Tourist as vector: Viral mobilities of COVID-19

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Abstract
Tourist mobilities helped COVID-19 become a pandemic. This commentary argues mobilities perspectives are vital to understanding tourism impacts of COVID-19. It assists scholars and policy-makers in two ways: by demonstrating how tourism is implicated in political issues heightened by the pandemic, and by advancing research on low carbon tourist mobilities.

Keywords: COVID-19, tourism mobilities, pandemic, coronavirus, tourism geography; mobility politics

Introduction
The outbreak of COVID-19 in the city of Wuhan, China in December 2019 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation on 11 March 2020. At the time of the outbreak, the prevalence of international tourism helped facilitate the rapid global transmission of the disease. This commentary draws on mobilities theory (Adey, 2011; Sheller, 2016) to consider the role of tourists in the circulation of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and its accompanying disease, COVID-19. I explore tourists as ‘vectors’ and argue that the application of mobilities perspectives will assist scholars and policy-makers in addressing impacts of COVID-19 on tourism.

Mobilities is a suitable theoretical framing because it positions tourism as one among many different types of mobility (including human and viral). It also positions tourism as part of everyday life – a fact which helped the disease to spread so quickly. Rather than concentrating on static expressions of social life, the mobilities turn draws attention to the connections and flows characterizing the social world. A key feature of mobilities theory is the rejection of binary divisions such as home/away or work/leisure to explain tourism, with potential implications for understanding how the infection was transmitted.
Tourism and COVID-19

When assessing the spread of the novel coronavirus, it is important to not only consider its lethality and level of contagion, but also the social and spatial conditions enabling its movement. The circulation of viruses and other pathogens has not escaped the attention of mobilities researchers (Lavau, 2014; Sheller, 2016), but COVID-19 emerged just as yearly international tourist arrivals reached 1.5 billion. While tourism is only one of many reasons for travel, it is worth exploring the role of tourism in viral transmission given the extent of international tourism at the time of the outbreak.

Tourism has been one of the industries most impacted by the virus, but it is also one of the most responsible for its propagation. Some of the countries hardest hit are major tourist destinations such as Italy, Japan, and Spain, while the flow of tourists from China also helped speed up the spread of the virus before travel restrictions were established. Cruise ships quickly emerged as major sites of contagion, with names such as the Westerdam, the Ruby Princess, and the World Dream now synonymous with COVID-19. Ski resorts, such as Ischgl and Aspen, were also sites of significant transmission. Aboard cruise ships and airplanes, the virus became a tourist ‘travel companion’ (Lavau, 2014: 299) and by mid-March 2020, the virus had already been established in 146 countries due in large part to the magnitude of global aero-mobility (Gössling et al., 2020).

Tourist vectors

A vector is a trajectory – ‘a directional trace of movement’ that is either of the past or ‘of the now’ (Adey, 2011: 138). Contrails or tire tracks, for example. Tourist vectors include the wake of cruise ships or footprints on sandy beaches. To identify vectors, Adey writes, depends largely on where you are located in relation to them. But vectors are not just trajectories. They can also be mobile bodies that transmit disease – *Anopheles* mosquitoes spreading the *Plasmodium* parasites that cause malaria or flea vectors transmitting the Black Death. Tourists thus embodied two vector types – that of directional trace and disease proliferator. Aboard cruise ships and airplanes, disembarking at various ports and transiting back home, the directional traces of tourists were cutting across landscapes, oceans, and air as they acquired and transmitted COVID-19.

Viruses and the diseases they cause can be considered political in the sense that their geographical range and mortality rates are highly shaped by institutions, social norms, healthcare access, and individual subjectivities. COVID-19 often spread via relatively wealthy tourists, forcing ‘low-skilled’ tourism workers to become some of the world’s first responders. As COVID-19 circulated globally, a politics of immobility then emerged as multiple countries closed or partially closed their borders to all but their own citizens.

To understand the role of tourism in the pandemic requires an understanding of how mobility is practiced by tourists. The channeling of tourists through a limited number of nodes, the reliance on confined spaces such as that of the cruise ship, the airplane, the tour bus, and the hostel, but also the practices involved in the social lives of tourists, in which close and prolonged social contact is required, all facilitated the transmission of
COVID-19 and its elevation to a pandemic. Vectors are thus ‘embodied and experiential’ (Adey, 2011: 139), enacted by mobile tourist bodies engaged in leisure practices, facilitated by transport and communications technologies, and the materiality of the virus itself.

