

*An Ethnographic Study of the Use of Twitter by Interactive Travelers*

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**Abstract**

In the age of mobile media and the Internet, travelers share their experiences and exchange information online while on the move. The term “interactive travelers” is used to refer to travelers using mobile media to communicate with others (friends, family, Internet acquaintances) while on the move. In this study, we focus on Twitter, a service used by interactive travelers during their travels. We address the following research questions: How do interactive travelers use Twitter during their travels? What is the significance of using Twitter while traveling? The study targeted 14 undergraduate and postgraduate students who participated in a six-day educational travel program conducted in Helsinki. For the study, an ethnographic approach was chosen. It involved traveling with the participants and observing and recording their reactions, behavior, and interpretations as bystanders. The study has enabled us to identify the Twitter usage patterns of interactive travelers.

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## **Background and objectives of the research**

In the age of mobile media and the Internet, travelers share their experiences and exchange information online while on the move. Urry (2011) points out that the more we engage in corporeal travel, the more we increase our virtual travel in cyberspace. Molz (2011) uses the term “interactive travelers” to refer to travelers using mobile media to communicate with others (friends, family, Internet acquaintances) while on the move. In addition, Molz (2011) highlights the lack of research on interactive travelers.

In this study, we focus on Twitter, a service used by interactive travelers during their travels. Twitter is an information network comprising 140-character messages, called “tweets” (Twitter Help Center, 2013). In 2012, Twitter reached 500 million registered users worldwide, whereas the number of users in Japan exceeded 30 million, making it the world’s third most active country on Twitter, behind the United States and Brazil (SemioCast, 2012). According to an investigation conducted by the Ministry of International Affairs and Communications (Japan), the most common reason for using Twitter is, similar to other forms of online communication such as blogs, to “convey interesting information to others.” However, the second most common reason is to “update others of your current status,” and Twitter is often viewed as a tool used by individuals to convey information about themselves to others.

In this study, we address the following research questions:

- How do interactive travelers use Twitter during their travels?
- What is the significance of using Twitter while traveling?

## **Summary of the study**

### **Location**

The study was conducted in Helsinki, the capital of Finland, in March 2012. From 2006, Helsinki began providing a free public wireless LAN service within the city (Helsingin Sanomat, 2006). The service enables anyone to use free public wireless LAN in public spaces within the city, such as the City Hall, the port, art galleries, parks, and shopping centers, as well as on public transportation, such as buses, trams, and metro (City of Helsinki, 2012). Because registration is not required, foreign travelers can also easily access the Internet for free using mobile media devices compatible with wireless LAN. A large number of restaurants, cafés, and hotels also provide public wireless LAN to their customers for free or at low prices. Therefore, we considered Helsinki to be a suitable location for deepening our understanding of interactive travelers because of its traveler-friendly public wireless LAN infrastructure.

### **Participants**

The study targeted 14 undergraduate and postgraduate students who participated in a six-day educational travel program conducted in Helsinki. Although the participants were not regular tourists—they were participating in an educational travel program—the program provided them with a considerable free time, and for the participants, one

objective of the program was to enjoy a graduation/spring break with friends from their seminar room.

Of the 14 participants, 13 were in their early twenties and one was in her late twenties. According to the 2012 White Paper on Information and Communications (Japan), young adults in their twenties had the highest rate of internet usage. In fact, the students used mobile media to access the Internet on a daily basis, and all 14 participants had brought with them laptop computers and smartphones with wireless LAN functions.

### **Method of Investigation**

Edward M. Bruner, the ethnographer and author of “Culture on Tour: Ethnographies of Travel,” argued that the most effective method of conducting research on tourism is to travel with the group and share the unexpected happenings that occur during the trip (2007). In this study, we followed the example of Bruner (2007) by adopting an ethnographic approach, which involved traveling with the participants and observing and recording their reactions, behavior, and interpretations as bystanders. Before the trip, we confirmed the participants’ Twitter usage patterns and obtained their permission to collect data that they posted to Twitter during the trip.

On the last day of the trip, we conducted a group interview of approximately 30 min in which all participants were present. Group interviews are advantageous because they give participants time to recollect and reflect on their past experiences; hear the opinions of others; and qualify, modify, and reject their initial views after careful consideration. We used a semi-structured interview, a method that enables researchers to follow a general framework of questions while adding new questions and changing the order of questions according to the context of the discussion (Tani & Ashida, 2009). The interview was videotaped after obtaining the consent of the participants. After the interview, we transcribed all the utterances in the video in accordance with the transcription method introduced by Tani and Ashida (2009).

### **Method of Analysis**

To clarify patterns in the participants’ tweet-posting activity, we measured the number of tweets posted on an hourly basis. Next, we analyzed the Twitter usage patterns of the participants during the trip by cross-referencing the results of the above measurements with our field notes and the transcribed data from the group interview.

Then, to clarify the significance of the participants’ use of Twitter during the trip, we analyzed our field notes, the content of the tweets posted during the trip, and the transcribed data from the group interview. In this analysis, we referred to the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2010). We adopted a method whereby one of the researchers assigned categorical codes to any data relevant to the study. This method was applied to all data, and corrections were repeatedly made and confirmed by two other researchers. By this process, we extracted the key categories in terms of the significance of using Twitter during the trip from the perspective of the participants.

