



The Initial Impact of Technology Enabled Relationship Creation in Rural Lebanon

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Abstract. Technology enables actor-to-actor experience co-creation leading to value creation for the parties involved in the process. This research presents the initial impact of a mobile application developed to foster technology enabled relationship in rural Lebanon. Results indicate that technology has the potential to positively impact both host and guest fostering relationships building in all the trip stages and leading to socio-economic development and transformative experiences. In fact, the paper shows that relationships created and strengthened with the support of technology are expected to have effects at personal, community and business level.

Keywords: eTourism · eT4D · Community-based tourism · Transformative experiences · Host-guest relationships

1 Introduction

Tourism has become one of the largest economic sectors in our globalized world [34]; however, over the years a series of alternative to mass tourism have been proposed. Those forms of tourism are said to be more community focused and ideally contributing to local socio-economic development. These include community-based tourism (CBT), ecotourism, and regenerative tourism, impact local communities and seek to protect nature [1, 7, 8, 11, 20, 22].

Digital technology, besides having had the merit of reshaping and the competitive environment of the industry [14], are also considerably influencing these alternative forms of tourism [18]. In fact, digital technologies have impacted consumer behavior, service operations and distribution channels throughout the industry [26]. Most importantly for this study, technology has changed the interaction between service providers and customers and using technologies in a specific way further allows to benefit from efforts such as personalizing services or creating value together [2, 14]. Research shows that the possibility to connect with people through technology and co-create experiences [25] facilitates and supports the creation of transformative experiences [17, 28].

This study aims at generating an initial and exploratory understanding of the impact of smart digital technologies for actor-to-actor relationships building towards the creation of (i) socio-economic development at community level and (ii) transformative experiences in the context of rural Lebanon. The study tackles these aim and research objectives by the means of an exploratory qualitative methodology addressing tourism providers and travelers.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Community Based Tourism

While there is no clear consensus on the definition for Community Based Tourism [24 – CBT], it is agreed that it is a form of tourism that puts at its heart the local communities, their development, and the conservation of their culture and habitat [7, 10]. Special importance in this form of tourism can be laid on community participation and involvement, the relationship between host communities and guests, as well as cultural encounters that are often part of Community Based Tourism products [22]. Benefits of CBT include employment opportunities, especially for women, youth, and less-skilled people [13, 22], as well as improvements made to local infrastructure [21]. However, Saayman and Giampiccoli [29] argued that in remote areas, the lack of infrastructure, along with a potential lack of financial resources and low capacities, may hinder community participation in CBT initiatives.

One of the main features of CBT, the heavy involvement of local communities in decision making processes, has been questioned with the assumption that communities are not homogenous; community members have different opinions, and there are different stakes at play within a community [30]. This premise is supported by research by Jamal and Getz [19] who show that views on tourism development vary within a single community. A major limitation to CBT is that socio-economic structures and political systems remain the same despite CBT initiatives that fail to address and change root-causes of poverty and inequalities [32]. Similarly, Scheyvens [30] mentions that state intervention is often required to ensure that the benefits of tourism are captured, and to avoid the destruction of the environment or the violation of labor laws. The involvement of local communities and the consideration of their interests is important, and it must be ensured by involving stakeholders from various groups from the beginning of CBT (planning) processes [3, 19]. Additionally, appropriate policies should be put in place early in the process to avoid environmental destruction and to prevent most benefits of CBT from going towards local elites [31].

The tourism literature discusses the possible impact of travel related initiatives in developing and emerging countries looking at (i) infrastructure development [21] with Saayman and Giampiccoli [29] arguing that the lack of infrastructure in remote areas may hinder visitation and therefore community participation in CBT initiatives. (ii) Employment opportunities pointing out that many jobs within tourism are available to vulnerable members of local communities (women, young people) and are oftentimes suitable for less-skilled people with minimal levels of education [20]. (iii) Economic growth lies in the expectation to capture income from tourists' spending, in other words, increase foreign exchange earnings [20].

