhrani 2009). This is very much the case in the religious tourism sector; nowadays, SMT services such as Hajj Apps (Naar, 2015), E-bracelets for pilgrims, free WIFI services in the Grand Mosques in both Mecca and Madinah, and the availability of dedicated social media Websites are facilitating pilgrims and enhancing their social experience of Hajj (BBC, 2016). However, since Hajj has become 'high-tech', the nature of the pilgrims' experience is being challenged, its fundamental spirituality being transformed it into something more akin to a 'cyber experience', an experience which competes with and jeopardies the principles of the Islamic religious journey of the Hajj with its focus on worship and simplicity. Therefore, through a qualitative analysis of the views of pilgrims and supplemented by participant observation of the roles and actions of pilgrims during the Hajj in 2016, this paper explores how the spiritual experience of pilgrims may be influenced by the availability and use of various SMT services,

Literature Review

The consequences of the widespread adoption of information and communication technology have become the focus of extensive research in the tourism, marketing and business literature over the last three decades (Davis et al. 1989; Tornatzky and Fleischer, 1990). In particular, attention has focused on how governments or authorities which are involved directly in the operation of religious tourism around the world are responding to challenges arising from this technological revolution, its influence on the tourism sector and the rapidly changing religious tourism consumer (tourist/ pilgrim) against a background of far-reaching social, political, technological and economic developments (Gretzel et al., 2006). In addition, the (religious) tourism industry is also facing changing demands from contemporary consumers (Ehmer and Heymann, 2008). Many religious authorities face economic benefits and challenges; the increasing demand for tourist/pilgrim experiences represents an economic opportunity but, with transformations tourist / pilgrims' interests (technological and spiritual), destinations are now obliged to invest heavily to gain maximum economic advantages from changing consumer buying behaviours (Kim and Mauborgne 2005). SMT are contributing significantly to the re-shaping of the tourism experience, playing a major role at all stages of the experience, from anticipation and planning, through travel and time at the destination, to the return home and recollection. The sustainable role of SMT in tourism is widely acknowledged by academics and e-commerce business sector (Cantoni and De Ascaniis, 2016); however, its role in religious tourism and pilgrimage in particular remains under-investigated. Specifically, whilst SMT represent opportunities for e-commerce businesses and for pilgrims, they may have a negative influence on the experience of pilgrim. Therefore, in this paper the focus is on the role of SMT in the lives of Hajj pilgrims. In the research the spiritual experiences of pilgrims with very different interests and goals is investigated.

Methodology

Qualitative data were collected through the researcher's participation in the Hajj. The researcher joined the Hajj as a pilgrim in August-September 2016. The principal data method was semi-structured in-depth interviews; as Saunders (2003) argues, semi-structured interviews provides the researcher with flexibility in the interview process, allowing the sequence of questions to be varied and emergent issues to be followed and discussed. The interviews were conducted with pilgrims from both the UK (developed country) and a developing countries in order to not only explore in depth how pilgrims experience a use of SMT in Hajj but also to identify the extent to which these experiences vary amongst pilgrims from contrasting cultural backgrounds. Interviews were also conducted with representatives of the telecom sector in the Mecca. Qualitative interview data were supplemented by participant observation of the roles and actions of pilgrims during the Hajj.

Results

The findings suggest that SMT services have both positive and undesirable impacts on the pilgrim's spiritual experience. One pilgrim responded.....

Look before visiting these two holy Mosques I have already received hundreds of pictures of them on Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Selfies so when I saw these Mosques literally I didn't feel emotional or highly spiritually charged because I already felt them on my (SMT) gadgets. I am really disappointed that pilgrims are busy in making movies here, taking selfies, chatting with external world by using different SMT platforms and gadgets. They are concentrating less on the spiritual aspect of the journey it is more like a fun nowadays or holidays. This is like a frustration now, I came here to find spiritual tranquility but majority of pilgrims are busy here with SMART technologies, may Allah all might bless us and forgive us. The selfie culture which is considered to be like devil's act and now looks like a part of worship, Haji's are switching to ostentatious behavior, they are busy in showing their relatives, friends, families each and every move of their journey. I want to tell you more if you allow me? Yes no problem carry on..... ok. I saw lots of pilgrims they are not reciting 'Talbiyah' (Muslim prayer invoked by the pilgrims as a conviction that they intend to perform the Hajj only for the glory of Allah) by themselves, they switched on their SMART phones to do so, imagine we feel tied and feeling shy to recite 'Talbiyah'.Imagine the 'Talbiyah' which should come out from our hearts

coming from the machine. About Hajj App yes I download it but haven't used it, but my friends are using. This is shame that now machine is guiding us how to perform Hajj like a 'TOMTOM', it should be our religious duty to have this knowledge how to perform Hajj.

But I like the e-bracelet system this is helpful at least if you are lost, which is normal in Hajj, it really helps pilgrims. I think every Haji should receive e-bracelet by the Hajj of 2017. Actually we are now 'E-Pilgrims'

Conclusion and Discussion

Rapid change in pilgrim's technological, social and consumer behavior in the travel industry as a whole prove to be a potential factor motivating governments to adopt SMT to gain maximum economic advantage. However, although government intervention, such as creating E-religion portal concepts, including Hajj Apps, E-bracelets, WIFI services, and social media websites, in some respects enhances the pilgrim's social and technological experience, it nevertheless impacts negatively on their spiritual experience of the divine ritual which demands concentration on worship and the non-material

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