## Results and Discussion

### How did the participants use Twitter during the trip?

The students posted a total of 531 tweets during the trip. Two participants were using Twitter's protected tweets setting (only approved followers can view tweets); however, this did not necessarily mean that these students had restricted their followers to family members and friends. The remaining 12 students were using Twitter's public tweets setting (anyone can view tweets, not only followers). Of the 531 tweets, 495 (more than 90%) were public tweets. The highest number of Twitter followers for any one student was 541 and the lowest was 91, resulting in an average of 289 and a median of 300.

Here, we describe the tweeting patterns from day two to day five of the trip since the first and last days involved movements to and from the study location. On day two, all participants participated in a walking tour of the town as well as workshops at two museums. A large number of tweets were posted on the evening of this day, during the time period between returning to the hotel and going to bed. However, on days three, four, and five, which contained a significant amount of free time, tweets were posted by at least one participant almost every hour between 9 am and 11 pm. The participants could do this by securing "technological readiness" (Olson & Olson, 2012), that is, by discovering locations where they could access public wireless LAN while in the hotel and while engaging in independent activities.

Through our interactions with the participants in the field and the group interview, we learned that participants had posted tweets during the daytime while touring the city by using the public wireless LAN available on public transportation facilities such as the metro and trams. Students often posted tweets about their experiences from various locations within the city while traveling to their next destination.

We compared the participants' average number of tweets per day during the one-month period before the trip to the average number of tweets per day during the trip. The results revealed that during the trip, half of the participants posted a number of tweets equal to or greater than that during the period before the trip. The remaining 50% posted fewer tweets than that during the period before the trip. Faced with an unfamiliar Internet connection environment, the former group still managed to maintain their tweet posting pace by discovering locations that offered public wireless LAN and securing "technological readiness." However, one participant from the latter group explained that

"Tweeting about 'current' events is fine, but it wasn't possible to access the Internet in some places. So, when I couldn't tweet right away, I planned to do it later at the hotel, but, looking back, I found it difficult to limit the tweets to 140 characters."

This participant viewed Twitter as a media tool for conveying information about one's "current" situations and thoughts. Therefore, the coincidental presence or absence of public wireless LAN at the "current" location affected the number of tweets posted.

## **What was the significance of the participants' use of Twitter?**

Here, we discuss the above question with reference to the following three categories, which were generated from the coding process, while also providing specific examples of individual participants:

- (1) A tool for constructing “narratives” of travel experiences
- (2) Viewing the “narratives” of other participants
- (3) Open microcoordination

### **(1) A tool for constructing “narratives” of travel experiences**

Of the 531 tweets posted by the participants, 324 (61%) contained detailed diary-like accounts of activities undertaken, places visited, and thoughts entertained during the trip. The following are examples of the participants' tweets:

- Yesterday, I thought about the daily lives of people living in Finland, the lives of people shopping at shopping centers or supermarkets, and the lives of the people working there. I'm sure they also spend their days off differently from us. So many of the shops are closed on Sundays. I wonder where they go and what they do on their days off.
- Museum of Photography. Using “soundscapes” to express “silent” photos via sounds. To complete the task, we had to form concrete images from isolated scenes. The process helped me to focus carefully on a single photo. As a result, I could appreciate the work more deeply than I would by just looking at its caption...

According to Bruner (2007), the final product of tourism is experience; however, experience in itself is essentially incomplete unless it is organized through “narrative.” This is because “narrative” gives meaning to everything and is the process through which we interpret our travels and lives (Bruner, 2007). Therefore, the results showed that the participants interpreted and reflected on their travel experiences by constructing “narratives” in the form of tweets.

### **(2) Viewing the “narratives” of other participants**

During the group interview, all participants stated that they had regularly viewed the tweets of other participants during the trip. The following are examples of remarks made by participants during the group interview:

- I knew where other people were and what they were doing at certain times. Not at the same time, but at similar times.
- Since we were often doing different things, simply knowing where other people were helped us to share our experiences and made us want to go to those same places the following day.
- I was interested to see what kind of food everyone was eating in Helsinki. It made me want to go out to eat the next day. The tweets about food were interesting.

The above remarks show that Twitter was used for the purpose of viewing the “narratives” of other participants' travel experiences during non-group activities. In

addition, viewing the travel experiences of other participants was useful when planning what to do on the following day, and therefore contributed to enhancing the participants' travel experiences.

### **(3) Open microcoordination**

Of the 531 tweets posted during the trip, 144 (27%) were sent to other participants using the "@" sign followed by the recipient's username. The following are examples of such tweets:

- We're meeting on the platform of Kaisaniemi metro station at 13:30. Let's meet in the hotel lobby at 13:20 and go together.
- OK

Such tweets were sent to fellow participants to confirm current locations during non-group activities and coordinate times and places for later meets. This corresponds to what Ling and Yttri (2004) refer to as "microcoordination." The term "microcoordination" was originally used to refer to personal coordination activities between individuals performed using mobile phones; however, when such communication occurs via Twitter, the context differs in that the exchanges can also be viewed by others, including other Twitter followers. The participants of the present study followed each other's tweets and loosely shared information on their whereabouts and activities by engaging in "open microcoordination."

### **Conclusion**

The study has enabled us to identify the Twitter usage patterns of interactive travelers. The circumstances of travel are very different from those of daily life; however, the study has found that for interactive travelers, gaining access to public wireless LAN and securing an equivalent level of "technological readiness" can be a condition for enjoying stress-free travel. Furthermore, interactive travelers used Twitter as a tool for constructing and conveying "narratives" of their travel experiences. In addition, we found that Twitter was used to view the "narratives" of and engage in open microcoordination with other travelers, suggesting that the service is often used as a tool for enhancing travel experience.

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