Negotiating technology use to make vacations special

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Abstract

Vacation and hospitality events are special times that represent breaks from daily routines. This research seeks to understand how technology is used or not used to support the specialness of these events and occasions. The theory of planned behaviour (TPB) is used as a framework in guiding the research to understand intentions to use or refrain from technology during special events and holidays. The qualitative interviews identified a number of important attitudes, subjective norms and behavioural control issues that can explain intentions.

Keywords: technology use; attitudes toward technology; subjective norms; behavioural control; behavioural intentions.

1 Introduction

Vacations and hospitality events are special times and can mean big investments of money, time, and emotions (Dolnicar, Yanamandram, & Cliff, 2012). Internet and mobile technology can mediate both behavioural and psychological dimensions of these special experiences (Wang, Park, & Fesenmaier, 2011). On one hand, technology can make experiences more special by eliminating some of the frictions that touristic mobility can bring with it (Jansson, 2007). On the other hand, it can interfere with the specialness of vacations and events (Pearce & Gretzel, 2012). Escape from daily routines and novelty are big motivating factors for tourism and hospitality experiences (Pearce, 2011). Individuals traditionally cross a threshold from their home life into this special time that disconnects them from their everyday routines into a rewarding and sometimes challenging space (Graburn, 1983). However, where once there were clearly defined thresholds of work life, family time, special events and vacations, now mobile technology provides ongoing connections (White & White, 2007; MacKay & Vogt, 2012). Vacations and hospitality events are supposed to be important times aimed at breaking the normal routine of everyday life and providing opportunities to build or strengthen relationships (Agate, Zabriskie, Agate, & Poff, 2009). This suggests that individuals would have to negotiate technology use and respect thresholds to protect their special times from being taking

over by daily life. This paper aims to investigate if individuals create boundaries for their technology use during these special times.

2 Theoretical Background

Since the research is fundamentally concerned with intentions to use or not use technology during vacations and special events, the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) was selected as the theoretical framework guiding the research questions and analysis. The TPB is a comprehensive theory that identifies a causal structure for justifying a wide range of human behaviour (Morris, Venkatesh & Ackerman, 2005), including technology use (Figure 1).
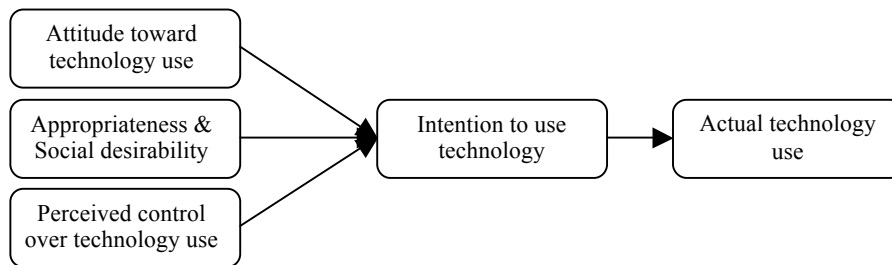

Fig. 1. The Theory of Planned Behaviour Applied to Technology Use

The TBP explains that a person's attitude helps or hinders an individual's intention to behave in a certain way (Pierce & Ball, 2009). For the attitude construct, this research will look at attitudes toward technology use during special times such as vacations, restaurant visits, weddings, etc. In addition to looking at attitudes, subjective norms are the second construct important in understanding intentions. Subjective norms deal with a person's perception of the social pressures to perform or not perform a specific behaviour (Ajzen, 2007). This research will look at subjective norms in terms of what technology use is perceived as appropriate or desirable in vacation and events settings. PBC is the individual's perception of their ability to control whether they participate or do not participate in a specific behaviour (Ajzen, 2007). In this study, PBC is conceptualized as perceived control over one's technology use during tourism and hospitality experiences. Given the increasing dependence on technology (Simon, 2005), controlling technology use behaviours might actually be quite difficult for individuals. Intention is the plan for whether to participate or not participate in the behaviour. A person's intentions, combined with PBC, can account for a large amount of variance in actual behavior (Pierce & Ball, 2009). Attitude, subjective norms, and PBC are considered to have both direct and indirect influences on behavior through intention (Liaw, 2004). In the context of this research, intentions relate to either preserving the liminality of vacations/events or enhancing the experiences through technology use.

3　Methods/Procedures

For this study both one-on-one interviews and focus groups were utilized. The interviewees ranged from 8 to 58 years of age, represented both genders, and had different occupations so that the research would cover a broad range of perspectives on technology use. All interviewees had at least some travel experience. A total of 23 individual interviews were conducted. To add richness to the data, focus groups were also conducted. The focus groups included 21 males and females between the age of 14 and 58, again with varying occupational backgrounds and at least some travel experience. These individuals were recruited through snowball sampling. Four focus groups were formed. Data was collected at the end of 2011 and beginning of 2012. For data analysis, a philosophical hermeneutic approach (Gadamer, 1970) is utilized.