2.2 eTourism 4 Development and Host-Guest Relationships

The interplay between digital technologies and tourism in the context of developing and emerging countries has a young academic history (e.g. eTourism 4 Development - 18). Yet, although there is scant research in the field of Information and Communication for Development which focuses on Tourism [16], there is ample evidence of the importance of digital media and especially the internet as a marketing and management tool for small business operating in tourism in developing and emerging countries [18]. Recent research pointed out that the interactive power of technology can be harnessed to develop and sustain actor-to-actor relationships [25] and create personalized and meaningful experiences [4]. A concept often mentioned in relation to the personalization of services with technologies is “value co-creation” [2, 25], whereby both sides (consumer and service provider) make use of modern technology and the wider smart tourism ecosystem to interact and create value together [14, 27]. With respect to tourism destination managers, the use of technology can create increased competitiveness and be a source of competitive advantage [2, 27], and contribute to more suitable, meaningful, memorable, and often transformative experiences for each individual consumer [17]. Thanks to actor-to-actor co-creation [27] the co-created value impact both actors – i.e. host and guests [17].

2.3 Transformative Experiences

Transformational travel has been defined as “intentionally traveling to stretch, learn and grow into new ways of being and engaging with the world” [33, p.4]. Equally, transformative travel carries notions of self-fulfilment and respect towards visited communities and nature [5]. Especially the new generation of travellers is looking for transformational and interactive experiences [9]. Technology is an valuable tool for creating these experiences as it can assist with co-creation processes and creating deeper connections between service providers and tourists [12].

Travelers who go through transformative experiences speak about change in their identity throughout the travel experience, and experiencing situations that allow them to challenge themselves as well as their entire environment [23]. Similarly, another study found tourists talking about experiencing transformation through connecting to different people, thereby enriching their ideas of the world, and becoming more humble [28]. In terms of impact on the hosts of the transformative tourism experiences, Vidickienė et al. [35] discuss how rural areas can benefit from offering transformative tourism experiences by using intangible cultural heritage to attract visitors and creating a multiplier effect for other local businesses. Research by Inversini et al. [17] proposed bonding and meaningful relationships with local communities as drivers for transformative learning experiences.

3 Methodology

This study aims at generating an initial understanding of the impact of digital technology as a tool for actor-to-actor relationship building towards the creation of (i) socio-economic development at community level and (ii) transformative experiences in the context of rural Lebanon.

Due to the specificity of the research topic and its minimal previous exploration, a qualitative case-study approach was chosen for the study. The case-study used is the startup “Daskara” which developed an app indexing local cultural and heritage sites in rural Lebanon, chosen by local experts to foster tourism while preserving local culture and nature in rural Lebanon [6]. Daskara was born as a social mapping projects where rural communities were asked to index their cultural and natural point of interests; it developed as a tool to support ‘pre-trip decision making’ and ‘in-trip guidance’ therefore can be used in different behavioral contexts. In fact, the recent development of the app resulted in a smart interface that allows guests to directly connect with hosts through the app and for hosts to offer more experience-based services [15]. The app was deployed on the ground as a smart host-guest relationship tool; the present research focuses on the initial impact of the artifact to mediated host-guest relationships.

3.1 Sample and Procedures

Semi structured interviews were chosen as methodology for investigation as they allow for deeper exploration and understanding of how technology mediated host-guest relationships can impact both parties.

Ten in-depth interviews were conducted, as further detailed in Table 1. These interviews are split into two parts: 5 local tourism services providers (i.e. hosts) and 5 travelers (i.e. guests). Host participants were chosen on the basis of availabilities in the two rural areas with most tourism density (i.e. Al Shouf biosphere reserve and Jabal Moussa biosphere reserve.); travelers were randomly chosen with snowball sampling. Both groups were familiar with the mobile application. The interviews were conducted face-to-face with participants in different areas of Lebanon. Before conducting any interviews, participants were handed a Participant Information Sheet to better explain the purpose of the interview and overall study. Subsequently, participants were handed a form to confirm they were informed about the interviews and agree to participate, including being voice recorded. During the interview, an interview guide was used to ask relevant questions while still offering flexibility to adapt to each individual’s responses and follow up with questions to further understand participants statements if needed, or contrarily skip certain questions if already answered previously.