**Mobility politics of COVID-19**

Like other diseases (Sheller, 2016), COVID-19 demonstrates how mobility is entangled with the expression of political power. The pandemic revealed the politics of mobility to be a factor influencing the role of tourists as vectors. Cruise ships were notable sites of viral transmission, but the capacity of cruise tourists to spread COVID-19 often depended on where they were docked. After the World Dream docked in Hong Kong, passengers and crew were forced to remain on board until testing negative. In Australia, where ‘turning-back’ boats of asylum seekers is fundamental to the federal government’s border security policy, thousands of passengers aboard the Ruby Princess were permitted to disembark in Sydney without being tested. Hundreds of coronavirus infections in Australia can now be traced to the ship.

In Cambodia, authorities permitted the Westerdam to dock even after it was prevented from docking at ports in Taiwan, Japan and Thailand due to fears it was carrying infected passengers. One of the passengers aboard the Westerdam was then later found to be infected while transiting through Kuala Lumpur (Paddock et al., 2020). Since the pandemic, mobile people are increasingly seen as potentially dangerous vectors of COVID-19. In Hong Kong, medical staff went on strike in February 2020 to call for the closure of the border with Guangdong Province, heightening the politicization of mainland Chinese tourists. Antipathy intensified toward expats, particularly toward those who refused to wear masks.

Mobilities researchers have pointed out that distinctions between various mobility categories, such as those between tourism and business travel, are often unclear. Business travelers or conference attendees, for example, may devote time in between work obligations to visit museums or other local tourist attractions. While significant on a theoretical level, the ways mobile people are categorized might have important implications for how the spread of the virus is understood by policy-makers, governments and medical researchers. This may further complicate efforts to conduct contact tracing and document a more complete number of infected cases.

**Transforming tourist mobilities**

As some tourism researchers have already pointed out, the pandemic provides an opportunity for the tourism industry to address some of its environmental impacts. For example, by transitioning to carbon neutrality (Prideaux et al., 2020), or by considering the climate change implications of tourism’s growth model (Gössling et al., 2020). Such suggestions are welcome, but they often fail to consider the challenges of reducing tourism’s carbon footprint when international tourism has for many people become essential to the maintenance of social life. International tourism is a common way for family and/or friends to spend quality time together. As the immobilities enforced by
COVID-19 have demonstrated, not being able to travel is potentially distressing for loved ones living separately.

The mobilities turn locates tourism among other mobilities comprising people’s daily lives, such as commuting and business travel. Therefore, it can inform efforts by scholars and policy-makers to reduce tourism’s environmental impacts as it considers how tourism interacts with other spheres of social life and consumption. The capacity of mobilities thinking to shift between scales then allows scholars to simultaneously consider the massive carbon footprint of tourism at the global level, and how this is influenced by the social lives of individual tourists compelled to visit relatives in far flung locations.

A mobilities lens can uncover the cultural factors, values and social obligations sustaining carbon-intensive travel (Waitt et al., 2017), helping scholars and policy-makers to further recognize that barriers to low carbon tourist mobilities often have a social basis in addition to a technological one. This is not to say that tourism researchers have failed to grasp the significance of mobility in efforts to transform parts of the tourism industry. For instance, Renaud (2020) argued the cruise tourism industry should adopt a ‘local mobility’ model in which destinations ban large cruise ships but exert control over a fleet of smaller ships.

The ability of tourists to act as vectors of COVID-19 might differ depending on the particular tourist mobilities in question. Some forms of hiking, camping and road tripping can afford long periods of relative social isolation, reducing the chances of viral transmission. The ‘travel bubble’ is one notable response by governments attempting to maintain tourist activity despite COVID-19. The Baltic travel bubble established between Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia allows all citizens and residents to travel freely across the three countries, while outsiders are forced to self-isolate for 14 days (Reuters, 2020). Travel bubbles constrain international tourist mobility but increase more locally-based tourist flows with implications for businesses, resident lifestyles, local traffic, per capita carbon emissions, and tourism geographies.

Conclusion

This commentary has used the concept of vector to highlight the role of tourist mobilities in elevating COVID-19 to a pandemic. A highly interconnected global economy in which 1.5 billion tourists are travelling internationally every year is an effective way to spread a virus. This is not to say that tourists have been the only vectors. Conference attendees and expats, among others, were also responsible. Mobilities theory provides the conceptual resources to help scholars and policy-makers respond to the tourism-related challenges presented by COVID-19. Mobilities perspectives reveal how transportation infrastructures, the social lives of tourists, their viral travel companions, and tourist mobility practices, all combine to produce what we recognize as contemporary tourism.

Mobilities thinking highlights how tourism is entwined with the political ramifications of COVID-19 and offers some considerations for those seeking to use the pandemic as an opportunity to enable low carbon forms of tourism. A multi-scalar approach mindful of tourism implications would help scholars and policy-makers come to terms with the viral mobilities of COVID-19 and future viruses. For as long as tourism continues to be a highly valued activity, tourist mobilities will remain central to political and environmental issues, as well as to the movements of potentially deadly viruses.
References