4　Results

4.1　Intentions to Use Technology During Vacations and Special Events

The responses showed a wide range of intentions from complete abandonment of technology to restricted use to full engagement in order to take advantage of the technology for information search and decision-making and get the most out of the limited vacation time. In some cases, not using technology was a major motivational factor driving the vacation behavior. Some expressed intentions for conditional technology use. The responses show that individuals' intentions to use technology vary and depend on the type of vacation. When they cross over into the threshold of a camping vacation, then technology is turned off and not used. However, in the case of being in a city with ready access to wireless, the technology is used regularly for functional and hedonic purposes. This demonstrates that intentions are context-dependent and can even differ for the same individual.

4.2　Attitude toward technology use

The participants we spoke with had different attitudes about technology use. Some see it as extremely helpful and experience-enhancing. Technology was also considered to be useful to stave off boredom. One of the respondents had recently travelled with a group and she commented on how vital the technology was for their holiday and coordinating schedules, events, and meetings within the group of travelers while they were on holiday. Others had mixed feelings about technology use. There were also some very negative attitudes reflected in the comments, suggesting that technology was seen as something that makes one dependent, that takes away from the experience, that distracts, manipulates and that actually causes one to lose important skills and miss out on important life experiences. Those with such negative attitudes were much more avid in expressing intentions to abandon technology during vacations.

4.3 Subjective Norms

Several individuals mentioned clear expectations by loved ones to be reachable all the time. People also spoke about the expectation to share their travel photos on facebook with friends so that their friends could keep up with them while they were travelling without having to make real contact. There was pressure from their bosses and other co-workers to maintain some form of contact even when on leave. While they were all very quick to point out that they would set their voice mails and email auto-reply to say they were out of the office, they still felt there were expectations to respond to email. In trying to understand the boundaries that individuals place on their mobile technology use during special times, they were asked if there were any activities or events where they would definitely turn off their technology or always put it on silent. The most common responses were weddings, funerals, shows and religious events. Not following social conventions regarding technology use was definitely seen as leading to embarrassment. Many people felt that others were violating their personal space during times that were meant to be special. Ergo, they assumed that they would also disturb others if they engaged in technology use in such situations. Some also mentioned that it is generally expected nowadays to have a mobile phone with you, also for interacting with tourism providers for purposes like confirming reservations. These subjective norms to use or not use technology result in pressures that people have in the back of their minds when forming their intentions to use technology during vacations or special events. However, it was clear that some respondents took those norms more into consideration than others.

4.3.1   PBC

Some individuals felt that their habits from their daily lives were seeping into their special occasions while others explained they were able to put up boundaries so that technology would not interfere with the special experiences. For some it seems to be easy to control their technology use. Still, other respondents said they would leave their phone in the car for special events so that they were not tempted to check their email and social media. One participant went as far as to use others to control her use of technology during times when she wanted to focus on something else. Another participant felt that it was especially hard for children to function without technology. Clearly, it is easier for some to leave technology behind than for others. Perceived lack of behavioural control leads some to establish firm rules and clear boundaries, leading to intentions to limit technology use. Some boundaries are self inflicted guidelines while others create actual physical boundaries by not taking their phone, going to areas without technology or allowing the battery to die in order to keep the events special.

5   Conclusions

In conclusion, the TPB framework proved to be a useful way in which to think about intentions to use technology during vacations and special events. The findings showed that intentions are indeed conditioned by a complex mix of attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. It is also clear that individuals differ considerably

in terms of these dimensions. Social pressures can originate from a number of sources, including family and friends at home, work, the travel party, other travellers around them, and the tourism industry. Importantly, the interviewees report that social conventions regarding technology use are emerging. What is very clear is the central role technology plays in these experiences, no matter whether it is seen as enhancing or distracting. From a theoretical perspective, the results suggest that more research is needed to understand the antecedents of technology use attitudes. The study also indicates that current conceptualizations of technology use in the tourism literature are too limited in that they do not take into account that tourists might want to actively restrict their technology use. From a practical point of view it is important to think about what the industry (both the technology and the tourism providers) can do to make sure that intentions can be supported, whether they limit or embrace technology use. For instance, if individuals have intentions to restrict their technology use when on vacation but then have to turn their mobile phones on in order to make reservations, their special times might be compromised because they then also get messages from others or are tempted to check their emails. On the other hand, if individuals intend to use their technology to enhance their experience but encounter unreasonable roaming charges, this can also take away from their special times.

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