Table 1. List of interviewees

Interviewee N°	Background	Category	Duration
1A	Guest house owner	Service provider	24’
2A	Boutique hotel manager	Service provider	16’
3A	Local artisan and guide	Service provider	24’
4A	Local tourism developer and consultant with FAO and WFP	Tourism expert	29’
5A	Director of Daskara	Tourism expert	14’

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Interviewee N°	Background	Category	Duration
1B	Lebanese tourist/hiker	Traveler	24'
2B	Lebanese tourist/hiker	Traveler	19'
3B	Australian tourist with Lebanese roots	Traveler	21'
4B	Lebanese tourist/hiker	Traveler	21'
5B	Lebanese tourist/hiker	Traveler	18'

3.2 Analyses

After conducting the interviews, they were transcribed; using “Dedoose” (dedoose.com) tool, all interviews were coded with codes, which were deduced from the literature review. A deductive coding approach was primary used starting from the literature about community socio-economic development socio-economic development for the hosts [e.g. 20] and transformative experiences [e.g. 17] for the guests. However, additional codes were added throughout the process if the existing codes did not match what a participant was talking about specifically (inductive coding).

4 Results

4.1 Host Perspectives

Two distinct perspectives appeared in the results of the host interviews: interviewees discussed the socio-economic impact of the mobile application, and they described the power of the app to support and enhance relationships with travelers and within the community.

4.1.1 Socio Economic Development

Participants discussed how apps like Daskara and the relationships built through them could impact others in their community. Interviewee 5A talks about youth specifically: *“Youth empowerment, because if the youth is creating magnificent things in their home and they are the ones who are with new ideas, they are the ones who are trying to make a difference or trying to, uh, collaborate with all the different organizers or the service providers. So, they are being the link between each one.”* This interviewee further talks about the opportunity to find connections to other communities with help of smart technology: *“I would honestly love for communication, not only within the same communities, but along different communities within Lebanon.”* Going a step further from relationship building, interviewee 3A talks about how an app like Daskara could help with community development in general: *“On an economic level, it will help the Lebanese villagers to stay here in their village, and not to leave. Let’s say that I have an empty house. This empty house would be filled with guests, I might open a guest house. And this guest house will be one source of money.”* This sense of potential economic

development is equally shared by interviewee 2A, who says “*absolutely [we] would gain more customers and loyalty [...], returning customers. Especially in the winter season because in the winter season here [...], there’s almost no one here. So, building this relationship with our customers will help that they visit us in winter as well.*”

4.1.2 Relationship Building

One of the most mentioned potential impacts came down to the building of new personal relationships: Interviewee 1A tells us that “*Our guests, we consider them as friends [...], we let them feel that they belong to this beautiful culture and they can consider themselves that they are true friends.*” Another story is told by interviewee 2A: “*Of course many of my customers from [my] previous work went to my wedding [...] in Cyprus, so they followed me to Cyprus. So, this relationship is very, very important to us [...]. Most of our customers are based on friendship.*”

One effect these more personal relationships with guests could have was mentioned to be getting to live new experiences, which at the same time could also lead to better cultural understanding and more openness to others, as stated by interviewee 3A: “*On a cultural level [...] my Lebanese villagers will be enriched by having other tourists here. They will have other cultures. They will share their proper experience. [...] Let’s say, to broaden my horizon [...] I have to look at the world from different perspectives and Daskara will bring different perspectives to my village. So it’s not necessary to visit Italy for example, [...] it’s a chance to take Italian perspectives, Italian culture, maybe we’ll share together for example, information about canes, about history, about nature. I will learn something from different people, they will visit me here and thus I will have my horizons broadened due to that experience also.*”

4.2 Guest Perspectives

Participants agreed that building relationships with hosts through an app like Daskara could impact different components of their travel experience. One area that was mentioned is the opportunity to discover new places and activities through the functions of the app. Interviewee 1B says “*If I want new places, I really don’t know where [to go], because maybe I don’t know, in a certain region, where are the guest house or who are like some small guest houses. [...] If I have an app where I write “Shouf” and I get all the guest houses and I have a picture, it would be cool,*” and interviewee 2B talks about discovering smaller places: “*I think there’s added value by having a local app because it’ll cater to the local hosts and experiences by basically pinpointing the smallest village or town to visit that may have a uniqueness to it that might not be captured by an international app.*”

Interviewee 2B gives another example: “*Sometimes we also have difficulty, like where is a good place to sit and eat? Where is a good place to sit and relax? Where is it a good place to spend the night? And so, I think the locals would definitely know. Actually, this will bring in a lot of money and a lot of tourism to the village itself.*” This same interviewee further states, “*having someone, or several contact persons, I think would enrich the experience.*”

