Discrimination and Technologies in Tourism: Applying Critical Race Theory to Future Studies

Abstract: Technology has been intertwined with hospitality and tourism from the 1940s. Current conversations on technology design, racial politics and ethics are almost absent from the tourism literature although wider technology literature focuses on this. Moreover, these technologies are still associated with the tourism industry and affect the business of practitioners and lives of tourists. This research note proposes the application of critical race theory to unravel these industry occurrences. As a result, technologies in tourism studies will not only focus on efficiency and empowerment but also inclusion, which can further enable an investigation into concepts of justice, equality and equity.

Keywords: critical race theory; discrimination; eTourism; information technology; intersectionality; smart tourism

Technology has had a long-standing relationship with hospitality and tourism from the 1940s with the introduction of hotel reservation and global distribution systems (Buhalis, 2019). However, research in the area follows a long-held tradition of technology studies of mainly being associated with a techno-deterministic approach. This is evident in two ways: a techno-dystopian view and technology as a benefit (Benjamin, 2019). The techno-dystopian view refers to the absence of jobs as a result of total implementation and control by technologies (Vanolo, 2016). Meanwhile, technology as a beneficiary refers to innovation as an enabler of greater efficiency and better solutions, which is the conceptual understanding associated with

varying technological forms in tourism (Buhalis, 2019). However, the techno-deterministic approach obscures human agency underlying these innovations and does not sufficiently allow us to explore technology as a social construct. Harrington and Dillahunt (2021) note that when one considers technology-enhanced experiences, he or she should recognise that social constructs such as race and class underly these experiences.

Furthermore, tourism and technology studies have been dominated by methodologies that focus less on examining meanings and interpretations and instead a positivist lens (Hwang et al., 2015). This methodological choice tends allows one to overlook the political nature of technologies, thereby rending innovations such as smart cities apolitical and not deepening interests in systematic exclusion while continuing to promote mandates of diversity and inclusion (Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019). This research note proposes critical race theory as a useful theoretical approach for broadening an understanding of technologies as well as unravelling and combatting inclusion and diversity challenges in the hospitality and tourism industry as it increases technology adoption. It has been applied further afield in technology studies on gender, race, education and marketing (Francis, 2021), which show that there is an extensive number of challenges to address before one can conclude that innovations are made for and accessible to all citizens (see Benjamin, 2019; Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019; Noble, 2019). This follows the call made by Gretzel et al. (2020) and Cai et al. (2020) to identify new theoretical concepts and methodological tools for creating knowledge in information technology and tourism.

Insights into Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory was spearheaded by legal scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, a period that saw continued practices of racism even in light of the Civil Rights Legislation of the 1960s. It emerged to illustrate the connection between race and lack of property rights due to slavery

(Bell, 1980; Delgado & Stefancic 2001). Critical race theory is used to study "how power and domination persist even in the absence of coercion and in a context of collective denial. Thus, the strategy becomes one of unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p.11). The theory is based on the idea that racism is rooted in societal institutions. It enables researchers to provide insights into how racism is produced. Though being commonplace, racial discrimination is opaque to the dominant race as this form of racism is normalised and embedded in daily encounters (Bell, 1980).

There is no set standards and principles for including critical race theory in research, however, some scholars have drawn upon suggestions made within their research areas in order to apply the theory. For instance, Noble (2012) in her study on Google algorithms and discrimination, draws upon work from library studies as she conceptualised the Internet as an information institution and system. Noble (2012) follows tenets laid out by Furner (2007) that scholars should consider when applying critical race theory: admission by designers that bias exists in classification systems, acknowledgement that implementation of policy will provide little removal of bias, and collection and analysis of perspectives from user who are from racially discriminated groups. Similar perspectives are shared further afield in studies such as education. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) propose the following for consideration when conduction critical race theory: race is perceived as normal; convergence of interest; race as a social construct; intersectionality; and counter-narrative. Despite the variety of suggestions, critical race theory aligns with the following principal views:

- race is not biological;
- racial categories and characteristics have been created; and
- the effect of these invented categories is the normalisation of whites while other categories of individuals are seen as subordinates (Mills, 1997).

Critical race theory has given rise to other perspectives created by theorists in the legal field. For instance, in the 1980s, Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality, which proposes that an individual's identity is as a result of multiple, intersecting identities that give rise to specific individual experiences. Tourism scholars associated with studies on gender have applied this theoretical lens in recent times (Chambers, 2021). Other theoretical developments associated with critical race theory include QuantCrit and CritQuant that are both approaches based on the principle that numbers are not neutral or given and race is central to examining the issue at hand (Gillborn et al., 2018; Sullivan et al., 2010). There is also the disability critical race theory, which enables researchers to address challenges on racism and disability (Connor et al., 2016).

Critical race theory can broaden the theoretical lens used within research on information technology in hospitality as it is currently dominated by value co-creation and technology adoption models (Cai et al., 2020; Gretzel et al., 2020; see Stylos et al., 2021). Scholars can begin to present diverse perspectives as well as expand on data collection methods and analysis in this research area, such as developing experiments and applying discourse analysis. Findings generated through the application of this theory will allow us to begin conversations on discriminatory design, which can harm and exclude stakeholders within the tourism industry. For instance, some airport scanner alarms can sound when examining an individual with braids or dreadlocks, which are hairstyles normally associated with black women (BET, 2019).

There have been mounting discussions of racial discrimination associated with technologies, following recent events of hate crimes towards Arabs, Asians and persons of African descent. These conversations have been accompanied by examples such as Google being a search

engine that reinforces racism and gender-based profiling for females from minority groups (Noble, 2019) or soap dispensers powered by light sensors have been recognised as being unresponsive to dark-skinned persons, which is the contrary for light-skinned persons (Princeton, 2021). These instances remind us of the importance that should be placed on topics of discrimination and innovation. While these events and recent calls for ethical considerations in technology are not directed to the tourism industry, they affect and shape the lives of tourism and hospitality professionals and occur within destinations that still draw on colonial stories to formulate memorable experiences for visitors (Vice, 2020).

By being based in the tradition of critical race theory, scholars set out with the goal of eliminating injustices in hospitality, tourism and technology contexts. It provides the opportunity to understand the experiences of racialised populations and serve marginalised communities while also challenging dominant beliefs that exist in society (Harrington & Dillahunt, 2021). This move allows us to respond to current calls for findings that challenge technologies in tourism ideas as well as public calls for increased accountability for technology companies and inclusion in tourism advocated by the United Nations Word Tourism Organisation (2021). Researchers and practitioners can develop strategies and tactics that enable inclusion and diversity in participatory human-centred design for technologies in tourism.

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