Something mentioned by interviewee 3B is finding people with similar passions and interests through the app: *“If there’s 20% of us, who are passionate about it, [...] it’s still worth connecting us together”*. Interviewee 4B adds on *“The application that you created, I believe that it will target a specific kind of traveler who has the same passion. If I don’t like hiking, I won’t go into the application, talking to a guy to take me on a hike. So I guess they will be like-minded people who are talking about this kind of thing.”* This thought is complemented by the interviewee explaining how a basis built on similarities may then help you to also better understand certain differences: *“The reality is not that you will see something a hundred percent different. You will see like 80% similar, 20% difference, which is interesting.”* The learning aspects, which lead to transformative experiences, were mentioned in the interviews. For example, interviewee 1B states, *“If someone really tells you about the story behind it, the cultural importance, an interesting story, the struggle of a painter or a society, I’m sure it will be educational. [...] And if I have like more knowledge, I will be also happier.”* Interviewee 5B adds *“Definitely, [through interactions with locals] you learn more about the culture, about the towns you’re walking through and all that, you get a feel of like...it’s surprising that still exists.”*

Through these exchanges, participants have also mentioned better intercultural understanding. *“The kids [while hiking] saw these men wearing traditional ethnic pants. And so the kids were like, “what are they wearing? Why do they have this on their head?” et cetera. So I think even for kids that are a little bit older, that can read such an app, could give them also a little bit of experiential learning about the town and the way it dresses, what they eat, how they speak...,”* says interviewee 5B. Interviewee 2B talks about how connecting with hosts can help visitors become more culturally aware, even before your trip: *“That’s interesting because, you know, people coming from the outside might not know about what’s acceptable, what’s not acceptable. You know, even the simple gestures that are allowable or not allowable, maybe dress codes that are acceptable or non-acceptable so that actually can bring a lot of nuances to it. [...] So at least you go there being culturally appropriate, um, you know, and knowing exactly what to say or what not to say.”* Interviewee 4B similarly mentions, *“With interactions, just like we are talking right now, I get information from you and you get information from me. So when you have an application, connecting people in a good way, this is a good use of technology. [...] I will adapt to your way of thinking and you will adapt to mine.”*

Another interesting aspect is mentioned by interviewee 4B talking about how a close relationship can also help you with self-reflection, here specifically in terms of littering: *“I feel if there’s a connection and the presence of someone, people are much more likely to not throw the trash. If someone asks me to please take care of the trash, I think it will create an impact.”* Interviewee 5B adds that these interactions *“can teach us tolerance and respect”*.

5 Discussion

Interviews with both sides (i.e. host and guests) have demonstrated the potential for positive impact of technology-enabled relationship building for CBT in rural Lebanon.

From a host perspective, the experience based mobile application, enabled the start of a relationship prior to arrival of guests at the destination or at the accommodation.

This can lead to better preparation for both hosts and guests, more tolerance and cultural sensitivity on the side of guests and the potential for hosts to better understand their customers and their wishes.

The engagement between the two parties that is created earlier in the travel process could help to strengthen host-guest relationships throughout the experience, which is seen as an important aspect mentioned specifically by hosts. This personal relationship is also said to contribute to openness to others, gaining new perspectives, broadening of horizons and personal development on the side of hosts. Some hosts even spoke of change in personality or personal growth, which could be eventually classified as inner self-impact and possibly as a transformative experience. Additionally, the facilitation of building relationships is expected to lead to more loyalty, word-of-mouth advertising, and eventually increasing visitation for local community. In fact, the main expected outcome of the surge in visitation is of course increasing revenue for local businesses and general contributions towards rural development. There is a visible potential for socio-economic development fostered by technology enabled relationship building between hosts and guests.

On the guests' side, there is the recognition of the positive contributions to their travel experiences through technology-enabled relationships with hosts. For one, they expect to discover new, unexpected places and get more personalized recommendations by locals. Learning and cultural understanding were other main topics in terms of impact, and as mentioned previously, the pre-trip contact with locals is expected to contribute to better preparation for a trip, including better understanding local norms and culture. Guest mentioned that being closely in touch with host and building a relationship with them could equally lead to self-reflection, consideration for your own values and those of others', and eventually shift your perceptions. Thus, transformation is expected to be facilitated through the technology mediated host-guest relationship.

Throughout analysis of interviews, it became clear that there is a certain interplay of both sides to the host-guest relationship with the common denominator being the transformative aspect of the relationship. Transformational experiences are deemed possible for both sides of the relationship and is expected to then lead to further outcomes for both hosts and guests (see Fig. 1. Technology-enabled relationship model).

The transformational nature of the relationship can further act as a catalyst impacting hosts at the personal, business, and community-levels (i.e. fostering socio economic developments and freedoms - Senn, 1999). Similarly, guests will be impacted by the transformational nature of the travel experience both at personal level and travel experiential level; also the transformation could be seen as impacting outside the actual travel experience. While transformation has potential for both hosts and guests, this is the main expected outcome for guests, whereas hosts are further expected to benefit from socio-economic development through the impact of the smart host-guest technology and the linked effects such as increasing visitation.

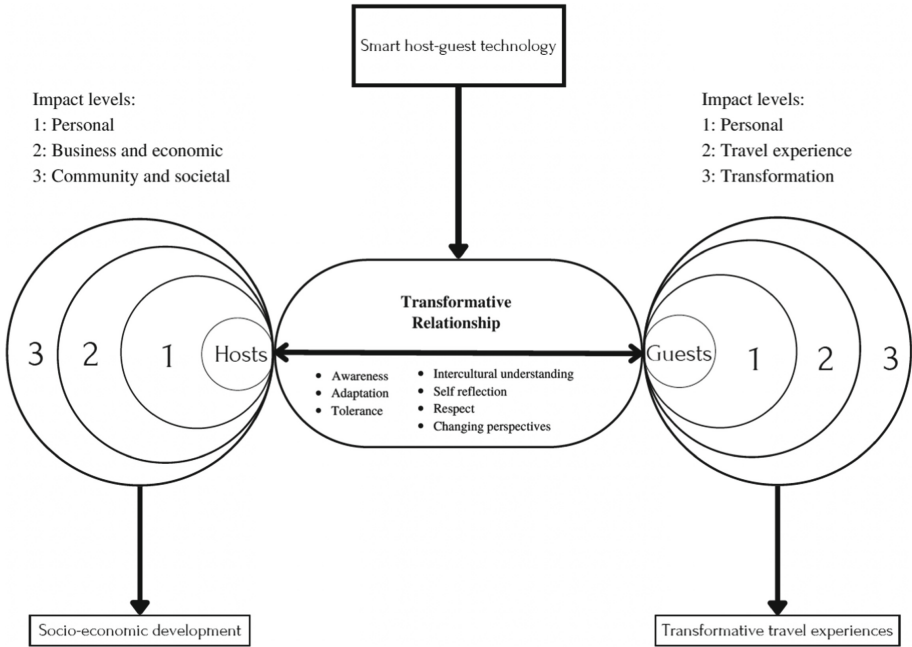


Fig. 1. Technology-enabled relationship model

6 Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

This study contributes to the understanding of how technology can impact relationship-building in a Community Based Tourism context, focusing on rural Lebanon. Host-guest relationships should foster mutual value creation. Framed within the rising stream of research at the intersection of tourism studies, development studies and information and communication technology (Inversini et al., 2015), this study contributes to existing literature by introducing the concept of smart host-guest relationship in emerging economies. Results show that technology can be seen as a tool that fosters host-guest relationships, pre-, during, and post trips. The impact is manifold on both sides with a focus on potential transformation for both hosts and guests. This transformational relationship is further seen as an aid in reaching further impacts, for example in terms of socio-economic and community development on the side of hosts, or for experiential, educational, and transformative travel experiences for guests. As has transpired through the interviews, it is at times challenging to demonstrate the direct effect of technologies on certain elements of a host-guest relationship as opposed to for example what would simply be effects of increasing visitation.

Likewise, for transformative aspects, it remains difficult to fully understand causation, which is a topic to be further explored in future research specifically in relation to technology's role in transformative tourism. Lastly, this study focused specifically on Lebanon, and while similar results may be expected in the general Middle Eastern region, results should not be generalized to further geographic regions due to differences in local economic, cultural, and social situations.

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